

The Incendiary Ashes of Subhas Chandra Bose, or Myth and History, Life and Death in Japan and India

By Joyce Lebra

Hero of the Indian Independence

When a person dies and is cremated, his or her ashes rest in peace eternally. Not so the ashes of Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945). His ashes continue to burn, to sear the memories of individuals in both Japan and India. Why is this so? Who was Subhas Chandra Bose that his ashes should cause such fiery memories? He was a Bengali, educated in British schools, where as a student he developed an antipathy to British rule that strengthened as he grew older and joined the Congress Party and later the radical Forward Bloc. His career included becoming mayor of Calcutta, now Kolkata, being jailed, and in 1939 being elected presi-

dent of the Congress Party, despite breaking with Gandhi over the use of force against the British.

In 1941 Bose dramatically eluded house arrest and journeyed incognito through Afghanistan to Nazi Germany, where he sought German aid against Britain. In 1943 he was brought to Singapore via German and Japanese submarines. There he took command of the Indian National Army (INA) composed of Indian officers and men captured by the Japanese and inspired by Lieut. Fujiwara Iwaichi, an imaginative young intelligence officer, to fight for independence rather than remain as prisoners of war. Bose also recruited Indians living in Southeast Asia and formed a women's regiment named

after the Rani of Jhansi, an earlier Indian heroine who was killed by the British in battle.

Bose's ashes rest at the Renko-ji Temple in Tokyo, brought there by Hayashida Takeo after Bose died in the crash of a Japanese military plane in Taiwan in August 1945. For many Japanese officers and men who fought beside Bose in World War II, the Renko-ji Temple is not the proper resting place for this hero of Indian independence. For any Japanese, one's ashes should be brought home, to a family temple, and only then will they rest content.

The people of Calcutta not only do not want Bose's ashes, but they also do not wish to acknowledge his ashes in any way, because to do so would mean admitting that Bose is dead. This many Bengalis are not willing to concede. If they are confronted with the possibility of having the ashes brought to Calcutta they will protest, they will riot.

This is what I witnessed several years ago while attending a conference on the history of the INA at the Netaji Bhavan, Bose's ancestral home in Calcutta. Also in attendance as the main speaker was General Fujiwara, founder of the INA and after World War II commander of the First Division of the Ground Self-Defense Forces. Newspapers in Calcutta had published the rumor that Fujiwara was bringing Bose's ashes home to Bengal. While we were in the conference hall where I was to introduce Fujiwara, a group of young radicals broke through the gate and invaded the hall. They shook their fists and shouted insults at Fujiwara and everyone else on the stage, including me. The rioters were only quelled when Dr. Sisir Bose, nephew of Subhas Bose and host of the conference, took a microphone and

Photo: The Mainichi Newspapers



Indira Gandhi, India's third Prime Minister, visited the Renko-ji Temple to see Bose's ashes in 1969

scolded them in forceful Bengali: “You come to vilify General Fujiwara? You should come to do *pranam*.” His words chastened these young firebrands and they were ushered from the building. *Pranam* is the ultimate respect that can be shown to any revered person, including one’s parents.

During another session at the conference an elderly relative of Subhas Bose took the podium and insisted: “Bose is still alive! He promised to return for World War III!” Of course if Bose, affectionately known as Netaji (fuhrer) were still alive then, he would have been over ninety, no longer the young revolutionary who had fought British control for most of his life.

Later that night I pondered the meaning of the day’s incredible events. Why did many Bengalis refuse to believe that Netaji had died, moreover that he was still the young radical who had defied British power and continued his struggle against the British in Southeast Asia? How could Bengalis believe in such defiance of reason?

As I lay unable to sleep, something significant occurred to me. In traditional India, time is not a linear construct proceeding from past through present to future. Instead, time moves in a circle without beginning or ending. In a construct of time without past, present or future, Indians were unable to write history. Rather, myths were generated in great profusion in an elaborate oral tradition. Just as the seasons move in continual rotation as in agrarian cultures, so for traditional India did all life move in continual circular rotation. For humans, life and death are followed in unending succession to rebirth, life, death and rebirth. That Bose might have died is irrelevant in this traditional concept of time where past, present, and future are the same and irrelevant to linear time.

This Indian notion of time is as alien to Japanese ideas of time as it is to Western thinking. Traditionally, Japanese did write history, in which time proceeded from Amaterasu and Susa-no-o to Jimmu Tenno and the

rest of the imperial line, “in a line unbroken for ages eternal” down to the present incumbents. Herein lay a major cultural disjunction between Japan and India, an interface that did not connect.

■ The Legend Lives on

Subhas Chandra Bose had transmogrified into a legend, and legends do not die easily, if at all. They live on in the collective memory of a nation. For the above-mentioned reasons this is precisely what had happened to Bose. For many Bengalis, not only was Netaji not dead but he could never die; instead he would survive eternally. It occurred to me as I lay sleepless that this was part of the explanation for the puzzling behavior of the rioters in the conference hall that extraordinary day.

Another similar example is the Rani of Jhansi, “India’s Joan of Arc,” killed in battle by British forces near the formidable Gwalior fort in June, 1858 at the end of the Sepoy Rebellion, the most-written about event of British control in India. Her martyrdom transformed her into a legend, where she lives on in the hearts and minds of Indians and continues to inspire generations of women. Her undying legend feeds on the templates of sixteen mother goddesses, on the avenging goddess Durga, on the war goddess Chandni, and on Shakti, the cosmic female power in the universe. The Rani legend thus lives on eternally.

I still lay awake, for there was another cultural disjunction between Japan and India that needed further exploration. This related to the above-mentioned problem of Bose’s ashes. Japanese participants in the INA often discussed the ashes as they attended memorial services for Bose at the Renko-ji Temple. The Japanese imperative to return the ashes to their proper home in Bengal continued and continues to this day, so long as Japanese who cooperated with the INA remain alive. Is there any way for these Japanese individuals to assuage their consciences,

Photo: THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN



Subhas Chandra Bose, hero of the Indian Independence

their sense of responsibility to the dead? The efforts of Japanese to repatriate the ashes of Japanese war dead from far-flung parts of Asia have been well documented in reportage and fiction. Yet the refusal of Bengalis to accept Netaji’s ashes has frustrated all Japanese attempts.

As I lay still considering all the cultural differences between Japan and India, I could see no solution for the good intentions of Japanese soldiers of that generation who cooperated with the INA. As they leave this life, perhaps the impetus to return Bose’s ashes to Calcutta will eventually diminish to the point of irrelevance. Thus the problem of the ashes will fade, the ashes will remain in the Renko-ji Temple, and the image of Subhas Chandra Bose as a young revolutionary, his legend forever vibrant, will continue eternally frozen in time. **JS**

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