

Biswakabi & his Deshnayak: Why they matter

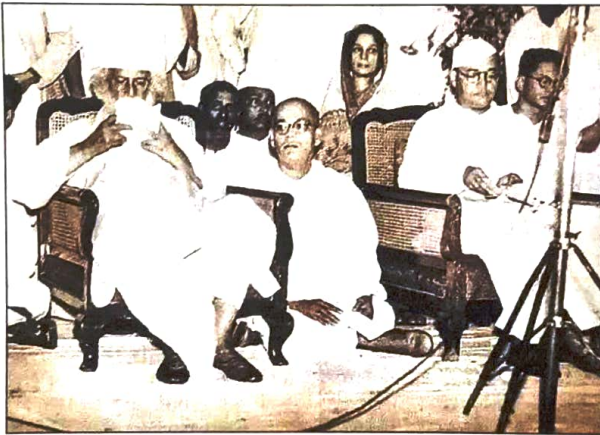
SUGATA BOSE

Eighty-seven years ago, on August 19, 1939, Bengal's two luminaries Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose came together at a solemn public function in Calcutta. I first heard about this event from my father Sisir Kumar Bose, who as a 19-year-old witness to history took several photographs from various angles aided by the flash bulbs of ABP's veteran cameraman Birendra Nath Sinha.

Tagore and Bose were seated side by side on two antique chairs while Sarat Chandra Bose sat on the ground between them. Among those standing behind them were Humayun Kabir and Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chaudhuri.

Bose had invited Tagore to lay the foundation of a house, which the poet named "Mahajati Sadan" (House of the Great Nation). What was the significance of this name? Tagore was an old-style patriot who loved his homeland. But he

■ Sugata Bose is Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University



Rabindranath Tagore and Subhas Chandra Bose, with Sarat Chandra Bose seated on the ground between them, at the event to lay the foundation for Mahajati Sadan on August 19, 1939. (Picture credit: Netaji Research Bureau)

harboured scepticism about nationalism, especially the modern nation-state. He spelt out his conception of *mahajati* in his speech. The strength of the Bengali nation that he sought to invoke was not the type of state power (*rashtrashakti*) that instilled fear and doubt in friends and foes alike.

Having explained what *mahajati* was not, he wanted courage and beauty, devotion to dutiful work and the creative power of imagination, to blend seamlessly to craft the all-round freedom

of humanity (*manushyater sarbangin mukti*).

Hailing Tagore as the "poet of humanity", Bose too spoke of the history of Bengal's social and political movement that knew no provincial boundaries and transcended the national frontier of India. Bose was critical of the brand of nationalism that was narrow, selfish and arrogant, and instead promoted a devotion to the motherland that inspired creative faculties and instilled a spirit of public service and sacrifice

among our people.

While being rooted in the soil of our country, the universalist and humanist aspiration articulated by both Tagore and Bose makes their shared legacy especially salient in our troubled times.

I hear many decent people lament that today's wielders of *rashtrashakti* are denying these two icons the honour that is due to them. My response is that these high personages do not need the State because they are forever enshrined in their people's hearts. Tagore's poems and songs have been our resort and refuge in joy and in sorrow. Netaji has been and continues to serve as an alter-ego to the post-colonial state's power structure — an imperishable beacon of hope to our people whenever freedom has been threatened or justice denied.

Both Tagore and Bose sometimes faced unfair criticism or inadequate appreciation in their lifetime. Separated by 36 years in age, each knew exactly what the other contributed to the life of the nation. A 15-year-old Bose had written to his elder brother Sarat about Tagore, deploring "how indifferent Bengal had been in shower-

ing laurels upon him and has suffered his genius, super-human though it is, to lie in the shade of neglect" while foreigners "extolled him as the greatest poet the world has produced".

This was in September 1912, more than a year before Tagore won the Nobel. When Bose faced a political crisis and resigned as Congress president in April 1939, he won Tagore's approbation: "The dignity and forbearance, which you have shown in the midst of a most aggravating situation, has won my admiration and confidence in your leadership. The same perfect decorum has still to be maintained by Bengal for the sake of her own self-respect and thereby to help turn your apparent defeat into a permanent victory."

In addition to their humanism, they must be remembered today for the dignity and decorum they brought to our public life.

In his eloquent *Deshnayak* address, the poet captured the essence of Bose's leadership that earned him the love and adoration of his countrymen.

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Biswakabi

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Tagore recalled “the sacred assurance of the Gita that from time to time the Divine champion of the good arises to challenge the reign of the evil”. He saw Bose as the “deliverer” who would claim of his people “the resoluteness, the unyielding will to live and to conquer strengthened by the inspiration” of his own life.

“I may not join him in the fight that is to come,” the 78-year-old Tagore wrote in conclusion. “I can only bless him and take my leave knowing that he has made his country’s burden of sorrow his own, that his final reward is fast coming as his country’s freedom.”

In the summer of 1941 Sarat Chandra Bose visited Santiniketan and took Tagore into confidence about the success and goal of Netaji’s Mahanishkraman, the great escape from India.

In one of his last short stories written in June 1941, Tagore described the journey of a lonely traveller making his way across the rugged terrain of Afghanistan in search of freedom. The revolutionary says: “*Rabi Thakurer ekta gan amaar kanthastha — amaare bandhbi tora shei bandhon ki toder aachhe!*” British chains could not bind Netaji.

On August 19, 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose had said in Tagore’s presence: “Today clouds have darkened our political firmament.” As even darker clouds gather on the political horizon in 2026, the path illuminated by the Biswakabi and his Deshnayak beckons us.