

Interview/ Sugata Bose

Q. In 2003, speaking on Kashmir as part of the Glenn Miller Lecture Series, you had highlighted how the social fabric of the region was not just a product of seamless religious syncretism as later day political proponents of Kashmiriyat have claimed but more of a creative accommodation of differences. You were hinting at the autonomy the region enjoyed even under Akbar's claim of sovereignty, leaving space for local authorities as well as the preservation of a regional identity. In the melee of a nationalist discourse, how do you see the complexities today? You did recently reiterate what you had said earlier on the issue, that the centre should not treat Kashmir as a real estate dispute. Also, has the creative accommodation of differences lost out somewhere in the urgent need to oppose the state?

One has to respect differences in order to transcend them. Kashmiris knew how to do so ever since the days of Lal Ded and Sheikh Nooruddin. The exigencies of the current political protest may have temporarily undermined the long tradition of creative accommodation of differences. It can be rekindled if the state takes the initiative to have a people-centred rather than a territory-centred approach to the Kashmir problem. The first necessity is to discard colonial definitions of sovereignty and borders and instead rely on rich resources in pre-colonial and anti-colonial Indian political thought on layered and shared sovereignty. We can also learn from political experiments in other parts of the world. The British and the Irish redefined sovereignty in order to reach the Good Friday agreement on Northern Ireland in 1998. A conceptual shift often needs to precede a breakthrough in a political logjam.

Q. During the course of the same lecture you said that 'the state system has to bend if not to break'? People in this country have always had a problem with a unitary nation-state propped up on a quasi federal structure and insist on maintaining the idea enshrined in our constitution that India is a union of states. It is evident today with protests in Una, food preferences being challenged by majoritarian principle. Have the prioritization of the national agenda adversely affected our federalism? What are your thoughts?

Since independence we have had a state structure that is federal in form but by and large unitary in substance. This is because we inherited the unitary centre of the British raj in 1947. During the last seven decades a certain tension has emerged between a slow-changing state structure and fast-moving democratic processes that have tended towards a more federal polity. Federalism is not just about the autonomy of states. It is also about an equitable sharing of power at the centre. That is why federalism needs to be a key principle on our national agenda. The resort to religious majoritarianism will foment further division and alienation. A free and flexible federal union will in the long run prove to be a stronger Indian union.

Q. After the murders of Pansare, Kalburgi and Dabholkar, there were widespread protests among artists, scholars, professors, and intellectuals from all walks of society. Awards were returned, public meetings organized, etc. Then there were the Muzaffarnagar riots and Akhlaq's lynching. What do you think is the role of a public intellectual in these troubled times?

The role of a public intellectual is to speak out without fear. The return of state honours is an age-old method of recording dissent. The meaning of *Akhlaq* is ethics. Artists, professor and scholars should contribute to the public debate about the ethics of good governance.

Q. In your speech in Parliament on the issue of intolerance you highlighted the need for constitutional morality espoused by Dr. Ambedkar, because some members of the Government according to you were "spreading a virulent form of prejudice and bigotry". You also said that "tolerance is not good enough". What is this notion of constitutional morality? Also, is the idea of tolerance itself hinged on differential parameters of majority and minority?

Dr. Ambedkar invoked the concept of constitutional morality described by Grote, the historian of Greece, as "a paramount reverence for the forms of the Constitution enforcing obedience to authority acting under and within these forms...yet combined with the habit of open speech...and unrestrained censure of those very authorities as to all their public acts." "Constitutional morality," Dr. Ambedkar had contended, "is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated. We must realize that our people have yet to learn it." In the course of the constituent assembly debates Zairul-Hassan Lari pointed out that constitutional morality was a value that not just citizens but also the government must learn. The spirit underlying the constitution and not just the words must guide and restrain the government. We must go well beyond tolerance and foster cultural intimacy among India's diverse communities.

Q. The minorities and marginalized people are increasingly being threatened with murder or being raped on the mere suspicion of carrying beef. 'Majoritarian triumphalism' as you termed it in Parliament is an increasing threat in our times. Do our lawmakers and the executive have to answer for this? Additionally, is there something seriously wrong with our pedagogy that youngsters nowadays are not aware of the history of meat eating or dietary preferences across cultures?

The beef issue is one symptom of majoritarian triumphalism. While it is important for our young generation to be taught to respect dietary preferences of others, it is even more important for them to learn the true meaning of majority and minority in a democracy. Dr. Ambedkar had said, "The minorities in India have agreed to place their existence in the hands of the majority...They have loyally accepted the rule of the majority which is basically a communal majority and not a political majority. It is for the majority to realize its duty not to discriminate against minorities." I would go a step further and question why we should privilege the religious distinction in defining majority and minority. In a true democracy a majority should be earned and not handed out on a pre-fabricated religious platter.

Q. “Nationalism” you mentioned in Parliament on the debate over Rohith Vemula’s death, “can be a truly Janus faced phenomenon”. But this debate over nationalism or national interests running roughshod over individual aspirations or divergent views is not new. In Independent India we have examples of the emergency, the Babri Masjid Demolition, etc. Even in pre-colonial times there were voices like Tagore’s, who spoke out against excesses committed in the name of the Swadeshi movement. Are we yet to be comfortable as a democracy to be more accommodative of different ideas and definitions of nationalism?

This is not a problem specific to Indian democracy. We are living through an historical moment similar to that of one hundred years ago when narrow nationalism bedevilled the working of formal democracies. For example, the rhetoric of Donald Trump is today making a mockery of democracy in America. In India we have fortunately always had sage voices warning against the hubris of the more selfish and arrogant forms of nationalism even in the days of our freedom struggle. We need to rescue nationalism from the clutches of chauvinists and religion from the stranglehold of religious bigots. We should nurture the more generous forms of nationalism that instil a spirit of service and inspire creative faculties among our people.

Q. You have authored notable monographs on agrarian studies in Bengal. In *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal Since 1970*, “In 1970” you write, “... the agrarian scene in Bengal was marked by scarcity of people and vast stretches of uncultivable fertile land. Two centuries later, land in the two Bengals has some of the highest densities of population and some of the lowest yields of production in the world”. The Singur verdict was passed on 31st of August, 2016, in which the land acquisition was quashed. Justice Arun Mishra faulting it on irregularities and failure to follow due processes while Justice V. Gopala Gowda faulted the acquisition altogether, suggesting that land acquired for private industrial setups, no matter the employment generation involved, cannot be seen as falling under public purpose. In a sense excluding the land acquisition from the purview of the 1894 Land Acquisition Act. We know that it might not be possible for you to separate the political, in this case the organizational from the academic perspective but as a scholar of agrarian history how do you see the Singur verdict?

In *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* I had written about the demographic transition since the great famine of 1770 and offered an interpretation of agrarian change over the next two centuries. In addition to demography, I had noted the significance of market forces and the agrarian class structure as explanatory variables. On the Singur verdict, as an agrarian historian I agree with Justice V. Gopala Gowda’s line of reasoning. I am glad that at last our highest court has taken the question of public purpose seriously in reaching a judgment.

Q. As is widely known and you have also mentioned in the book that unbridled demographic growth or population pressure can create a burden on the land and sustenance for its tillers leading to malnutrition and hunger. This was also one of the

arguments used by the Left when it pushed for speedy industrialization, which among other areas included Singur. There is also the contrarian view that this population pressure could lead to innovations in agriculture. While the jury is still out on it, how do you look at industrialization in the context of fertile landscapes like West Bengal? Is it possible to have a different industrial model, which the Left perhaps failed to see, even when there is high competition among states in India?

In my academic work I had accepted the theory that demographic pressure could and did lead to innovations in agriculture. At the same time, I noted that by the late twentieth century there was a desperate need for employment-generating industries. However, we need a change of mind-set in terms how we go about seeking investment for new industries. Instead of offering special privileges to particular business houses and selling out the legitimate rights of peasant smallholders, we should create an attractive, transparent and competitive environment with particular attention to physical and social infrastructure as well as a level playing field for potential investors.

Q. Vivekananda has been thoroughly appropriated today by the right. How was it possible for the right to appropriate him without any murmur or protest as such? Not only did the BJP use Vivekananda as their main icon, even candidates from the BJP's student wing fighting for union elections in universities like JNU carry pamphlets with Vivekananda's image on them, as if this grants their campaign sanctity. Do you believe this is a correct appraisal of his work or his lifelong positions? One is of course reminded of the *Organizer* selectively quoting Vivekananda even during 1992 – 1993.

It was so easy to appropriate a figure like Swami Vivekananda because the self-avowed secularists had ceded the domain of religion to the religious bigots. Religious faith cannot be reduced to communalism in the pejorative sense of that word. Vivekananda had a remarkable breadth of outlook on religion and caste. Young people should read his speeches and writings that go completely against the grain of what the cow vigilantes and their patrons stand for today.

Q. With the release of new documents of Netaji there have been attempts to appropriate Netaji's legacy by almost all political outfits. What is the relevance of Subhas Chandra Bose today?

Subhas Chandra Bose remains relevant today as a unique example of generous leadership that successfully united all religious communities and linguistic groups. He won the absolute trust of the minorities because of his fair-mindedness. His egalitarian vision encapsulated in the concept of "samyavada" is also salient in an era of increasing inequalities.

Q. Without getting into the controversy surrounding his death and ways to latch on to it, is this attempt of the right wing guided by what they perceived as Subhas Chandra Bose's yearning for authoritarian rule the first few years post Independence.

Is this reception then pitted against what they see as Nehru's feeble democracy, which ceded space to everyone whether opponents within his party or outside?

The younger generation should learn from Netaji's book of life. Even though Subhas Chandra Bose spoke of a strong state authority in three or four lectures/essays to carry through radical social and economic reforms in the early years after independence, the entire corpus of his works reveal a deep and abiding commitment to the principles of federalism and democracy, including inner-party democracy. If there is to be a legitimate critique of the Nehruvian era after independence, it should be directed at his ill-conceived authoritarianism in Kashmir and the Northeast. The febleness of his post-colonial democracy was revealed not in attempts at consensus-building but in the abject failures to deliver in the fields of primary education and healthcare.

Q. JSHC's present issue is on the differing notions of secularism. Students of Indian History are aware of both Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution to the ideological processes that shaped a secular India. Bose was religious while Nehru was agnostic, if not an atheist. One celebrated religio-cultural differences and an environment which fostered their mutual interdependence while the other wanted a neutral state espousing a culture built on rationality, science and allowing the right to question religion itself. What were the basic tenets of their secular ideals which helped evolve an idea of India? Did their thoughts converge on the secular credentials of a nation?

Subhas Chandra Bose was less impatient with the expression of religious and cultural differences than Jawaharlal Nehru. In this respect, he was closer to Gandhi and Tagore in believing that only by respecting differences can you rise above them. Yet Bose was different from Gandhi who until the 1920s was not in favour of inter-dining or inter-marriage. The value of cultural intimacy among our diverse communities was the foundation of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's political philosophy. "Democracy," he told the Maharashtra provincial conference over which he presided in 1928, "is by no means a Western institution; it is a human institution." India, he believed, should become "an independent Federal Republic". He warned Indian nationalists not to become "a queer mixture of political democrats and social conservatives" in matters to do with class, community, caste and gender. While not being opposed to "any patch-up work" needed for "healing communal sores", he sought a "deeper remedy" through "cultural rapprochement". He regretted that the different communities inhabiting India were "too exclusive". "Fanaticism is the greatest thorn in the path of cultural intimacy," he told his audience, "and there is no better remedy for fanaticism than secular and scientific education." This was the first occasion on which Netaji used the term secular. For him secularism was not hostile to religiously informed cultural identities, but could help foster "cultural intimacy" among India's diverse religious communities. So there were elements of convergence and divergence in Nehru and Bose's thoughts on the secular credentials of a nation. Nehru tended towards a secular uniformity that was uncomfortable with the notion of difference. Bose's secularism, by contrast, embraced difference to forge unity. It was this accomplishment of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose that Mahatma Gandhi came to admire in the last years of his life.

Interviewed on behalf of JSHC by Rohit Dutta Roy.

Interviewee Bio:

Professor Sugata Bose is Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs and a Member of Parliament in India. He obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. His books include *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) and *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.). He was a recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1997.