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# A GENTLEMAN'S WORD

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# A GENTLEMAN'S WORD

The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia

NILANJANA SENGUPTA



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
Singapore

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*Front cover:* Subhas Chandra Bose at a mass rally at Cathay Theatre, Singapore. *Source:* National Archives of Singapore.

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To my dear mother,

*Because of you I see the light in a Rembrandt*

*And the verdurous gloom of Pather Panchali.*



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# FOREWORD

Dozens of books, many recent, and scores of articles by scholarly researchers have been written about Subhas Chandra Bose and his role and exploits in the political struggle he waged towards gaining independence for India from the British Raj. His political and diplomatic efforts and military exploits in that struggle have been extensively researched in India and in Southeast Asia and published. With the passage of time, his sacrifices and determined efforts will become legendary to young Indians and eventually fade from their memory. What has not been distilled from his voluminous writings, speeches and exhortations about the social, economic and inter-racial and religious problems of India and Indian society, would be worth further researching.

Ms Nilanjana Sengupta has in her publication touched on some of the societal problems that concerned Bose and how he sought to address them from his early times, while he was engaged in leading the Municipal Corporation of Calcutta and while profiling himself actively as a budding freedom fighter. Ms Sengupta has drawn attention to his efforts to forge Hindu-Muslim unity; his interest in the emancipation of Indian women; and his attempts to prevent the exploitation of peasants and workers in India, among other issues. What comes to the fore from this research is his inexhaustible concern for the variety of social and economic problems that afflicted Indian society and cried out for redress.

Ms Sengupta has discovered in the course of her research how Bose took the opportunity, while establishing his Indian National Army and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, to consider the possibility of translating some of his beliefs and ideas and trying them out, among the men and women in the two military organizations that he established in Southeast Asia.

This book by Ms Sengupta should help stir memories in India, if not in the state of West Bengal, to encourage further research and understanding from his writings and speeches, the views he expressed for addressing India's economic and societal problems, and consider which of them would be worthy of trying out in the context of today's India.

*S. R. Nathan*  
*Sixth President of Singapore*  
*6 February 2012*

# MESSAGE

Most Indian families of my generation in Singapore and Malaysia would have had some connection with Subhas Chandra Bose and his struggle for India's independence through the Indian National Army. Even after World War II had ended, and for many years later, Bose's picture took pride of place in our homes.

Following my assumption of duty as Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 2002, I had several conversations with then-President S.R. Nathan. He noted that, while there were many accounts of Bose's life and wartime exploits, his legacy had not been explored sufficiently and written about. Mr Nathan hoped that this would be done.

It was against this background that I decided to commission a book on Bose which would highlight his contributions to the emergence of nationalist movements in Southeast Asia. I also wanted the book to show how Bose had affected the lives of ordinary men and women living in Malaya.

About ten months ago, I came to know Nilanjana Sengupta. I discussed the idea of her writing the book. Coming from Calcutta, Bose's home town, she had a first-hand feel for the subject in the larger Indian context. What she needed was knowledge of developments in and around Southeast Asia. Reading voraciously, she came up to speed on the subject and completed writing the book in a record ten months. Although this book is very well

researched, it is written engagingly for both the scholar and the layman. It brings to life an epic period of Singapore and Malayan history through the iconic figure of Bose and the legacy that he so richly left behind.

I would like to express my appreciation to Nilanjana for working so assiduously on a legendary personality who remains enshrined in the hearts and minds of many. I would also like to thank Rinkoo Bhowmik, another daughter of Calcutta, and the staff of ISEAS Publications Unit for all the hard work they have put into the production of this book.

*K. Kesavapany*  
*Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies*

# MESSAGE

Nilanjana Sengupta casts her net widely in this ambitious volume exploring the post-war impact of Subhas Chandra Bose on Southeast Asia. Because the study of Bose has been extensively explored by generations of scholars, Sengupta necessarily addresses some familiar ground.

Throughout the volume we hear echoes of his early spiritualism, secularism and egalitarianism. We hear also references to his mother's worship — extending to Bharat Mata [Mother India] — and his fostering of women's political and military roles, in for example his creation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. We encounter again his early political role in Calcutta and its extension to his relations with Gandhi and the Congress, preparing him for an even larger stage in Southeast Asia.

We shift to Burma and Malaya and the embryonic nationalism there in the 1920s under colonial rule and a discussion of the Japanese alliance. Subsequently, for a while the scene shifts to the Red Fort Trials in India and their impact on the British Indian army spread across Southeast Asia.

Sengupta discusses Bose's communication and propaganda techniques, his modern understanding of the mechanisms of mass communication, including his awareness of his personal impact. His emotional and absolute commitment to the goal of military liberation was a significant ingredient of his mesmerizing impact

on audiences. The Rebellion of 1857 and the martyrdom of the Rani of Jhansi helped to foster his conviction that the military paradigm was imperative.

Sengupta forges new ground in her discussion of Bose's post-war impact on Southeast Asian leadership, the growth of nationalism, and the burgeoning labour union movement. Throughout Southeast Asia, political organizations such as the MPAJA and labour unions grew in each country, as Sengupta details. The consequence was that British and Dutch post-war attempts to reassert their colonial rule were thwarted by resurgent nationalism. The experience of INA veterans, the personal example of Bose's leadership, and the body of officers trained by the Japanese gave the colonial powers a rude awakening. Southeast Asian nationalism was now an established force in Southeast Asia.

Historians will welcome Sengupta's contribution to our understanding of Bose's continuing impact on the political landscape of Southeast Asia.

*Joyce C. Lebra*  
*Professor Emerita, University of Colorado*

# PREFACE

For me it all started with meeting three little old men at an *Udipi* restaurant on Serangoon Road, Singapore. Bala A. Chandran, Girish Kothari and Kishore Bhattacharya — all three in their eighties, with one of them having undergone an intestinal surgery in the recent past. I was chasing an article for a newspaper in Bombay for which I had already missed the deadline. As they filed in, refusing assistance from the young Tamil waitress and started speaking of their INA (Indian National Army) days, I noticed an unmistakable straightening of the shoulders and an *Ancient Mariner* like glitter in their eyes: it was that momentary transformation which sparked my interest in their story. Was it the easy camaraderie of old boys speaking of their alma mater? Around the same time I read another story of Laxmi Indira Panda of Orissa who had joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. After many frustrating trips down the corridors of power, she finally met the President of India when in her nineties. As she walked down the carpeted corridors of Rashtrapati Bhawan, she stopped to salute the pictures of national leaders. What was it about these men and women, I wondered, that made them less ordinary?

The 1940s was a decade of violence and trauma for Southeast Asian communities, as it was for the rest of the world. It began with the mass exodus of Burmese-Indian refugees in the face of Japanese invasion, witnessed the tragedy of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki — the only nuclear holocausts the world has known and the ruthless massacre of the Chinese communities as they faced the fury of Japan's wartime atrocities. The war, when it finally ended, had systematically torn apart indigenous ecosystems of culture and tradition, of old habits and communal practices.

The INA, as a movement, placed a motley group of individuals against this bleak terrain. Remarkably, it was a group that transcended barriers of caste, religion or race. Even the small cross-section at Singapore that I had the opportunity to meet consisted of expatriate Indians from the far-flung states of Kerala, Gujarat and undivided Bengal. Those who enlisted for the army were similarly widely diverse in their economic and educational backgrounds: just as there was a Ponnampalam who enlisted from a plantation at Seramban where he dried rubber sheets on a clothes line, there was also an S. A. Ayer, Reuter's Special Correspondent in Bangkok. These men and women's lives intersected for a brief while during the years 1943 to 1945 and at the end of the war the network unraveled again, even as life limped back to normalcy. Once the INA was disbanded, the former soldiers pursued divergent career paths: John A. Thivy founded the Malayan National Congress and worked as a diplomat in his later life, Janaki Davar travelled to London to work at the Indian High Commission and then returned to Malaysia and a career in politics and then there was also an L. Krishnan who joined Shaw Brothers and pioneered Malay film production. Yet the INA experience — the learning and memories, remained with them like an omnipotent alter ego. At times the past found manifestation in little physical gestures — like the *Jai Hind* with which the INA community greet each other even today and at times returned in haunting nightmares of near-fatal air-attacks (in his memoirs M. Z. Kiani wrote of the nightmares that plagued him for many months after his return from the front).

During the period of occupation, Japanese-trained voluntary and independent armies dotted almost every region of Southeast

Asia. Militant bands of men sporting uniforms and carrying weapons were ubiquitous in Burma, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, Indochina and the Philippines. The Japanese had raised these armies over a period of time — while the BIA (Burma Independence Army) of Burma had been raised before the outbreak of war in the Pacific, PETA (Sukarela Tentara Pembela Tanah Air) in Java was created only in October 1943. The range and quality of training offered to these armies had also differed — unlike the voluntary armies of Malaya or Indonesia, the INA and BIA had been trained by graduates of the Japanese Army Intelligence School, the Nakano Gakko. But here too the INA was remarkable in being the only army which enjoyed military status and fought alongside the Japanese as her ally.<sup>1</sup>

If the INA and its men were remarkable then it was a reflection of the leader, Subhas Chandra Bose, a major source of the veterans' perception of life. He was a man who had marched to the beat of a different drummer — at a time when the Indian political scene was dominated by Gandhi, he had distanced himself from the “authoritarianism” of the Gandhian movement and sought an alliance with the Axis Powers to press forward the independence struggle of his country.<sup>2</sup> He had escaped the confining political space of India and used Southeast Asia as a sounding board for his alternate viewpoint. He had united the contentious Indians and led them on a hitherto unknown path of armed struggle: Indians, forcibly disarmed by the British since the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (and the Singapore Mutiny of 1915), took to armed resistance against the British after the lapse of many decades. Bose is a leader who still arouses extreme emotions — to some he is a martyr and to others a quisling. His image too oscillates between fields of reality and the distortion thereof: even on my last visit to Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta, in August 2011, I met a gentleman claiming Bose was alive and continued to reside in the high mountain passes of Russia!

For independent India, Subhas Chandra Bose had envisaged the political model of a secular, democratic, federal republic. During his presidential address at the Maharashtra Provincial Conference of May 1928, he had argued that though democracy was an occidental institution, it was not alien to the culture of India and cited examples of early models of democracy which had historically existed in the country:

Speaking for myself, I stand for an independent Federal Republic ... India must fulfill her own destiny and cannot be content with colonial self-government. ... While striving to attain liberty we have to note all its implications. ... You cannot establish political democracy and endeavour at the same time to resist the democratization of the society. ... Privileges based on birth, caste or creed should go, and equal opportunities should be thrown open to all ...<sup>3</sup>

The vision of an independent India with no state religion and based on equal opportunities for all was important to Bose and he was wary of any possible encroachments. In the early 1940s when the possibility of the INA marching into India at the head of the Japanese Imperial Army arose, he was careful in striking a deal with his allies. He insisted that the first drop of blood to be shed on Indian soil should be of a freedom-loving Indian and refused to walk on the proffered “stilts” of Japanese aid.<sup>4</sup> Bose was chary of the Japanese because of earlier Sino-Japan relations, on which he had commented that in attempting to satisfy her “imperial ambitions”, Japan was wont to expand “at the expense of China”. “The vastness”, he wrote, “the potential richness, and the internal weakness of China, constitutes the greatest temptation for Japan”: qualities, which he was aware, were equally true for the Indian subcontinent as well.<sup>5</sup>

In his search for an economic model that would institute complete, all-round undiluted freedom, a socio-economic structure

and body-politic that would bring maximum happiness, Bose was convinced he had found the answer in Socialism. Socialism by providing every human being with the right to work, the right to a living wage and equal opportunities for all could ensure a fair, just and equitable distribution of wealth. And for this if necessary the State could take over control of the means of production and distribution of wealth.<sup>6</sup> As a political philosophy for free India he sought a synthesis of the “national unity and solidarity” of Fascism (he called it “National Socialism” and mentioned what he sought was distinct from what had been achieved in contemporary Germany) with the “planned economy of Communism”.<sup>7</sup> In his later years he amended his views on democracy and felt for the immediate future of post-independent India, it was necessary to institute a State with some authoritative powers “... a State of an authoritarian character, which will work as an organ, or as the servant of the masses, and not of a clique or of a few rich individuals.”<sup>8</sup> Once India had achieved a stable social, political and economic framework based on justice, equality, freedom, discipline and love, a government in accordance with the “will of the people” would be instituted.

In my explorations of this enigmatic leader, there are a few images, amongst others, of which I am particularly fond. One is from his early manhood when he was the favourite *Rangakakababu* [uncle] to his brood of young nephews and nieces: he listened to them with such serious intent that they felt they were adults speaking to a friend. This image reflects Bose’s very genuine compassion for the people around him and his ability to relate to them — qualities which would win him the love of the multitudes in Southeast Asia. The other picture is of Bose in his mid-thirties, when he was exiled to Europe during 1933–34. His friends noticed him purchasing books on India in languages that he could not read: this almost obsessive passion for India would remain with him and drive him all his life. The last image

is more poignant: Habibur Rahman, narrates the last few hours of Bose's life spent in a Japanese hospital at Taipei. The leader was convinced his end was near and told Habib that he had no regrets apart from not being able to witness his country attain freedom. Habib should go and tell his countrymen that he had fought for India's independence till his last breath.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the theme of sacrificial patriotism, these words reiterate a recurring motif of his speeches and writings — that of being true to one's pledge, of not breaching a promise.

*A Gentleman's Word* is about this promise that Subhas Chandra Bose made to the Indian people of Southeast Asia who had placed their love and trust in his hands. The book looks beyond the ubiquitous garlanded portrait of the leader and attempts an analysis and assessment of all that he left behind. At an individual level it looks at certain personalities like Aung San and Ahmad Boestamam who were influenced by his ideology as they continued their nation's struggle against colonialism. For the expatriate Indian community of Southeast Asia, the book traces the evolution of certain movements like those fostered by the emerging Indian trade unions and the Malayan Indian Congress which would help shape the community's socio-political future in the years to come. The book devotes considerable space to the issues of feminism that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment helped nurture. At a wider level, it captures some of the highlights of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind's [Free India] inter-communal relations with Burma, Malaya, Thailand and Japan.

Subhas Chandra Bose, in his first public appearance in Singapore on 4 July 1943, had mentioned:

By participation in this common fight, we shall be qualifying for our freedom. By shedding our blood in a sacred cause, we shall be paying the price of liberty and, at the same time, we

shall be laying the only enduring foundation for our national unity. And last but not least, by winning freedom through our own efforts and sacrifice, we shall be acquiring the strength whereby we shall preserve our liberty for all time.<sup>10</sup>

*A Gentleman's Word* tells the tale of this journey of self-discovery of those who were inspired by him.

## Notes

1. Professor Joyce Lebra mentions, it was the INA which, "... retained the strongest sense of its own national identity with the least actual Japanese training." Joyce Chapman Lebra, "The INA and Japanese Trained Armies in Southeast Asia", *The Oracle*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1979): 35.
2. Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, eds., *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (Calcutta/New Delhi: Netaji Research Bureau/Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 275.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.
4. Joyce Chapman Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 143.
5. Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, eds., *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose*, p. 176. See the essay "Japan's Role in the Far East" for Bose's opinion on Sino-Japanese relationship, *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose*, pp. 175–90.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 320.
9. Government of Japan, "4<sup>th</sup> Section, Asian Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs", August 1956, p. 416. Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 307–8.
10. Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, eds., *Chalo Delhi, 1943–1945*, Netaji Collected Works, vol. XII (Calcutta/New Delhi: Netaji Research Bureau/Permanent Black, 2007), p. 44.



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The last year has been one of the best years of my life. Since February 2011, which is when I started working on this book in all seriousness, I have met countless people, most of whom have become friends or at least close acquaintances. There was nobody I approached with details of the project, who did not reciprocate in all earnestness, and with each encounter my book was enriched with a new layer of understanding. On top of the list is K. Kesavapany, Director of ISEAS, who gave new meaning and direction to my life by offering me this project: it was he who set me off on this wonderful journey and encouraged me at every turn. I was overwhelmed when S. R. Nathan, former President of Singapore, agreed to actually read my manuscript. His critical marginal notes and the discussions he had with me gave me new insight. He even very kindly shared books from his personal collection with me. I met Krishna Bose, Chairperson, Netaji Research Bureau (NRB), Calcutta, twice over the course of the year and each time was an experience — Subhas Chandra Bose still resides over a large part of her consciousness and I could feel his palpable presence when I spoke to her. Her very illustrious son, Sugata Bose, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs, Harvard University, and author of some wonderful books, set aside time from his very busy schedule and spent two long afternoons at NRB with me. As I heard his measured tone

and analysis of historical events and continuities, I could not resist anxiety pangs at my own temerity in deciding to research the same subject on which he had dwelled so knowledgeably and for so many years. During the year I shared a warm, albeit long-distance relationship with Joyce Chapman Lebra, Professor Emerita, University of Colorado, who was kind enough to read my initial project proposal and later clarified doubts and answered queries. Then there were the INA (Indian National Army) and Rani of Jhansi veterans. Despite their advanced years they were eager and energetic in sharing with me details of that period of their lives which they unanimously claim to be the most glorious. We rendezvoused at restaurants and residences and each time I came away fired by their enthusiasm for their leader. Today if Malaysia feels like a second home to me it is because of people like Rasammah Bhupalan, Dominic Puthuchery and Janaki Athi Nahappan who live there. The latter and her son, Ishwar Nahappan, welcomed me into their home and we spent a whole weekend ruminating and thumbing through her old albums. My *guruji*, Swami Muktirupanandaji and Swami Samachittanandaji of Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore, freely shared information and books from the RK Mission library. My friends at ISEAS — Tansen Sen, Head, Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre, Geoffrey Wade, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, Visiting Research Fellow — gave me a crucial sense of academic comradeship even as I spent many solitary hours at the ISEAS library. Rinkoo Bhowmik very kindly agreed to do the artwork for the cover and helped me in innumerable different ways in putting the finishing touches to the book while Madan Kunnavakkam added an interesting new dimension with his photographs. I had very perceptive editors in Triena Ong and Sheryl Sin who steered the project towards its logical conclusion. There were others — Johan Saravanamuttu, Norshahril Saat, Christina Goh, Desmond Yong

of ISEAS and others — numerous staff members and librarians of Netaji Research Bureau, ISEAS and the National Library, Singapore who contributed to making this book what it is today. And of course there was my loving family — my husband, Arindam, who smilingly welcomed Subhas Chandra Bose as the fourth member of our household and our eight-year-old daughter Ananya. Once in a while she tiptoed into my study to express her concern about my long working hours and then, closing the door with infinite care, left to watch some more television — much to my consternation!

May the merits of this book be shared by all I have or have not mentioned above while the inadvertent flaws and follies come to my share.