

NETAJI SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE'S ANTI-BRITISH WAR AND THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*: A POSTSCRIPT

The Bose saga was discussed in a previous article published in this same journal. (Arseculeratne, 1997); it considered the enigma of why Bose did not invoke the words of Krishna to Arjuna as related in the Hindu epic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which legitimised Arjuna's resort to war on a righteous cause. That discussion assumed (1) that the Indian people were familiar with this epic poem and (2) that if Bose, (who had imbibed the message of the *Gita* through his mentors, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo), did invoke that message in his speeches to the Indian people, it could have provided strong motivation for their enlistment in Bose's anti-British military campaign. There is however no evidence in the literature on Bose or his anti-British campaign that he did refer explicitly to the message of the *Gita* in his speeches on the need for anti-British revolt. Indeed, this contrasts with the fact that another Indian patriot, B.G. Tilak, who in his anti-British stance, did invoke Krishna's words to Arjuna: "...in speeches and articles Tilak, a master of invective, advocated extreme methods of opposition, and was not above occasionally using Hindu scriptures to justify political murder. In 1894 at the Shivazji Festival at Raigarh he told the crowd that "the Divine Krishna tells us in the Bhagavad Gita that we may kill even our teachers and our kinsmen and no blame attaches to us if we are not actuated by selfish desires" (Corr, 1975. p.20).

The extensive literature on Bose and the I.N.A. does not provide an explanation of this enigma; nor was Dr. Sisir Bose (Netaji's nephew who drove the car which took Bose out of India, on his way to Europe, in January 1941, and Director, Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta) able to do so (Personal Communication 1996). A plausible explanation was proposed by Dr. P.K. Mazumdar (1997, Personal Communication). According to this view, Bose deliberately avoided the use of Krishna's words because he was convinced that the liberation of India from the British could be achieved only if there was unity amongst the people of India in this cause, irrespective of their caste and creed, and that the message of Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu epic poem, would have been alien to the considerable non-Hindu proportion of the Indian people, notably the Muslims. This postscript recounts the evidence from diverse sources, which supports this view.

During the latter half of the 19th century the formation and growth of small (anti-British) revolutionary groups in India continued:

Later, as muscular Hinduism took hold, the ideology shaped itself; the *Gita* in which Lord Krishna had preached the Hindu

philosophy of life to Arjuna, was a constant source of reference; the motherland conveniently became the mother goddess Durga, and the goddess Kali the symbol of strength. All this, laced with a sort of socialism, produced a strong, if confused, driving force (Mihir Bose, 1982. p. 42.);

In May and June 1927 terrible Hindu-Muslim riots had racked Calcutta and in November the leaders were sufficiently concerned to call for a unity conference. Netaji Bose took up the theme at a large gathering at Calcutta's Shradhananda Park.... (Mihir Bose 1982; p. 59);

He (Netaji) always sought and worked for Hindu-Muslim unity on the basis of respect for each other's religious rights.... (Mihir Bose 1982; p. 60).

In his appeal for Hindu-Muslim unity, Bose "...asked the Hindus to bend over backwards to respect the rights of the Muslims and pleaded for concentration on the most important task at hand: the struggle for Indian freedom" (Gordon 1988; p. 163).

After a brief exile in Europe, Netaji Bose embarked on his voyage from Germany to Asia by submarine in February 1943. Abid Hussain (Hassan, a Muslim A.D.C.) was selected by Bose to accompany him as private secretary and assistant (Gordon 1989; p. 488) on that voyage to Sabang near Sumatra, and later on the flight to Tokyo, before he returned to the Malay peninsula to reform the Indian National Army.

A Muslim officer of the I.N.A. commented:

He believed passionately that all Indians, irrespective of the region they came from or the language they spoke or religious faith they practised, were members of the same family. He gave this belief practical shape and convinced all those who came in contact with him that, unless this basic fact was accepted without hesitation, there was no future for India (Ahamad 1992; p. vi).

And so, with no divisiveness on the basis of religion or race,

All the companies of the regiments of the Indian National Army were mixed up units of the Sikhs, Muslims, Rajputs, Jats, Garhwalis, and Marathas. They all lived together, ate together and so each considered (the) other as his own brother-in-arms....All their loyalties to their religion or region, if any, were subordinated to their loyalty to India. It was not only a model army but a model citizenry for free India (Bhattacharjee and Muller 1985; p. 56).

Dodwell Cooray, a journalist who led the I.N.A.'s broadcasting unit in Rangoon, Burma, wrote in a profile of Bose (*New Life*, 1987, September 18):

The Indian National Army comprising many castes and creeds of India, was a unified force under Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Hindu, Muslim and Christian ate at the same table....No religious differences were allowed to mar the unity of the members of the INA, and he forged a bond of oneness between all the members".

G.R. Wijedasa, a member of the Lanka Unit under the Indian Independence League, recalled (Arseculeratne 1991; p. 288): "Bose made no differentiation between Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims". Consider also the following:

He succeeded in binding together the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Tamils, Punjabis or for that matter all communities in a melting pot, namely the Indian National Army. That army stood for India first, India second and India last. His men took the solemn pledge that their loyalty to their religion, language or province would be subordinated to their loyalty to India (Muller & Bhattacharjee 1985; p. 3).

The proclamation (1943) of the Provisional Government of Free India was signed on behalf of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India); representatives of the armed forces included Muslims, Lt.Col. Azis Ahmed, Lt.Col. M.Z. Kiani, Lt.Col. Ehsan Qadir, Lt.Col. Shah Nawaz Khan; Karim Ghano and D.M. Khan were advisers (Muller & Bhattacharjee 1985; p. 117).

"On account of the criticism that *Jana Gana Mana* was in Bengali language, Netaji had specially commissioned Mumtaz Hussain (a Muslim), a local Hindustani poet, to compose the National Anthem of Azad Hind in simple

Hindustani" (Markandeya 1990; p. 276; my words in parenthesis).

During their abortive assault on British India from across the Burma-India border, Muslim officers headed some units- Lt.Col. Shah Nawaz Khan led the Subhas Brigade, and Col. I.J. Kiani led the Gandhi Brigade; the Guerilla Regiment was under Col. M.Z.Kiani.

The last drama of the Bose saga, before his death on August 18, 1945, occurred in Saigon on August 17, 1945; "Here a gathering of several of those closest to him through the last two years of the war took place. These included Colonel Habibur Rahman, Colonel Pritam Singh, Colonel Gulzara Singh, Major Abid Hassan, Debnath Das, and S.A. Ayer, and some other civilians" (Gordon 1989; p. 538). The only Indian whom Bose selected to accompany him on his (last) journey by plane to Manchuria and who was by his side when he died after the plane crashed in Taipeh (in Formosa), was the Indian Muslim Colonel Habibur Rahman. As G.R. Wijedasa, a member of the Lanka Unit under Netaji, said: "In fact his most trusted lieutenants were Muslims".

Following the failure of Bose's military campaign, the surrender of the Japanese and the end of the war in Asia, the treason-trials of I.N.A.'s officers began. At these trials, of the three principal accused: "...Shah Nawaz was a Muslim, Sahgal a Hindu and Dhillon a Sikh..."; they "...represented all the major communities of India. Auchinleck may have hoped that this would stress the communal nature of Indian politics - always Britain's strongest point; but for Indians it demonstrated that the I.N.A. was indeed a national army; that Bose had indeed succeeded in getting Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs to unite for a common cause" (Mihir Bose 1932; p. 260).

During the continuing trials of the I.N.A. officers, Captain Abdul Rashid was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. "For four days between 11 and 14 February the streets of Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi witnessed unique political demonstrations in which Hindus and Muslims forgot their differences and came together to fight the I.N.A.'s battles." (Mihir Bose 1982; p. 262).

Despite their radical opposition to Bose's military action against the British, Gandhi and Nehru remarked upon the Bose's stand on the need for unity amongst the diverse people of India and particularly his expression of it in his nurture of the I.N.A. "This aspect of the INA impressed very much Mahatma Gandhi who accordingly paid his glowing tribute to the I.N.A. in the following words - "Though the I.N.A. failed in their immediate objective, they have a lot to their credit, of which they might well be proud. Greatest among

these was to gather together, under one banner, men from all religions and races of India, and to infuse into them the spirit of solidarity and oneness to the exclusion of all communal or parochial sentiment. It is an example which we should all emulate" (Muller and Bhattacharjee 1985; p. 85). According to Jawaharlal Nehru: "The men and women who had enrolled themselves in the I.N.A. and worked under Netaji's guidance had done so because of their passionate desire to serve the cause of India's freedom. The I.N.A. made history not only in Malaya and Burma and elsewhere but also in people's minds all over India and that fact will endure. With the organisation of the I.N.A. on national lines outside India, Netaji has taught a lesson that with intercommunal unity we can solve the most difficult of problems. We must act upon the precedent he has set before us and strengthen our belief in intercommunal unity'" (Muller & Bhattacharjee 1985; p. 86).

On the use of the message of the *Gita* as a driving force in anti-British revolt,.... (Mihir Bose (1932); p. 42) commented: "Its limitations were that the stress on Hindu myths alienated the Muslims, though some of them did join in during the early stages, and that it was never a mass movement". Mazumdar's explanation of why Bose did not invoke the message of the *Gita* - because he appealed and worked for the unity of all Indians and that the *Gita*'s message in the Hindu epic might have 'alienated' the non-Hindu - is compatible with that view.

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