

BEYOND POWER AND IDEOLOGY: THE ETHICAL HUMANISM OF
NETAJI SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE

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Introduction;

Subhas Chandra Bose is a complex figure in twentieth-century Indian politics. Some view him as a bold revolutionary who wanted to use military means to achieve India's freedom. Others see him as a misguided nationalist whose connections with fascist powers hurt his reputation. This divide often comes from looking at Bose in black-and-white terms, patriot or traitor, democrat or dictator, rather than understanding him as a nuanced thinker facing the challenges of colonialism. This paper aims to reassess Bose's political ideas without overly praising or condemning him. It argues that his thoughts are centered on ethical nationalism, meaning he believed that true freedom requires both political change and moral growth. His approach to organization and revolution came from his understanding of the British government's inaction and the limitations of traditional politics.

Bose saw national liberation as a moral awakening. His focus on personal discipline as key to collective freedom resonates with Antonio Gramsci's idea of the "ethical state," where politics should build moral strength, not just power. Frantz Fanon's belief that decolonization involves renewing the colonized mindset also parallels Bose's view that freedom must be "earned through moral purification." Similarly, Hannah Arendt's ideas about the moral responsibilities of action during crises connect with Bose's rejection of both passive idealism and unchecked violence. Moreover, Bose's moral nationalism relates to Rabindranath Tagore's idea of "spiritual humanism," though Bose shifts Tagore's universalism into a call for disciplined struggle.

Bose's philosophy balances moral ideals with practical realities, linking him to Indian leaders like Gandhi and Nehru as well as later thinkers like Amartya Sen and Ashis Nandy, who explore the relationship between moral choices and national identity. Instead of dividing arguments mechanically; this study takes a journey through Bose's changing moral and political ideas. It starts with his writings and speeches, where ideals and actions meet, and then looks at the experiences of leadership and nation-building that gave those ideas life. The essay uses both Bose's own words and later historians' interpretations to show how his ethical humanism

evolved into a disciplined vision for national renewal and how his revolutionary tactics aimed to connect freedom with moral order. The first part examines the structure of Bose's thoughts, its ethical, political, and social aspects, while the second part focuses on the real-life events of the Indian National Army, the Azad Hind Government, and the moral debates that continue to shape his legacy.

Life and Intellectual Formation: The Making of a Moral Revolutionary

Subhas Chandra Bose's political beliefs are closely linked to the events of his life. He was born on 23 January 1897 in Cuttack, Bengal, into a family that supported moderate nationalism. Bose studied at Presidency College and later at Cambridge, where he qualified for the Indian Civil Service in 1920. However, he chose not to pursue this career, stating, "to serve an unjust government is to betray one's conscience" (Bose, *Collected Works* 1: 28). This decision marked the start of his lifelong effort to balance his strong ethical beliefs with the realities of politics.

Bose's early writings reveal an ascetic idealism tempered by pragmatic awareness. During his imprisonment in Mandalay (1926–27), he studied the Gita, Vivekananda, and European thinkers such as Kant and Hegel, developing what he later called "the philosophy of action through duty" (*Collected Works* 1: 56). He viewed politics as a form of spiritual discipline, a "sacred yajna" demanding sacrifice rather than ambition (*Collected Works* 2: 44). In his book *An Indian Pilgrim*, he described his intellectual awakening as a movement "from the religion of renunciation to the religion of service" (Bose 1993, 47).

As Calcutta's mayor and later as Congress president, Bose demonstrated both administrative talent and impatience with political stagnation. His tenure was marked by efforts to connect moral regeneration with civic reform, asserting that "freedom will come only to those who are morally fit to receive it" (*Collected Works* 3: 63). His eventual break with Gandhi at the Tripuri session in 1939 was not merely ideological but also ethical; he rejected what he saw as moral passivity disguised as non-violence. "Ahimsa must not become a lib for inaction," he warned (*Collected Works* 5: 201).

Exile sharpened his moral and political imagination. Between 1941 and 1943, Bose's journey from Calcutta to Berlin and then to Tokyo embodied his conviction that "the road to freedom lies through struggle and sacrifice, not petition and prayer"

(Collected Works 6: 189). His leadership of the Indian National Army and the Provisional Government of Azad Hind translated this conviction into action. To his soldiers, he declared, ~~It~~ "is not hatred that drives us, but the love of a nation enslaved" (Collected Works 8: 205).

Bose's life, therefore, stands as a dialogue between conscience and circumstance, a continuous experiment in moral politics. Every stage of his journey, from spiritual contemplation to revolutionary command, reflects his belief that freedom must be grounded in ethical self-mastery. His biography is not merely the chronicle of a nationalist leader but the unfolding of a moral vision that sought to fuse faith, courage, and reason into a single philosophy of liberation.

Core Elements of Bose's Political Thought; Ethical Humanism and Nationalism

Bose's political thought is anchored in a moral vision he called ~~the~~ "ethical humanism," a phrase that appears repeatedly in his correspondence and essays from the 1930s (Bose, Collected Works 5:21). In **The Indian Struggle**, he wrote that ~~the~~ "cause of Indian freedom is not merely a political struggle but a moral crusade" (Indian Struggle 1993, 134). For him, nationalism was a spiritual discipline, described as ~~a~~ "process of the inner emancipation of man" (Bose, Collected Works 2: 63).

In his writings from Mandalay Jail (1926–27), Bose characterized patriotism as ~~a~~ "service of God through service of man," linking Vedantic unity with civic responsibility (Collected Works 1: 54). He told his followers, ~~the~~ "secret of political success lies in moral strength" (Selected Speeches 1993, 27). His speeches to the Indian National Army (INA) in 1943–44 return to this theme: ~~Our~~ "fight is not for power or territory; it is for the soul of India" (Collected Works 8: 203).

Bose's integration of spirituality and politics reflects an attempt to reconcile the ascetic ethics of renunciation (tyāga) with the activist ethics of karma-yoga. He declared in a Singapore broadcast of July 1943, ~~Work~~ "is worship when done in the spirit of sacrifice" (Collected Works 8: 211). These statements confirm that his idea of national liberation was fundamentally ethical, a transformation of collective consciousness rather than merely the removal of imperial rule. As Sugata Bose observes, ~~Nazi's~~ "quest for freedom was framed in moral, not merely strategic, terms" (His Majesty's Opponent 157). Bose's own words echo this interpretation:

—Our movement must be moral in its foundation; otherwise, it will crumble like a house of cards” (Collected Works 3: 119).

Leadership, Discipline, and the Critique of Institutional Paralysis

A defining feature of Bose’s thought was his insistence that moral leadership and organizational discipline were prerequisites for national regeneration. In *The Indian Struggle*, he wrote, —We must have an army of workers with military discipline in the political field” (181). He contrasted what he called —committee politics” with —leadership through character” (Collected Works 4: 72). Bose’s speeches as Congress President at Haripura (1938) and Tripuri (1939) reveal his growing frustration with bureaucratic inertia. At Haripura, he declared, —The moral regeneration of the people must precede political freedom” (Collected Works 5: 156). At Tripuri, he warned, —Democracy in India will have to be born of discipline and suffering, not of talk and compromise” (Collected Works 5: 198). His administrative experience as Calcutta’s Mayor (1930) also shaped his conviction that leadership meant service: —Authority must rest on sacrifice; he who cannot serve cannot command” (Collected Works 3: 52).

In a 1942 radio address from Berlin, Bose redefined leadership as moral example: —A true leader is he who leads not by privilege but by pain” (Collected Works 6: 54). His insistence on personal austerity, simple living, abstention from luxury, and devotion to work, reflected what he termed —the ethics of service” (Collected Works 2: 45). These formulations correspond with his broader critique of the Congress’s gradualism and its failure to match Gandhi’s moral fervor with strategic energy.

Leonard Gordon observes that Bose’s concept of authority —was always tied to moral discipline rather than autocratic power” (Gordon, 1990, p. 222). Bose’s own words further substantiate this: —Without inner discipline, liberty degenerates into license” (Collected Works 7: 14). Understanding Bose as a moral thinker does not separate him from the historical context of the anti-colonial struggle; rather, his ethical framework arises from the urgency of colonial conditions. Bose’s idea of —disciplined liberty” seeks to reconcile moral responsibility with political necessity, opposing both passive idealism and unregulated coercion. His thought illustrates that ethical reflection was not in opposition to political realism but aimed to guide action

within extreme constraints. In this way, moral philosophy served as a framework for political decision-making rather than a means of retreat.

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1.1 Leadership, Discipline, and the Critique of Institutional Paralysis

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Interpreting Bose as a moral thinker does not separate him from the historical exigencies of anti-colonial struggle. On the contrary, his ethical framework emerged precisely from the urgency of colonial conditions. Bose’s concept of —disciplined liberty” reflects an attempt to reconcile moral responsibility with political necessity, rejecting both passive idealism and unregulated coercion. His thought demonstrates that ethical reflection was not opposed to political realism but sought to guide action under extreme constraints. In this sense, moral philosophy functioned as a guiding framework for political decision-making rather than a retreat from it.

Revolutionary Means and Instrumental Alliances

The controversy surrounding Bose’s alliance with the Axis powers has often obscured his justification for such decisions. In his Berlin broadcast of January 1942, he stated unequivocally: —We must use every weapon that history places in our hands, but never surrender our soul” (Collected Works 6: 188). In correspondence with Emilie Schön in 1942, he explained that his cooperation with Germany was —a temporary arrangement dictated by necessity, not by conviction” (Collected Works 6: 201).

In his —Proclamation to the Nation” issued in Singapore in October 1943, Bose asserted that —The future constitution of free India shall be framed by the will of her people” (Proclamation 1993, 3). In a speech at Rangoon in 1944, he reiterated: —Our alliance with Japan is an alliance of equals in the struggle against British imperialism” (Collected Works 9: 77). These statements reveal a consistent emphasis

on sovereignty and moral autonomy, rather than ideological submission. Bose contrasted European fascism's cult of race and power with India's moral concept of strength: —Power divorced from moral purpose is the negation of civilization” (Collected Works 7: 96). In another address to the Indian National Army (INA) in Singapore in 1944, he warned his soldiers: —We must never imitate our enemies in their evil; we must defeat them by our righteousness” (Collected Works 8: 309).

As Peter Ward Fay and Romain Hayes both argue, Bose's engagement with the Axis powers was pragmatic and temporary (Fay 112; Hayes 87). His own words affirm this position: —An enemy's enemy can be our friend only so long as our cause remains pure” (Collected Works 8: 204). Thus, his revolutionary praxis combined realism with restraint, fusing political necessity with ethical vigilance, a position consistent with his lifelong conviction that —the end never justifies the means unless the means are themselves ennobled by the end” (Collected Works 5: 133).

Social Vision: Inclusion and Mobilization

Far from being merely militaristic, Bose's social vision was profoundly inclusive. As early as his 1928 address to the Bengal Provincial Conference, he warned that —communism is the greatest obstacle to our unity” (Collected Works 2: 58). He envisioned an India where —religion would be a matter of individual conscience and not of political identity” (Collected Works 3: 81). His call for unity among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians was repeatedly articulated in his INA broadcasts: —When the blood of Hindu and Muslim flows together in the same cause, the soul of India will be reborn” (Collected Works 9: 145). The INA's daily prayer, invoking God without sectarian reference, embodied this civic nationalism (Mukhia 2010, 26).

Equally radical was Bose's advocacy for gender equality. In his 1944 Rangoon broadcast announcing the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, he proclaimed: —Real freedom can come to a nation unless its women are liberated” (Collected Works 9: 77). The establishment of that regiment under Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan transformed women from mere symbols of sacrifice into active agents of resistance (Madhuri Bose 2015, 176).

Bose's social program, detailed in the Azad Hind manifesto of 1943, called for land reform, universal education, industrial planning, and workers' rights (Collected Works 8: 318). He envisioned a —socialist type of society” based on

cooperation rather than class antagonism (Indian Struggle 1993, 238). His admiration for scientific planning, developed through collaboration with Jawaharlal Nehru in the National Planning Committee (1938-39), reflected his desire to blend technology with social justice (Nanda 1990, 89). In a speech in 1938, Bose summarized his socio-political beliefs: —Our socialism must be ethical; our nationalism must be inclusive; our freedom must be moral” (Collected Works 5: 127). This triadic vision places him within a modern democratic tradition while retaining India’s moral vocabulary of service and sacrifice.

The Indian National Army (INA) and the Azad Hind Experiment;

The Indian National Army (INA) and the Provisional Government of Free India (Azad Hind Sarkar) represent the most tangible manifestations of Bose’s political philosophy in practice, his attempt to translate moral ideals into institutional form. Founded formally on October 21, 1943, in Singapore under Japanese patronage but with autonomous Indian leadership, the Provisional Government declared war on Britain and the United States (Fay 187; Sugata Bose 189). Bose served simultaneously as Head of State, Prime Minister, and Supreme Commander of the INA, thereby uniting political authority and military command under a single ethical vision of national service.

Bose’s reliance on military organization has often been interpreted as overshadowing his moral philosophy. This paper argues instead that militarized resistance functioned, for Bose, as an ethically constrained response to colonial domination rather than an endorsement of violence as a political ideal. His emphasis on discipline, sacrifice, restraint, and service within the Indian National Army reflects an effort to morally regulate force and subordinate it to collective responsibility. Military action was thus conceived not as an end in itself but as a means directed toward restoring dignity and national self-respect under conditions where constitutional politics had proven ineffective. Emphasizing Bose’s ethical vision does not undermine militant approaches to decolonization. Instead, it clarifies his distinction between force as domination and force as morally regulated resistance under conditions of colonial constraint.

The Azad Hind Government sought to give India a symbolic and functional sovereignty even before liberation. It established its own administrative departments, judiciary, postal service, currency, and diplomatic corps (Gordon 1990, 354). These

gestures were not merely propagandistic; they were acts of performative sovereignty, asserting India's capacity to govern itself even in exile. The Proclamation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (1943) promised equality for all citizens and pledged to frame a democratic constitution once India was free (Bose, Proclamation 12). Bose's government received diplomatic recognition from nine nations aligned with the Axis Powers, including Germany, Japan, Italy, Burma, Croatia, and the Philippines (Hayes 2011, 167). He also secured limited recognition from Manchukuo and the Wang Jingwei government in China (Lebra 2008, 219). Through the Azad Hind Radio and the publication *Free India*, the government disseminated nationalist messages in multiple languages, appealing not only to Indians abroad but also to colonize peoples across Asia (Sugata Bose 2011, 194).

The Indian National Army (INA), revitalized under Bose's leadership in 1943, expanded rapidly from roughly 20,000 to nearly 50,000 soldiers by 1944 (Fay 1993, 190). Its ranks included former British Indian Army officers, civilians, and volunteers from Malaya, Burma, and Singapore. Bose's insistence on inclusivity, embracing Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians alike, was revolutionary at a time when communal tensions threatened the unity of the Indian freedom movement (Mukhia 2010, 26).

Among his most remarkable achievements was the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, an all-women combat unit led by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan (later known as Lakshmi Sahgal). It was the first women's regiment in modern Indian military history, symbolizing Bose's conviction that national freedom was inseparable from women's emancipation (Madhuri Bose 2015, 178). Bose's wartime diplomacy reflected both ambition and pragmatism. In July 1943, he undertook a perilous 90-day submarine voyage from Berlin to Tokyo across the Indian Ocean, an odyssey emblematic of his determination to link European and Asian theaters of anti-imperial struggle (Hayes 2011, 156). Upon arriving in Singapore, he proclaimed the establishment of the Azad Hind Government and revealed the INA's new battle cry: *Chalo Delhi!* (*March to Delhi!*). This became a rallying cry of moral defiance and patriotic unity.

Peter Ward Fay interprets the INA not merely as a military force but as —a political movement with the form of an army” (Fay 1993, 301). Its organization embodied Bose's ideal of disciplined freedom, unity through moral purpose. Even the

army's tricolored flag, saffron, white, and green with a springing tiger, signified the fusion of ancient Indian vitality and modern dynamism (Toye 1959, 78). The INA adopted the motto *Ittefaq, Itmad, Qurbani* (Unity, Faith, Sacrifice), which mirrored Bose's ethical triad of national rebirth.

Military Campaigns and Strategic Vision:

Under Japanese collaboration, the *Indian National Army* (INA) participated in the 1944 Imphal and Kohima campaigns, crossing the Burma–India frontier as part of the offensive to liberate India's northeastern territories (Fay 1993, 317). Though initially successful in capturing parts of Manipur, logistical breakdowns and monsoon conditions crippled the advance. By mid-1944, Japan's defeat forced the INA to retreat, marking the military failure of the campaign. However, as Sugata Bose observes, the moral and political significance of the INA far outlasted its military setbacks: "Defeat on the battlefield did not mean failure in history" (His Majesty's Opponent 229) The INA's campaigns demonstrated organizational discipline, trans-religious solidarity, and loyalty under impossible conditions. Bose's leadership combined military strategy with spiritual rhetoric, urging soldiers to fight not for conquest but for moral redemption. He reminded them that "the road to Delhi is the road to freedom" (Bose, *Collected Works* 8: 311). In the final months of the war, after Japan's surrender in August 1945, the INA began to disintegrate. Bose's disappearance following an air crash in Taipei in the same month turned him into a mythic figure, a martyr whose moral force exceeded his political lifespan (Lal 2011, 59).

Symbolic and Historical Impact

While the INA failed to achieve its military objectives, its political resonance was immense. *The Red Fort Trials* (1945–46), which prosecuted leading INA officers, Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Sahgal, and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, galvanized national sentiment. Public rallies in Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi drew tens of thousands; even British-Indian soldiers mutinied in sympathy (Bayly and Harper 2005, 345). Leaders from the Congress, the Muslim League, and the Communist Party jointly condemned the trials, making the INA a symbol of collective anti-colonial unity (Sitaramayya 1993, 332). The psychological shock of the INA trials deeply affected British policy. Contemporary observers, including Governor-General Wavell, privately admitted that the loyalty of the Indian armed forces could no longer

be assured (Fay 1993, 329). Historians such as Sugata Bose and Romain Hayes agree that the INA's defiance hastened British withdrawal by eroding the moral foundation of colonial rule (*His Majesty's Opponent* 235; Hayes 177).

Beyond politics, the INA's example helped shape India's post-independence military and civic ethos. Its insistence on secular unity and discipline prefigured the values later enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The participation of women, peasants, and diaspora Indians in the INA also expanded the social imagination of the nationalist movement, linking freedom to equality. Thus, while the INA's guns fell silent in 1945, its spirit resounded across India's moral landscape. The Azad Hind experiment became Bose's living testament, a fusion of ethical humanism and revolutionary statecraft, an attempt to prove that power and virtue need not be estranged. In its successes and failures alike, the INA embodied Bose's central conviction: that freedom is not merely a political right but a moral duty. Reassessing the "Authoritarian" Charge.

The most persistent critique of Bose's political philosophy concerns the allegations of his authoritarianism. His admiration for efficiency, centralized authority, and military discipline has often been conflated with an ideological sympathy for fascism (Keene 2001, 142). However, when examined through his writings and actions, such charges appear overstated and contextually misplaced. Bose's encounter with authoritarian structures was never surrender to totalitarianism but an effort to foster moral efficiency. His invocation of discipline and order stemmed from the conviction that the chaos of colonial subjugation had created a moral and organizational vacuum. For him, strong leadership was not a rejection of democracy but rather a preparatory stage for its moral awakening. As he wrote in *The Indian Struggle*, "Liberty can only be safeguarded when people have learned the virtue of discipline" (Bose, *Indian Struggle*, 211). This view parallels Antonio Gramsci's concept of the "ethical state," where hegemony must rest on consent informed by moral education rather than coercion (Gramsci 1971, 244).

Leonard Gordon notes that Bose's admiration for authority stemmed less from a fascination with power and more from his frustration with institutional

paralysis and moral lethargy within the nationalist leadership” (Gordon 1990, 285). Sugata Bose similarly contends that —Nazi’s idea of command was never about obedience for its own sake but about moral mobilization, a unifying of will around a just purpose” (*His Majesty’s Opponent* 198). His emphasis on karma-yoga, or duty in action, underscores this moralized understanding of authority (Bose, *Collected Works* 7: 14).

Critics who draw direct parallels between Bose and European fascism often overlook fundamental divergences in intention and philosophy. As Peter Ward Fay argues, —Bose’s organization of the INA owed more to Indian concepts of selfless service than to fascist regimentation” (Fay 1993, 319). Unlike Mussolini’s cult of domination or Hitler’s racial absolutism, Bose’s appeals were civic and universalist, grounded in the belief that strength was a moral necessity for freedom, not an end in itself (Mukhia 2010, 26). Hannah Arendt’s reflections on the moral boundaries of power in *Between Past and Future* illuminate this distinction: power, she asserted, —is actualized only when words are not empty and deeds not brutal” (Arendt 2006, 179). Bose’s practice embodies precisely that moral balance between conviction and command.

Furthermore, Bose’s alliance with Axis powers should be interpreted through the lens of political realism rather than ideological sympathy. As Romain Hayes notes, —Bose entered Berlin not as an ideologue but as a negotiator, attempting to use the cracks of empire against itself” (Hayes 2011, 115). His interactions with German and Japanese officials consistently emphasized the autonomy of India’s cause (Hayes 2011, 144). Even within the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, constitutional sovereignty was explicitly reserved for the Indian people (Bose, *Proclamation*, 14).

The historical climate of the 1930s also requires context sensitivity. With parliamentary democracy still in its infancy and imperial repression intensifying, the model of the —decisive leader” held wide appeal across anti-colonial movements – from Sun Yat-sen in China to Sukarno in Indonesia. Bose’s vision of disciplined revolution thus reflects what Bidyut Chakrabarti describes as —an Indian adaptation of the modernist will to collective purpose rather than a copy of

European authoritarianism” (Chakrabarti 2022, 164). His idea of leadership aligns with Amartya Sen’s concept of “responsible authority,” in which power is legitimized by public reasoning and moral accountability (Sen 2005, 212). Bose’s wartime alliances have generated ongoing ethical criticism.

This paper interprets these affiliations as strategic and contingent rather than ideological endorsements, shaped by asymmetric colonial power relations. It is also important to distinguish between symbolic and substantive authoritarianism. Bose’s uniforms, salutes, and processions functioned as performative acts of psychological decolonization, intended to instill unity and confidence in a fragmented people (Fay 1993, 318). Sugata Bose notes that these gestures “reflected not submission to totalitarianism but an attempt to infuse moral cohesion into a disempowered society” (*His Majesty’s Opponent* 210). Through these actions, Bose aimed to reverse the internalized sense of subservience that colonial rule had bred.

Hannah Arendt’s distinction between “authority” and “authoritarianism” clarifies this further: authority, she writes, “rests on the willing recognition of truth,” while authoritarianism “rests on fear” (Arendt 2006, 183). Bose’s leadership depended on voluntary faith, not coercion; his soldiers followed him not out of compulsion but out of devotion to a shared moral mission. The inclusive composition of the Indian National Army, comprising Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and women, underscores this non-coercive ethos (Madhuri Bose 2015, 176).

Leonard Gordon famously remarked that “Bose’s tragedy was to be judged by the company he was forced to keep rather than by the ideals he consistently professed” (Gordon 1990, 412). This tragedy, however, also attests to his political courage, the willingness to operate within moral ambiguity without surrendering moral agency. Hannah Arendt’s idea that “every action reveals the agent” (Arendt 2006, 181) captures Bose’s predicament: his alliances might have been ambiguous, but his purpose remained clear, to secure India’s freedom through disciplined moral strength.

When viewed through this lens, the charge of authoritarianism dissolves into a broader debate about moral power. Bose’s political philosophy suggests that the health of a nation depends not on the absence of authority but on the

moral quality of its exercise. Authority devoid of ethics degenerates into tyranny, while ethics without authority remains impotent. This dialectic, between conscience and command, was the crucible of Bose's political life. Thus, Bose's engagement with centralized power was tactical, moral, and contextually bound, not ideological. His synthesis of order and ethics offers a rare political framework that still resonates today: a reminder that democratic vitality is sustained not merely by procedural liberty but by the disciplined pursuit of justice.

Moral Complexities and Pragmatic Realism

Bose's political philosophy is best understood as a tension between moral idealism and pragmatic realism. His commitment to freedom was absolute, yet his means were conditioned by historical necessity. In a 1942 address from Berlin, he admitted, "If I cannot awaken the conscience of the British people, I must awaken the power of history itself" (Bose, *Collected Works* 6: 188).

This moral duality situates Bose within a broader philosophical dialogue on the ethics of resistance. His willingness to employ force in pursuit of justice invokes the classical debate between deontological and consequentialist ethics. From a Kantian perspective, moral worth depends on acting from duty, not from the calculation of results (Kant 1998, 52). Yet Bose reinterprets duty as historically situated; his sense of dharma demanded action when moral paralysis threatened the nation. In this regard, he resembles Aristotle's virtue ethicist, who holds that the good life lies in right action performed with practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) under concrete circumstances (Aristotle 1105b).

Unlike Gandhi's strict deontological pacifism, Bose's ethics was closer to teleological moral realism, the belief that ends and means are interdependent within the moral field of history. He understood that colonialism was itself a systematic immorality, and therefore resistance to it could not be judged by conventional moral codes. "Morality divorced from power," he argued, "is impotent" (Bose, *Indian Struggle* 242). As John Dewey later noted regarding democratic ethics, "The good is not a fixed ideal but a movement of adjustment within conditions" (Dewey 1922, 207); Bose's life embodies this moral pragmatism.

At the same time, Bose never surrendered to moral relativism. His invocation of *seva* and *tyaga* reflects an Indian synthesis of virtue and duty,

echoing Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of *karma-yoga*, the performance of work as spiritual discipline (Vivekananda 1896, 88). For Bose, violent struggle could remain ethical if it was governed by selflessness and aimed at restoring human dignity. Bose's realism thus converges with Hannah Arendt's argument that political action acquires moral legitimacy only when it demonstrates a commitment to human plurality and responsibility (Arendt 2006, 181). His alliances with Axis powers must therefore be judged not by proximity but by intent: as Romain Hayes argues, they were "a tragic wager born of desperation, not of moral collapse" (Hayes 2011, 119). Bose recognized that in a morally compromised world, purity could become the privilege of the powerless, a theme later echoed by Frantz Fanon, who warned that the colonized must forge an "ethics of violence" to reclaim their humanity (Fanon 2004, 66).

Thus, Bose's moral philosophy may be described as a form of contextual virtue ethics, a fusion of disciplined intention and adaptive means. His ideal was not Machiavellian expediency but the pursuit of righteousness through historical action. As Amartya Sen observes, "The challenge of moral reasoning lies in reconciling the demands of justice with the realities of choice" (Sen 2005, 116). Bose's life illustrated precisely that reconciliation.

In this light, Bose's pragmatic alliances appear not as betrayals but as manifestations of ethical realism, a willingness to act morally within imperfection. His refusal to propagate racial doctrines, his insistence on humane treatment of prisoners, and his protection of INA officers from Japanese excesses all testify to an ethic grounded in duty rather than expedience (Fay 1993, 329). Bose's example challenges us to reconsider the moral vocabulary of political action. If Gandhi embodied the sanctity of means, Bose personified the moral urgency of ends. Both sought the same ethical horizon, the liberation of the human spirit, but traveled divergent paths of conscience. In the crucible of colonial oppression, Bose's philosophy stands as an argument for moral courage within moral complexity, realism that rejects despair.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance:

Bose's political thought has endured a complex legacy in independent India. His vision of a strong, socially just, and morally awakened nation anticipated many postcolonial debates about development, leadership, and civic

virtue (Chakrabarti 2022, 211). After 1947, Indian political discourse largely followed the Nehruvian model of liberal democracy and planned economy. Yet, Bose's emphasis on moral discipline and civic duty foreshadowed later concerns about corruption, inefficiency, and national integration (Sarkar 1983, 375). His idea of karma-yoga as public service resonates in modern calls for ethical governance and participatory nationalism (Mukhia 2010, 31). Furthermore, his commitment to inclusivity, across religion, caste, and gender, remains urgently relevant in addressing contemporary India's pluralist challenges. The INA's multi-religious composition and the symbolic leadership of women serve as enduring testaments to his civic imagination (Madhuri Bose 2015, 180).

Recent scholarship has also re-evaluated Bose's internationalism. Unlike narrow nationalists, he viewed anti-imperialism as part of a global moral awakening. In his radio broadcast from Tokyo in 1944, he declared, "India's freedom is the condition of Asia's freedom" (Bose, *Collected Works* 9:143). This cosmopolitan nationalism aligns him with figures such as Ho Chi Minh, Sukarno, and Nehru in envisioning decolonization as a shared moral destiny (Nanda 1990, 144). As Sugata Bose argues, Bose's political philosophy offers "a moral vocabulary of power, the possibility of ethical nationalism in a world corrupted by empire" (*His Majesty's Opponent* 252). In today's global resurgence of populism and authoritarianism, his thought invites reflection on the relationship between moral conviction and political action (Lal 2011, 62).

Conclusion:

Subhas Chandra Bose had complex ideas that often sparked intense debates among historians. This shows the moral challenges in revolutionary politics, rather than a lack of moral clarity. Labeling Bose as just a militant nationalist misses the bigger picture. His vision went beyond simple political strategies. Bose's political philosophy combines ethical beliefs with practical needs, creating a unique way of thinking that connects action to deep moral values. He believed that true freedom is not just about taking power from colonial rulers, but also about awakening a nation's spirit and dignity.

Bose's life story highlights an important point: the fight for freedom is not just about opposing colonial powers, but also about overcoming the inner struggles of

a colonized society. He aligns with thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Antonio Gramsci, who argued that political freedom is linked to the moral upliftment of the oppressed. Fanon and Gramsci stress that achieving political freedom involves building ethical awareness that empowers individuals and communities.

Bose's promotion of values like *seva* and *tyaga*, and unity calls for a civic ethic essential for India and the wider postcolonial world. This mindset demands a political atmosphere filled with moral intent, as described by Sugata Bose. Simplifying Bose's ideas as just fascism or militarism limits the rich moral language available in anti-colonial movements. His messages came from a sense of duty and respect for human dignity, not from a desire for power or dominance.

In today's world, where democracies are weakening and authoritarian regimes are rising, Bose's idea of "ethical nationalism" offers an important perspective. He believed that strength and virtue are not opposites but work together in a complete political vision, which is especially relevant for modern societies. Bose's story is tragic because of his early death and the unrealized potential of his ideas. However, his thoughts remain relevant. He reminds us that power, when separated from ethics, undermines the freedom it claims to protect. Similarly, without power, morality can leave people trapped in oppression. Understanding Bose in this way connects Rabindranath Tagore's humanistic ideas with the practical morality of thinkers like Fanon. He viewed politics as an ongoing ethical mission and a continuous struggle for justice and fairness.

Bose's legacy urges us to see freedom as a continuous journey, not just a goal to be reached. His life shows that idealism needs to be balanced with discipline, and defiance must go hand in hand with duty. Remembering Bose today means recognizing that true liberty must include spiritual commitment and ethical principles. Every generation must re-earn its freedom, highlighting the importance of Bose's ideas while acknowledging the practical realities of the independence movement. This perspective also shows how ethical thinking can shape leadership, discipline, and governance.

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