

SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE'S ANTI-BRITISH WAR AS A RIGHTEOUS WAR, A *DHARMA YUDDHAYA*

In the first half of the 20th century, the Indian struggle for freedom from British colonial rule was two-pronged. There was the non-violent path guided by Gandhi through non-cooperation with the British; when confronted with an impasse, they resorted to explicit though non-violent opposition and passive resistance. There was, on the other hand, an armed struggle which bred militant groups both within India as well as outside it. Indian expatriates in the United States and Canada formed the revolutionary *Ghadrite* movement; those in Europe in the 1930s formed the *Indian Legion* which, with the arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose in Germany after his spectacular escape from India in 1941, became the nucleus of the first *Indian National Army*. These revolutionary groups in the West however had no explicit plans for the liberation of India. It was the entry of Japan into World War II in Asia that gave Bose, after his even more spectacular submarine voyage from Germany to the Far-East and then to the Malay peninsula, the opportunity for direct military action against the British in India. The formation of the Asian Indian National Army (*Azad Hind Fauj*) in the Malay peninsula gave 'Netaji' (the Leader) Bose the occasion to say "I shall lead the army when we march to India together."

Much has been written by Bose on his anti-British stance in many autobiographical and other writings. Western and Indian authors (see supplementary reading list) have also contributed to a growing corpus of literature on Bose and his role in the Indian freedom struggle.

The materialistic motives which prompted the soldiers of the British Indian Army who surrendered to the Japanese on the fall of Malaya and Singapore in 1941/42 to enlist in the Indian National Army have been discussed elsewhere (Arseculeratne, 1991). The impetus to enlist in a war against a colonial ruler might arise not only from such motives and even mercenary incentives, but also from a patriot's consciousness of a motherland, longing to be free from colonial domination. One aspect that appears to have been largely omitted in the commentaries on the saga of Bose is the ethical legitimisation of enlistment for armed rebellion and military action.

The possible sources of such legitimisation with which this essay is concerned have been indicated by Levi-Strauss, the anthropologist, when he wrote:

We do not know, and shall never know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past; but, as far as the present is concerned, it is certain that social behaviour is not produced spontaneously by each individual, under the influence of emotions of the moment. Men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act. Customs are given as external norms before giving rise to internal sentiments, and these non-sentient norms determine the sentiments of individuals as well as the circumstances in which they may, or must, be displayed. (p.70)

More specifically in the Indian context is the comment of Rajagopalachari:

It is not an exaggeration to say that the persons and incidents portrayed in the great literature of a people influence national character no less potently than the actual heroes and events enshrined in its history. (p. 3)

The *Mahabharata* with its *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the epic poems in the great literature of India, which is deeply rooted in the Hindu psyche. It recounts the Kurava-Pandava war and Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna on the morality of his war against his kinsmen. This epic is the core of this essay as it seems to me that a parallel exists between the Bose-Gandhi conflict on the anti-British struggle, and the message of Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. What influence could Krishna's message have had on this conflict?

The *Bhagavad Gita* recites the quandary of Arjuna:

And I see forebodings of evil, Krishna. I cannot foresee any glory if I kill my own kinsmen in the sacrifice of battle. (1-31)

Facing us in the field of battle are teachers, fathers and sons; grandsons, grandfathers, wives' brothers; mother's brothers and fathers of wives. (1-34)

These I do not wish to slay, even if I myself am slain. Not even for the kingdom of the three worlds; how much less for a kingdom of the earth! (1-35)

If we kill these evil men, evil shall fall upon us; what joy in their death could we have, O Janardana, mover of souls? (1-36)

Krishna exhorts Arjuna, thus:

Think thou also of thy duty and do not waver. There is no greater good for a warrior than to fight in a righteous war. (2-31)

There is a war that opens the doors of heaven. Arjuna! Happy the warriors whose fate it is to fight such a war. (2-32)

But to forgo this fight for righteousness is to forgo thy duty and honour; [it] is to fall into transgression. (2-33)

In death thy glory in heaven, in victory thy glory on earth. Arise therefore, Arjuna, with thy soul ready to fight. (2-37)

Bose's war against the British lacked this dimension of a war against one's kinsmen. It was rather a war against what Bose considered, a colonial oppressor. In that sense his anti-British war might have entailed less of a moral opprobrium than Arjuna had in his war against his kinsmen. Yet it is conceivable that the justification which Krishna gave

Arjuna could well have been a compelling determinant or motivation for enlistment in Bose's anti-British military campaign. It is curious that, but for a brief comment by Ganpuley, scant reference is made, nor a parallel drawn, by Indian commentators to the 'righteous war', the *dharma yuddhaya* of the *Bhagavad Gita* in their many writings on the Bose-Gandhi conflict. Ganpuley, however, wrote of Bose: "He was a living example of the philosophy of the *Gita*, *Karmanyevadhikaraste*, that is, 'doing as a sacred duty' whatever lay in his power without being anxious for the fruit which was always in the lap of the gods". Gordon made more extended references to the message of the *Gita* in his detailed analysis of the life of Netaji Bose. Nirad Chaudhuri discussed what he regarded, on the other hand, as the essential militarism of the Indian Hindus. So did Basham: "His (Gandhi's) faith in non-violence was, as we have seen, by no means typical of Hinduism - his predecessor in revolt, the able Maratha Brahman B.G. Tilak, and Gandhi's impatient lieutenant Subhas Chandra Bose were far more orthodox in this respect" (p. 485). On account of a sublimated version of that militarism, as embodied in the concept of a *dharma yuddhaya* of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one finds a paradox in the failure of Bose's revolutionary movement to mobilize the Indians in the anti-British military struggle, by invoking this concept of a *dharma yuddhaya* so vividly conveyed in the *Gita*.

Bose himself did not need legitimising of his anti-British revolutionary stand. In his youth, as Ayer writes, he

joined the university unit in the Indian Defence Force. . . . Subhas donned khaki and took musketry practice; he marvelled at his own transformation - from sitting at the feet of saffron-robed anchorites to standing with a rifle on his shoulder . . . Subhas thoroughly enjoyed the soldiering which he found gave a fillip to his feeling of strength and self-confidence. (p. 8)

Bose's experiences during his youth, of anti-Indian discrimination by the British, and the effectiveness of his retaliation led him to conclude that ". . . the Englishman understands and respects physical force and nothing else" (Bose 1965; pp.65-66) and ". . . to a Western people physical force alone makes an appeal" (Bose, 2602 [1942]; p. 300). For Nehru, the military mind and the violence of war were appalling. As it turned out, the non-violence of Gandhi, at an ideological plane, prevailed.

Bose yet appears to have had succour for his revolutionary struggle from Aurobindo Ghose whom Gordon describes as ". . . one of the ablest Swadeshi publicists, a secret plotter of revolutionary violence, and the political hero of Subhas Bose's teenage years" (p. 38). If Bose did indeed derive the message from the *Bhagavad Gita*, it was through Aurobindo Ghose who says, in *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance* (see Gordon, 1989 p. 40),

Under certain circumstances a civil struggle becomes in reality a battle and the morality of war is different from the morality of peace. To shrink from bloodshed and violence under such circumstances is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to

Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra.

Gordon adds:

Political workers are karmayogins striving for the liberation of their country as well as for personal salvation or moksha. This was a lesson that Subhas Bose learned from religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita and from his nationalist forebears, particularly Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Aurobindo Ghose. (p. 123)

It is of interest that, as documented in *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: A Malayan Perspective*, Rash Behari Bose, the Indian revolutionary who had thrown a bomb at Viceroy Hardinge in Delhi in 1912, had before he fled Delhi left leaflets which said: "The Gita, the Vedas and the Quran all enjoin us to kill all the enemies of the Motherland. . ." (p. 1).

In the final reckoning, however, could it be that "If we want to understand the spiritual meaning of the *Bhagavad Gita*, we had better forget everything concerning the great battle of the Mahabharata or the story of Krishna and Arjuna in the vast epic. A spiritual reader of the Gita will find in it the great spiritual struggle of a human soul" (Mascaro, p. 23)? In his interpretation of the *Gita*, Gandhi "refers to the battlefield of Kurukshetra as the heart of man in which the two natures of selfishness and unselfishness are engaged in combat" (Richards, p. 33). Yet would not this epic have been taken by the common Indian man-in-the-street in a literal sense as referring to a historical war rather than as a philosophical commentary on a spiritual dilemma which an intellectual would have entertained? And if the Indian masses did make the literal interpretation of the *Gita*, could it not have given them the moral justification to engage in battle against the British, despite the pacific stance of Gandhi? Gordon expressed a similar view:

Gandhi insisted that the *Bhagavad Gita* was about a conflict within the human soul and not about violent actions out in the world. However, this was not a widely accepted view of the Gita and his words could be taken in another spirit by the young warriors of India's freedom struggle (p. 232),

and added:

. . . many Indians agreed that violence in a noble cause was the way of Bose and backed by the Bhagavad Gita, the Kshatriya model, and other Indian religious and political traditions (p. 614).

All these contradictory aspects of the collective Hindu psyche, the spiritual and the mundane, would perhaps have been what Nirad Chaudhuri referred to as the multifaceted state of the Hindu mind, a *Janus Multifrons*, without a decisive turn towards war or peace. As Guy Wint sees it:

The great images of traditional Hindu thought - the images of the sadhu meditating on the mountain-side, of the Brahmin living in the world but without attachment to the world, of the warrior who fights because it is the predestined duty of his life, and all these things and other castes by their different meanings striving to find salvation and peace - still live powerfully in the Hindu mind. (p. 213)

What then could be the verdict on the military activities of Bose and his co-revolutionaries against the British? Cohen comments:

Modern militarism . . . emerged in Bengal and Western India, and spread to other regions; especially to the intellectuals, bourgeoisie, middle classes, and professional families. Modern militarism stressed the value of the military as a universal national solvent, (p. 58)

These revolutionary groups however did not represent the masses which Marxists regarded as the key to a revolutionary struggle. Yet Gordon claims that Bose

also saw the need for a mass base, as is clear from a passage in a letter of this time to a friend Charu Ganguly: 'Swami Vivekananda used to say that India's progress will be achieved only by the peasant, the washerman, the cobbler and the sweeper. These words are very true. The Western world has demonstrated what "the power of the people" can accomplish. The brightest example of this is the first socialist republic in the world, that is Russia. If India will ever rise again - that will come through that power of the people. (p. 64)

Chaudhuri provides an explanation for the failure of Bose's campaign within India:

. . . the Bengal revolutionary movement in its ideological inspiration was wholly military. It was at first conceived as an incipient military uprising. But soon it degenerated into a terrorist movement of political murder, which was due to two reasons: first, the impossibility of organizing a military revolt in the existing conditions, and, secondly the existence of a tradition of private murder for revenge among the Bengali gentry, which necessarily influenced the revolutionary activity. (p. 114)

Cohen adds:

Terrorism, infiltration, and subversion were never effective political instruments in India (p. 58).

While a revolutionary war against Britain in the cause of Indian freedom was Bose's aim, the means to which his movement resorted in India were thus not effective in attaining that end. The 'modern militarism' which emerged in his home, Bengal, and spread to other areas in India, did not pervade the masses to result in a wide-based

uprising; it bred sporadic violence instead. Had Bose remained in India, undoubtedly he, with his co-revolutionaries, would have been incarcerated by the British. Nor did Bose, in his exhortations to the Indians for their participation in his anti-British military campaign, invoke Krishna's moral justification to Arjuna for waging a righteous war. This remains one of the enigmas of the story of Netaji Bose's military campaign against the British. In an address to the students of India in 1940 Bhowse said:

In this fateful hour I am reminded of a message once given to Young India by one of our erstwhile Leftist leaders. 'Freedom comes,' he said, 'to those who dare and act.' The time has come for all of us to dare and act and let not any of us flinch at this critical juncture. I am also reminded of the inspiring words addressed by a famous Italian general to his innumerable followers while the Revolution was still in progress. 'I shall give you hunger, thirst, privation, forced marches and death,' said he, 'if you will follow me.' Let these words ring in our ears now and inspire us to march forward and to dare and act. Only then shall we win Victory and Swaraj. (p. 247)

Bose's words echo the exhortation of Krishna to Arjuna; what is ironic, however, is that Bose has chosen to quote an Italian general rather than Krishna whose words in a similar vein would have been closer to the Hindu psyche and tradition.

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