

Subhas Chandra Bose: Reminiscences

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Some Intimate Recollections



Hari Vishnu Kamath

H V Kamath resigned from the Indian Civil Service, and entered politics. Later, he was a member of the Constituent Assembly, representing the Forward Bloc, and later became a member of Parliament.

From his early boyhood when Subhas Chandra Bose journeyed alone to the Himalayas in search of personal salvation, up to the years of his mature manhood when he travelled to distant lands in search of national salvation, his life was all of one pattern: the life of a Grand Rebel whom the pathetic subjection of this ancient land turned into an uncompromising political revolutionary. He was not a mere political; he regarded his life as a complete dedication to a sublime Cause rooted in spiritual reality. This was clearly brought out in the title “An Indian Pilgrim” which he had adopted for his unfinished autobiography.

His unwavering faith in God, a rare quality which he had in common with Mahatma Gandhi, impressed everyone who came into close contact with him. While Chittaranjan Das was his political guru, his spiritual mentor was Swami Vivekananda. During the period I personally knew him, 1938-40, he used to visit frequently, often late at night, the Ramakrishna Mission Ashram in Calcutta. When he went to bed, he almost always kept under his pillow a small book — a pocket edition of the Bhagvad Gita. He was so steeped in its ethics and philosophy that one day he said to me: “How can I possibly accept Ahimsa as an inflexible principle of action, when Sri Krishna himself exhorted Arjuna not to run away from a righteous war, a dharmayuddha?”

And so, when the opportune moment arrived, he organised the Indian National Army, and led it into battle against the British Empire in India. In that stupendous task he displayed, a rare genius for organisation, strategy and tactics. His eye for the minutest detail, his unaffected camaraderie, his sincerity of purpose, his passionate faith, his burning love and his burning hate are scarce commodities in independent India today.

Not infrequently described as the 'stormy petrel' of Indian politics, his meteoric career showed that he was in his element during times of stress and strain, crisis and upheaval. He thrived on opposition which evoked all that was best in him. He rode the whirlwind and directed the storm.

With the passing of the years he had, by a process of spiritual discipline, though not in the orthodox style, woven a satisfactory pattern of intense external activity drawn from his inner poise and tranquility. His chubby face with its cherubic smile concealed a granite core of will. Gentle and affectionate in disposition, he could be very firm, even relentless, whenever occasion demanded it. Truly could it be said

of him in the words of the Sanskrit poet: *Vajradapi Kathorani, Mridooni Kusumadapi* — “harder than the diamond; softer than a flower.”

To know him was to love him. He rarely lost his temper, and the only outward sign of anger or irritation in him would be a sudden disconcerting silence, and at times a frowning, even stern mien; but there was seldom a violent outburst. The erring person would express his regret, and, presently, Netaji's smooth, unruffled countenance would put everyone at ease.

Had it not been for his warm and joyous response (“I welcome you with all my heart. What will be a loss to the Service will be a gain to the country”) to my request for advice and guidance, followed by an equally cordial meeting at the Nagpur residence of a Congress Minister in February, 1938, on his way home from Haripura, I doubt whether I would have resigned from the I.C.S. when I actually did — in April 1938. I was irresistibly impelled to enter politics when he was Congress President, and I am glad I did so; for I learnt far more from him about militant politics than I have from anyone else so far. Though he talked much about politics, national and international, he knew when to keep silent; he often used to say, “Life is higher than politics”.

In June 1938, shortly after my resignation from the I.C.S., I went to Calcutta, where unfortunately I fell ill. He insisted that I shift to his residence on Elgin Road, and when he followed the suggestion up by sending his car for me, I had to go. I spent nearly two months there, and it was a rich experience. As I slowly recovered from what looked like para-typhoid, I came to know him intimately, and my respect and admiration for him grew apace. His pious kindhearted mother and his nephews and nieces, some of whom were more attached to him than to their parents, often kept me company during the long, tedious hours of convalescence. I still have a vivid recollection of those few weeks which passed so pleasantly under the loving care of the man whose sacrifice and whose high-spirited letters from Mandalay Jail had strangely disturbed my mind during my college days.

As soon as I regained my health, he and I used to go for morning walks, usually in the Victoria Memorial Park, and I profited much from his rambling talks. He had a keen sense of humour, but it was never crude or vulgar. “There is no politics without tea,” he would laughingly tell someone who declined a cup of tea. He was a veritable tea-addict; his record, I was told, was about two dozen cups in one day. He reduced the intake only on medical advice in later years. In the matter of food he was an epicure and loved the good things of the table. He would jocularly chide poor eaters, asking them how they could aspire to fight well for their motherland.

Once he showed me a letter which had been addressed to him as Subhas Chandra Bose, I.C.S., some 18 years after he had resigned, and remarked: “The power and charm of the I.C.S. is tremendous indeed.” Inexplicably enough, it appears to be so even today. Thirty-six years have elapsed since I left the service, but still I occasionally get letters with the appendage “I.C.S.” to my name on the envelope. It seems even some educated persons are under the impression that “I. C. S.” means an academic degree or qualification.

During the period I knew him I could never suspect that he had suffered much from tuberculosis. He still had frequent bouts of illness, but they hardly interfered with his work; such was his strength of will and inner resistance. Who can ever forget the moving scene at Tripuri, near Jabalpur, in March 1939? He had been elected President of the Congress Session, in the first ever election, I believe, in the Party's history since the advent of Mahatma Gandhi; he had defeated Pattabhi Sitaramayya who had been backed by the Congress High Command including the Mahatma. So after the result of the election was declared, Gandhiji wrote, “Subhas's victory is my defeat, after all he is not an enemy of the country”. These words, coming as they did from Mahatmaji, were as gall and wormwood to Subhas who deeply respected him, but he did not retaliate in any manner whatsoever. Was it not Subhas who first called him the “Father of the Nation” in his wartime broadcasts from across the seas? Netaji was, however, much misunderstood by his colleagues while he was Congress President — may be because he did not kowtow to any of them, some of whom perhaps expected that from him as a younger man.

In the wake of the Mahatma's reaction to the election of Subhas, all the members of the Congress Working Committee resigned in a huff, and stated that they could not co-operate with the President-elect. All these happenings on the eve of session caused him acute pain and anguish, and proved too much even for his stoical temperament. When he arrived at Tripuri in early March for the session, he was a sick man.

I was accommodated in the President's camp. He was running a high temperature, and some Jabalpur doctors examined him and prescribed medicine and complete rest. They advised his removal to the Civil Hospital, Jabalpur, but he resolutely refused; "No, never, I would rather die here in the Narmada than be shifted to Jabalpur. I haven't come here to lie in a hospital". It was, however, amazing that the doctor's word was disbelieved by some of the topmost Congress leaders who went to the length of saying that Subhas was 'malingering', and that it was one of his usual "tricks". It was only when Dr. Gilder, the then Health Minister in the Bombay Cabinet, confirmed the earlier diagnosis and "certified" that he really have high fever that these men were silenced.

He was taken in an ambulance to the Subjects Committee meeting, and there reclining on a mattress spread out on the dais, while one of his nieces, Ila, applied icepacks to his fevered brow, he calmly and coolly conducted the proceedings. Even his harshest critics marvelled at the sight. The passage of the Pant resolution, thanks to the neutrality of some Congress Socialist Party delegates who had earlier voted for him in the election, sealed his fate; but he took it in good part and did not betray any annoyance.

Lying on his sick-bed in the camp, he wrote out the Presidential address, the briefest on record. But he proved a political prophet, in that on March 7, 1939, he predicted that "within the next six months", war would break out in Europe. Almost to the day, on September 3, the prophecy came true. He was too weak to attend the plenary session, and so his address was read out by his brother, Sarat Chandra Bose.

Editor's note: Key excerpts from the speech are presented below. The entire speech is available [here](#).

In the first place, I must give clear and unequivocal expression to what I have been feeling for some time past, namely, that the time has come for us to raise the issue of Swaraj and submit our national demand to the British Government in the form of an ultimatum. ... If no reply is received within this period or if an unsatisfactory reply is received, we should resort to such sanctions as we possess in order to enforce our national demand.

The sanctions that we possess today are mass civil disobedience or Satyagraha. And the British Government today are not in a position to face a major conflict like an All-India Satyagraha for a long period. It grieves me to find that there are people in the Congress who are so pessimistic as to think that the time is not ripe for a major assault on British Imperialism. But looking at the situation in a thoroughly realistic manner, I do not see the slightest ground for pessimism.

The historic Tripuri session had a sequel, even for me. During the previous year, in October 1938, Congress president, Subhas had convened a meeting of the Industries Ministers of several Provinces, and despite the opposition of his colleagues on the Working Committee, he had set up the National Planning Committee. He subsequently offered its Chairmanship to Jawaharlal Nehru who gladly accepted, and in December 1938 I was appointed Secretary of the Committee. In February 1939, on the eve of the Tripuri session I issued a couple of press statements defending Subhas's stand. To my utter surprise Pandit Nehru interpreted this action of mine as "active participation in politics", and forbade it. I could not accept that position so long as my political activity did not adversely affect my secretarial work. I wrote to Panditji: "I have not resigned the I.C.S. merely in order to exchange one prison-house for another". Nehru, however, was adamant and forced the issue, and asked me to resign, which I did. When I told Subhas about it he said, "your fault was that you took part in my politics, not his" (Nehru's) and gave a hearty laugh.

Subhas had in the meantime resigned the Presidentship of the Congress and launched the Forward Bloc with a view to preparing the country for the final struggle at the outbreak of war. I was appointed its first Organising Secretary. Three months later Subhas was virtually expelled from the Congress. But there was no rancour in his heart: he was already making his long-range plans.

He did not know much Hindi in 1938, but in less than a year his quick grasp and retentive mind enabled him to make effective speeches in that language. He used to tell me that the best way of learning a language was to hear it spoken by those really proficient therein. Though he had engaged a tutor, a Hindi Pandit at home, the latter once complained to me that his pupil was 'too lazy' to sit down and learn. He was quite right. Routine work bored him stiff, and made him even unpunctual. It was only adventure and fight that quickened his body and spirit.

When I was in Arthur Road Prison, Bombay, during 1940-41, undergoing a sentence of one year's rigorous imprisonment, I received from him a letter via the jail censor, dated January 18, 1941, saying that his health was not particularly good and that he would soon be back in jail. The day after I got it, the papers brought the news that he had disappeared from his Calcutta home, where he was on parole, under the very nose of the vigilant Indo-British Police and CID men. Even the Superintendent of my prison was astounded, and he casually asked me what could be the matter, as he himself had read the letter addressed to me only a couple of days earlier. I laughed outright and said: "Surely, in your safe custody here. I couldn't be a party to his disappearance". It was, however, good tactics on Subhas's part. He had sent similar letters to several friends all over the country, particularly to those whose correspondence was likely to be censored. Thus the machinery of Government intelligence was put off its guard, and probably the watch on his residence had consequently been relaxed.

I am not wide of the mark when I say that if Lokamanya Tilak could be described as the "Father of Indian Unrest", and Mahatma Gandhi as the "Father of Indian Struggle", then verily Subhas Chandra Bose was the "Father of Indian Revolution".

When will India see his like again?❖

Subhas the immortal



Pattabhi Sitaramayya

Pattabhi Sitaramayya was born in 1880. He graduated from the prestigious Madras Christian College, but left his lucrative practice to join the freedom fighting movement. He ran for the presidency of the Indian National Congress as the candidate closest to Mohandas Gandhi, against the more-radical Subhas Bose in 1939. He lost owing to Bose. He served as a member in the Constituent Assembly, later as the Governor of Madhya Pradesh from 1952 to 1957.

Today's politics is tomorrow's history. That is but a truism. But events happen in life which being the politics of the day, constitute the history of the day as well. Such is the flight of Subhas Babu beyond the borders of India across the fastnesses of Kabul to unknown regions for achieving unsuspected purposes. Whosoever thought that this silent sphinx of the Congress who stood mute and voiceless for a year of his tenure of office, would suddenly develop into a strategist, a warrior, a commander of forces, a rebel, and

revolutionary in other than the softer meanings of the terms, and at last a mystery man whose whereabouts are unknown, who nevertheless is today adored as the hero in hiding and was yesterday worshipped as the martyr that was no more.

Greatness never advertises itself until it inevitably comes into the limelight of its own self-luminosity. Reflected light cannot be independent. They are planetary in character but the innate, self-born brightness of the stars emit their scintillations in their own time and lit the skies and the earth even from those astronomical distances which are not easily conceivable. Even so did Subhas Babu shine from afar like a radiant orb in the blue firmament. Alike from far-off Berlin in the West and from distant Tokyo in the East, Subhas Babu broadcast his thoughts and sentiments and unfolded on the wireless his plans and campaigns week in and week out to an amazed and astounded world that now believed them all and was thrown into raptures of hope and joy, and now disbelieved and was lost in doubt and despair.

Subhas was still a phantom and his name was still a sound when the Indian Armies under his leadership and command invaded Imphal and the eastern boundary of Manipur. Japan was in everyone's thoughts. And when the Japanese were threatening to invade Balasore and the armies on boundary marched towards Jamshedpur, it was Japan that was believed to be the mainspring and fountain-head of the mighty resources which were overwhelming the country.

But time solved all problems and riddles and resolved all doubts and difficulties. The return of the INA, the sensational trials that it led to, the wide advertisement that followed in their train, brought to light the hidden facts of this great adventure in modern history and revealed the real man in the mystic, the brave soldier in the civilian, the genuine revolutionary in the administrator. That Subhas's colleagues did not share his principles and policies could not detract for the glory of his adventure. No foreigner may be trusted to emancipate one subject country except to enslave it himself in turn. Yet the fact remained that the attempt unprecedented in character, colossal in magnitude and stupendous in achievement must be assessed at its innate worth without being discounted either by the rights and wrongs of the case or by the facts of its success or failure. The endeavour was an end in itself, apart from its potential (since become kinetic) value in disillusioning a nation in regard to its own enviable importance.

A new faith and fervour, yea a new philosophy has been generated in millions of dried-up and despairing hearts much as the showers of the monsoon would cover a fallow land with patches of green verdure. Subhas has proved to the world that Hindustan is still a land of valour and prowess, that the Indian has still in him that sense of national honour for the preservation and perpetuation of which his forefathers had shed their red blood. Subhas may be alive or dead in body, but his spirit and his name will endure long, yea forever in history, in common with the names of Alexander and Darius, of Caesar and Hannibal, of Czenkhis Khan and Temur Lane, of Harold the last of the Barons and William the Conqueror, of Cromwell and Guy Fawkes, of Kaiser and Hitler. ❖