

## **Reconciling Boundaries and Identities: The world of Bengali Intellectualism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.**

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Nations and cultures long articulated by geography and territory were undergoing transformations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Transnational movements of people have recreated the idea of exile with migrants seeking to transform cultural boundaries and transfiguring new depiction of their selves, their pasts and their histories. However, cultures and histories are hardly isolated from memories of the past and experiences of the present that a kind of supra territorial identity evolves from transnational migrations. This supra territorial identity should not be treated as a ‘rupture’ from a particular nation or culture rather it must be taken as reconstructing the history in highly selective ways when both nostalgia and memories tend to have subjective production of reality, not objective phenomena specific to time and place. Writing by the immigrants either in a form of memoir or critical commentary could be proved worthy enough to address the questions of ‘boundary’ and ‘identity’ in a remote location provided that the transnational visions and cross cultural experiences offer equal treatment to the ideas of ‘home’ and the ‘exile’ in a given situation. This paper makes a humble attempt to review the life and time of one of the early Bengali intellectuals Dr. Sudhindra Bose in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. His writings are being taken as a site of relocating how Indians wrote America and how Indians wrote India in America. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, the man has been traced in history and his world of intellectualism has been projected in the last part. It is to mention here that his writings did not always reflect what Edward Said had described as sheer fact of isolation and displacement, rather a kind of long distance nationalism which indeed shaped up the idea of being and becoming a nation differently.

**The Man and His Time**

The history of Asian -Bengali immigration in America dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century when a few Muslim Bengali craftsmen and labourers from Bengali villages came to American port cities in search of a job. Vivek Bald's book *'Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America'*<sup>1</sup> discusses the history of the Muslim peddlers who journeyed from their villages in Hooley, Bengal to American holiday destinations to sell the embroidered silks to meet the desires of the American consumers for the luxury goods from the orient. Decades later, another group of South Asian Bengalis started arriving at the port cities of the Eastern seaboard. They were Indian sailors from East Bengal villages who worked in the British merchant marine. In search of a better life style and better jobs these seamen land at the port cities, and went on to find work in factories. Unlike these traders and labourers, a new set of religious leaders, university professors, research scholars, and writers and poets started arriving in America from late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1883 Brahma Samaj leader P.C Mozoomdar lectured in many American cities<sup>2</sup> followed by Swami Vivekananda's historical visit in Chicago in 1893.<sup>3</sup> In late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chicago symbolized the picture of expanding America. It was the heart- land of trade and transportation; it was even a prominent international trade centre. The rapidly changing climate of Chicago's, its rambling position alongside Lake Michigan, its steady chaos of growth and change, and its baffled city life, all made the place an attractive destination for the travellers and the migrants.<sup>4</sup> from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali students, activists, artist's journalists and teaching professionals arrived in America and built intellectual network with one another. A good number of Hindu Bengalis didn't like the idea of sending their children to England. It was their nationalist pride which made them looking for some other options like America—an English speaking country where the Indian students would not face the problem of a foreign language as it was the case in Germany, France and Japan. It was the time when African, American, Caribbean and Indian immigrant intellectuals established common ties on the issues of racial injustice inside America and across the boundaries of the colonial world. Some of Bengali intellectuals wrote extensively on Indian freedom movement, British colonization of Bengal as well as their own conceptions of the American society with a comparative analysis of Indian and American culture. Prof Sudhindra Bose was one of them. He championed the cause of Indian independence in America and kept his voice against American practise of denying citizenship to the Indians. Bose was born in 1883 in Dhaka in undivided British Bengal. He received his early education from Comilla College from 1901-1903, attended Vitoria College in Calcutta from 1901-1903 and got permission to study in America. Between 1904-1905 he attended Park College in Missouri in America and got admission in the University of Illinois on 1906.

Why he left India? Studying in America was not a very good optional that time because of its strict immigration rules. Bose belonged to a middle class family; since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was immense dissatisfaction among the middle class Bengal bhadraloks due to the growing competition over coveted jobs and racial discrimination over judicial and other matters. The Ilbert Bill controversy, Calcutta Corporation Act of 1899, the University Act of 1904<sup>5</sup> and other government measures also generated a sense of disappointment and resentment among them. Most of the educated middle class students opted for the legal profession as an independent way of earning while a few others went in search for their 'dreamland' outside India. It is to be mentioned here that in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century the movement around Bengal partition (1905) had created an immense uproar over political extremism in Bengal leading to revolutionary militancy by a few underground revolutionary organizations. Interestingly, the early Bengalis who arrived in America in the first two decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century shared a kind of connection with this trend of political extremism in Bengal and many of them were found organising nationalist activities in America in support of Indian independence movement. Men like Taraknath Das, Kalyan Kumar Banerjee or Haridas Mazumdar had a direct association with the revolutionaries while Dhangopal Mukherjee, the brother of well known revolutionary Jadugopal Mukherjee nurtured the spirit of Indian nationalism in a way different from others. Kalyan Kumar Banerjee focused on the Gadar Movement as the first organised activity by the Indians in a foreign country, Tapan Kumar Mookerjee in his detailed biography on Taraknath Das has pointed out Das as the first Bengali revolutionary in exile. Strangely enough in the mainstream historiography on national movement in India the Bengali revolutionaries based in the United States were hardly mentioned. Harold Gauld's *Sikhs Swamis, Students and Spies* demonstrates how a small group of Indian intellectuals like Haridas Mazumdar and Taraknath Das put their efforts in attaining America's support against the British in India during the 1920s -1940s and worked with a prosperous network of American liberals for India's freedom and civil rights. Now in case of Sudhindra Bose, no direct involvement with the revolutionaries was found rather it could be expected that a disillusioned Bose left India in the wake of the anti partition movement due to the mounting political disturbances and professional uncertainty in Bengal. It's worth mentioning that the number of Indians arriving in America in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century were limited to merchants, students and unassisted immigrants who were capable enough to finance their own maintenance since the United States enacted a complementary law in 1885, the U.S. Contract Labour Law, which forbade any company or individual from bringing foreigners into the country in order to contract them for labour. In a

hearing before the ‘*Committee of Immigration on ‘Restrictions of Immigration of Hindu Labourers*’<sup>6</sup> in 1914, Sudhindra Bose , the then lecturer of Oriental Politics and Civilization at the State University of Iowa acknowledged that,

“I have often been asked why the Hindus come to the country at all. I wish to say that the Hindus come to this country precisely for the same reason as the millions that come to this country from other countries. To us America is another name of opportunity. We come here to this country because of the opportunities we have for social uplift, intellectual betterment and economic advancement. If you will pardon a personal allusion, I wish to say that a few years ago I came to this country as a labourer and if I had been in any other country as a labourer and if I had been in any other country I would not have had the opportunity of education that I have received in this country.”<sup>3</sup> Bose also denied the objections that the Hindu immigrants in America were underselling the white labour, since, “...there is no competition whatever between the American labour and the Hindu labour, because the American labourers are skilled labourers and the Hindus are nearly all un-skilled labourers and.....there can be no competition between skilled labour and unskilled labour.” Here Bose clearly pointed out why he had come to America and also tried to assure his audience that in no way the white labourers were jeopardised by the Hindu immigrant labourers from India. However, the latter part of the conversation between Bose and the committee members sounds equally interesting and it gives almost a profound idea on what Bose was doing in America soon after his arrival....

“Mr Manahan; you said you came here as a labourer itself.

Ribose: Yes Sir.

Mr.Manahan: Did you come as an unskilled labour or as a skilled labour?

Dr.Bose: I knew no trade, if that is what you mean by unskilled labour.

Mr.Manahan: Is that what you mean by unskilled labour?

Dr.Bose: Yes Sir, I could manipulate no machinery. I could not do mechanical work.

Mr.Manahan; what work did you do?

Dr.Bose: I worked in a store. First I was employed in a store and then I worked on a farm as a common farm hand. I worked in the orchard and gradually I worked into college.

Mr. Manahan: Then you went to school?

Dr.Bose: Yes Sir.

The Chairman: How long has it been since you came over?

Dr.Bose: Then years ago.

The Chairman; Where did you do this work and get your education?

Dr.Bose: I first went to a college in Missouri at Parkville, and then to the University of Illinois, and then to the University of Chicago. Then I came back to Illinois where I took my Masters Degree. Then I went to Iowa, where I took my Doctors Degree, and at the present time I am lecturer on Oriental politics and civilization in the State University of Iowa.

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The Manahan: and you were born where?

Dr.Bose: I was born near Calcutta.

Mr.Manahan: And your people were of what class? If there are classes in India?

Dr.Bose: I came from the middle class.

The Chairman: Were you educated any over there before you came here?

Dr.Bose: I fancy I could.

Mr.Manahan: Then an educational test would not have barred you out of the United States?

Dr.Bose: No, an educational test would not have touched me. Of course I did not come here as a pauper. I had some money, and I could pass the usual test they applied.”<sup>7</sup>

No doubt it was the charm and spell of America that attracted a young man like Bose to continue his journey first as a worker and then a university lecturer. It was more like a magical leap from the material world to the world of intellectualism. He found nothing interesting in British India or simply tried to escape the misfortunes of being and becoming a colonial subject in Bengal. He specifically mentioned the reasons why he had chosen America as an ultimate destination, however, the flight from India to America could have been proved to be a disaster for a young middle class boy in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bose took the risk and ultimately survived the struggle he had no idea at all. As it was mentioned, Bose earned his B.A. in 1907 and an M.A. in English in 1909. He received a Ph.D. degree in Political Science from the University of Iowa in 1913 and from 1913 until his death in 1946, Dr. Bose was an instructor in the Department of Political Science at Iowa, first as Assistant in Political Science and then as Lecturer in Oriental Politics. Throughout his academic career, Bose defended the question of citizenship of the Indians in America. In 1915 he represented Indian Americans to the federal authorities in Washington. In spite of having a natural citizenship of America, Bose had to face the court in 1923 when the US Supreme Court ruled in United States vs. Bhagat Singh Thand case on the citizenship of Asian Indians in America. Bose regained his citizenship in 1927; however, American public opinion in general went

against immigrants receiving citizenship in America after the First World War. (Ling and Austin: 2010: 319-320).

All through his stay in America Bose nurtured a feeling of rupture towards his colonised homeland as Edward Said pointed out nationalism and rupturing share a strong dialectic of constituting each other. Being an immigrant he was to balance between two types of identities; a racial minority as well as an immigrant from a colonised nation. His writings reflect the very dilemma of positioning his colonised status vis a vis his immigrant status in America. It reflects the spirit of getting freedom not only from British colonialism in India but from the clutches of colonialism for the whole of the mankind. It is here Bose and most of his contemporaries challenged the idea of nation and nationalism being an objective production of time and space. The idea of freedom what he had expected to realise in the wonder land of America was proved to be a myth since he knew it well that political freedom would not ensure social or cultural freedom and staying in a race society in America would be equally painful like living in a colonial condition in Bengal. Having realised that most of the Bengali immigrants tried to re write the 'real' homeland and recreate the notions of being a Hindu, most of the early Indian intellectuals like Bose often described Hinduism according to the dominant western concept of religion, thereby portraying Hinduism as a homogenised and exclusive religion.

### **The world of Bose**

Bose wrote a number of books, pamphlets and articles in different journals in America and India. He could be called one of the early Bengali intellectuals who had developed a world view in the true sense of the term, His books included *Some Aspects of English Administration in India* (1913), *Some Aspects of British Rule in India* (1916), *Fifteen Years in America* (Kar and Mazumdar, Calcutta, 1920), *Glimpses of America* (1925) and *Mother America* (1934). Other than his life experiences in America, most of his writings dealt with wider issues of oriental culture and civilization in the context of colonial India and liberal America. In a pamphlet called '*Messenger of Brotherhood*', published by the University of Iowa in 1911, Bose was described as "a man's man and in deadly earnest in his plea for a more sympathetic understanding between the United States and the new Orient...his most recent trip took him to England, the European countries, China, Japan, Ceylon, Siam, Korea, Manchuria, Straits Settlements, Indo-China, Hawaii etc. He was in frequent contact with that world famous Hindu poet Rabindranath Tagore; had an informant audience with the Gaekwar

of Baroda, who rules two million subjects in India; met the great Egyptian leader Zaghlul Pasha, was invited to the palace of the Cambodian king at Pnom-Penn; visited with Dr. San Yat Sen, President of the South China Republic at Canton; Marquis Okuma, former Premier of Japan; Prince Damrong, liberal leader in Siam; Wu-Ting Fang, ex minister of China to America and many other international figures.”<sup>8</sup> The world view of Bose was reflected in his books and articles, published in both India and America. He was the American correspondent of the leading dailies from Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore as well regularly contributed in the Des Moines Registrar on his world tour. Prominent English journals from India like Hindustan Review and Modern Review frequently published his papers along with American journals like Forum, American Political Science Review, Nation, Scientific Monthly, Living Age and Open Court and others. The intellectual vigour of Bose earned him fame and reputation all the way through his journey both as a speaker and writer on Orient. Commenting on Bose, Dr Benjamin Shambaugh, and Head of the Department of Political Science at the University of Iowa mentioned, “He has come to be the foremost teacher, lecturer and writer on Oriental Politics in America.”<sup>9</sup>

The book *Some Aspects of British Rule in India* (1916) was placed originally as the doctoral thesis of Bose in the State University of Iowa<sup>10</sup>. In the preface of the book, Bose clearly argued that, “The usual point of view of the English rulers of India is that all is well in India.....I may add that I am fully aware and duly appreciative of the many solid advantages of English rule; and if I have not dealt with those aspects of Indian administration it is because I have considered it more important just now to point out certain evils and suggest constructive reforms. The policy of repression which characterises the modern regime is, I believe, doing much harm. For the sake of the empire responsible English statesmanship should give earnest consideration to the betterment of conditions in India”.<sup>11</sup> In the last chapter of the book Bose concluded, “ If the Indians are to wait patiently till they become adept in the art of government before undertaking administrative work , then they are forever doomed to disappointment..... Indian must be given full and fair opportunity to learn how to administer her own affairs in near future.”<sup>12</sup> No doubt there were Americans who identified with the nationalist aspirations of the Indians and the Indian immigrants too identified with the American experience of independence from England. Still anxiety and fear prevailed among the Americans with their own assumptions of an imperial dilemma. Whether the Indians would enjoy the same rights as the Americans do? or it would have its own policy on the immigrants? In spite of having a strong argument against the racial discrimination in

America, Bose never let his American dream down. He believed that “the rising of India and as indeed the rest of the world must turn to the United States for support and inspiration. Hindustan should study and know America--the people, the government, the scientific progress, the educational development, the gospel of energism of the New World.” (Bose: 1920: iii). Having said that Bose opened up a fresh debate on so-called superiority and material progress of the west, but again in a paper Bose concluded, “I resent the implication that the Orientals are in any essential manner different from the Occidentals. We of the East ask only one thing of the West. It is this--which you of the West stay away from us and our problems: leave us to solve our own problems, to work out our own destinies, while you spend your time looking after yours. The greatest good you can do us, the lasting benefit you can confer on us, is to let us alone.” (Bose; 1915:226). This self contradiction was a part of the process of selective assimilation. Bose was writing America on the back of his motherland and often encountered the habitual question ‘where are you from?’ instead of ‘who you are or what you are?’ Interestingly his continuous refusal to get otherwise or objectified made him confident enough to invest in the present, not in the past of an imagined homeland. The title ‘Mother America’ itself signifies the fact that Bose had never taken his arrival or diaspora in the context of loss rather took it as a process of self integration. He almost took a balanced view over American society and culture, sometimes went up to the point of admiration and appreciation. In 1911 he wrote,

“The Americans are so free and easy in manners that it is one of the easiest things on earth to make one’s self feel at home when travelling with them.....The people in the country are very accommodating. they are ever ready to do what they can even without overlooking for a thank you.....travellers from England especially from Europe have often expressed to me their surprise at the freedom with which the young men and women mingle in society.”<sup>13</sup>

These words of admiration, however, are not for all the Americans. Bose mentioned,

“There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that the character of the American people is the same in every part of the United States. America like India is too vast a country for generalization. The people of the ‘wild and woolly western states are as much different in their temperament and in their habits of life from those of the progressive east , as the hustling people of the northern states differ from those of the slow moving south.....one of the greasiest problem which faces the south today is the negro problem....between the whites and the blacks in the south there is a perpetual social war.....this race prejudice does not seem

to affect the people of India whether they happen to be in the North and South.....the doors of all the colleges in America remain open to our students without creed and colour. The kindly interest, the sympathetic appreciation which the American professors constantly manifest in the patriotic ambition of the Indian students is most unique....indeed for the Hindustani youth such congenial intellectual atmosphere will be hard to find in any other country. It is not so very long ago that Professor Edward Dicey of Gray's Inn said that Indian students in England are more seriously handicapped on account of their colour. Indian and native English students seldom eat together. Beyond meeting together at lectures, said Dicey, sharply warning the Indians against going to England.”<sup>14</sup>

In this piece of writing Bose categorically talked about the Indian students suffering from racism in England. He took the ‘kindnesses of the American professors as a sweet gesture against the very audacities of British colonialism in India and England. In spite of having a firsthand experience on the state of colour racism in America, Bose wants to nullify the colour question as something not very serious in comparison to the other countries especially that of in England. In ‘Mother America: Realities of American Life as seen by an Indian’ Bose specifically addressed the issue of racial crime in America ...” all I have been endeavouring here to do is to indicate....America cannot afford to assume a self righteous air. Indeed it comes with ill grace for Americans to condemn other people as vicious, inferior or degradingly Asiatic.” (Bose: 1934; 68-69). Bose had several apprehensions on the realities of ‘white peril `all over the world but the same time he located himself into a unique position shared both by the attributes of Indian and American culture. For Bose, it was not ‘New York’s rich elegance` or Chicago’s ‘splendid` culture but the Midwest heartland and the unofficial civic institutions’ where the genuine spirit of America is to be found.

The most interesting explanation on the Indians in America, however, came from one of Bose’s contemporaries and the founder of the Gadar Party in America Lala Har Dayal. In an essay published in the Modern Review in 1911, Har Dayal informed,

“There is a strange contrast between Indian life in England and in the United States. the Indians who reside in England for study, health, place hunting, pleasure or political charlatanism do not for the most part represent the best elements in our society. In America on the contrary Indian society is composed of the best elements of the population of the mother country. We have no idle aristocrats, or hungry graduates longing for official favour, or professional politicians combining patriotism with a due measure of regard for the security

of their sacred persons and the condition of their depleted purses. India sends her best sons to America. “15

No doubt, the Indian students in America in early 20<sup>th</sup> century were of best quality and competence but did they really contribute anything constructive for their motherland? The Bengali intellectuals envisioned America as the land of liberty and justice and knew it well America would be free from the legal reach of the all powerful British empire. The young nationalist Bengalis pursued their higher education as well as their political passion for several years from the base of America but gradually lost the vigour after moving into some non political careers. Taraknath as, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, Sailendranath Ghosh, Prafulla c. Mukherjee and others too followed more or less the same fate in America and a few of them chose to pursue pure academic lives. Some of them returned to India and other stayed in America forever. Rathindranath Tagore, son of Rabindranath, studied agricultural science at the University of Illinois from 1906 to 1909 at the advice of his father who believed that India required more technologists and engineers specially for the reconstruction of the villages than urban intellectuals accomplished in political deliberations. Rathindranath returned to India and took an effective role in putting the poets visions into action at the village of Santiniketan, Bose, for instance, continued to think and write for the betterment of India especially in the education sector In an article from the September 1919 issue of the Hindustan Review, Bose asked for sending one Indian education commission to America for the revival of the ‘unsatisfactory’ and ‘frozen’ state of education in India. “.....There is now a great need of a coordinated and well directed plan to build a new education for new India. And as a basis for such educational reform, a commission of expert investigators and trained educators should come to America and see firsthand the creative work that is being done in commerce, art, literature and science. The results of such an investigation are bound to give immense stimulus for reconstruction of educational life, and make it quiver to the very soul of India.”<sup>16</sup>

Bose’s concern for India had never put him into isolation or what is called the erosion of memory. His writing on India had a good response in the United States while his ‘Mother America` didn’t have a sell there. Diasporic writings don’t receive attention unless they are written on the home country. Bose spent his energy more in writing on America and tried to explore another ‘home’ in exile. He married a white lady and continued to serve the University of Iowa throughout his life. He had his unique position vis-a-vis Indian and American cultures but he always walked around a supra territorial identity inside his own

intellectual world. He was ready to defend India in every possible manner if the situation demands but never lost hopes on the visions of cooperation between two countries. This sense of hope and expectations provided a new window of understanding what intellectual freedom is and how the psychological margins could be redesigned into the imaginations of an immigrant.

(Most of the sources are collected from, Sudhindranath Bose faculty file, Benjamin Sambaugh Papers, Special Collection Archives, University of Iowa Library, Iowa city).

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