

Phansir Mancho Theke Phire (Return from the Gallows): A Review

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi, a staunch opponent of armed revolt against the British, played a key role in the release of four members of the Indian National Army's (INA) secret service who had been sentenced to death during the British Raj. The Bengali book *Phansir Mancho Theke Phire* (Return from the Gallows), an autobiography of Jyotishchandra Bose (one of the four INA volunteers), compiles the seven letters that Gandhiji wrote to the British government, pleading for the release of the INA convicts. On the basis of these letters, all four were released. Their release order came the day they were supposed to be sent to the gallows. This review article will look into the imaginary perception of enmity between Gandhi & Bose, whether it was just limited to the difference in political ideologies or continued further. Another area this article will touch is the subaltern perspective of being in prison as the primary focus until now was to mostly look into the prison literature of famous leaders, that too those belonging to the elite class. One of the important aspects is the kind of emotional and mental torture a lesser-known revolutionary used to go through in jails during colonial times, along with physical one.

During the colonial rule in India, especially in the first-half of 20th century, there were mainly two categories of freedom fighters. First were the *Moderates* and the others were the *Revolutionaries*. Moderates believed in fighting against the British but through peaceful means. The Revolutionaries believed fighting in literal sense, that is, through violent means. If arrested, the Revolutionaries were tortured & treated inhumanly. But the Moderates were treated better as they never harmed the British physically. Thus, the experiences in prison for Jawaharlal Nehru must have been completely different from Bhagat Singh's experiences. This book looks into the experiences of Jyotishchandra Bose (the author, later went on to become the Deputy Speaker of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly after independence) in Presidency Jail of Calcutta. This autobiography was originally written in a crude diary form which was later transformed into a book by him.

In the midnight of 31st December 1944, Jyotishchandra Bose was arrested by the British police. In subsequent days, three others of his group Haridas Mitra (father of former Secretary-General of Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the current Finance Minister of West Bengal - Amit Mitra), Pabitra Ray & Amar Singh Gill too was arrested. They were initially kept in an old house in Calcutta. There, inhuman treatment & torture became a daily affair. It included – hitting sole of the foot after making them lie on ice slabs, giving electric shocks, injecting needles into the nails etc. The objective was to get

any kind of secret details related to the *Azad Hind Fauz*. But when the police couldn't force out a single piece of information after regular physical abuse for six months, they transferred all of them to jail under the laws of sedition. The court proceedings started. It sentenced all of them to death.

Jyotishchandra Bose's autobiography starts from 19th October 1945, four months after he was transferred to the Presidency jail. He starts with the description of the cell in which only the prisoners sentenced to death were kept. Four powerful bulbs in a 10 ft x 6 ft small room itself symbolize the depressing nature of the cell. This shows how the design of a cell can make a healthy person mentally disturbed. One thing which gets clear from the first chapter is that all the police *sepoys* and also most of the police officers except the Jailor were Indians. He mentions some *sepoys* who became close to him. This shows that most of them were working for their survival & didn't support British rule¹, which gets clear from their attitude of support towards *Swadeshis*. This also gets evident from the duty hours of *sepoys* who were changed every two hours so that no one gets a chance of planning escape of any of the prisoners (either out of sympathy or greed of money).

Generally, the Kubler-Ross model² talks about five stages of dying - which starts with the *stage of Denial*. But Bose's account clearly shows that his first stage was Happiness. He was happy that he will die a death of martyr, with a sole purpose of liberating the country. Probably that's the difference of emotions between the death of a normal person & the death of a revolutionary. This 'Happiness' stage gets evident when he writes -

“During checking of bodyweight of all revolutionaries, lot to the surprise of the Jail Sergeant, the machine showed increase of bodyweight of most. To this, the Sergeant told himself that it will be tough to keep India under British rule.”

The gain in bodyweight showed that they were neither afraid nor tensed of death; otherwise it would have led to reduction in weight.

The above analysis doesn't mean that he didn't go through the other stages of dying. In third chapter titled "*Purbi*" (name of his wife), he recalled the moments of love between him & his wife. While thinking about what would happen to his wife after him, he enters the *stage of Denial* where he asks himself – "Why me?" To motivate himself, he remembers a quote of Swami Vivekanand – "Love conquers death", thinking that the true love of his wife will surely result into a miraculous escape of his death.

Reading some of his chapters where he talked about the treatment offered to him by higher British officials, his successful appeal of meeting his wife – one can get the feel that the

¹ Bose: **Dead/Alive Television series** – Role of Naveen Kasturia as *Darbari Lal* (a police sepoy in Calcutta given the duty to follow Subhas Chandra Bose).

² Kubler-Ross's (psychologists) model of Stages of Dying - Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression & Acceptance.

British, if not better, were humane than some of the other imperial countries towards the subjects of the colonies such as Spain, Japan, Portugal etc. Their accounts of treating the subjects even many times included mentions of Guillotine & Cannibalism. Probably that's one of the reasons the British were able to maintain such a large empire for longer time than others because they continuously tried to create a *pretext of justice* even in their exploitation (the reason why British established courts in India).

In the sixth chapter, he mentions about the family of the Jailor and how his elder daughter sent him birthday cake. This shows that humanity existed in the British females, probably more than men who were busy showing masculinity to the world.

Bose recalls meeting his wife in one of his later chapters. He was almost sure that it was their last meeting before the D-day as the meeting was a sudden unscheduled one. Emotions reaching zenith can be clearly seen as the author puts his pain of permanent separation with his better-half. The desperation of both to spend a few more minutes together, to touch each other's hands presents a different level of emotions.

On the D-day (probably 1st/2nd/3rd November- not clearly mentioned), after he was taken to the place where hangings took place, he found out that the hangman chosen for his execution is the same who hanged Masterda Surya Sen. This made him feel proud. After he kissed the rope & covered his face with the black cloth, the Deputy Jailor came running with a Red Envelope which read -

“On request of Gandhiji, Lord Wavell exempts them from death penalty.”

Letters of Mahatma Gandhi clearly shows that he took a 'soft-hard-soft-hard' approach. In his first letter, he tried to request the British on moral grounds. But when no action was taken for weeks, he took a harder stand & even went onto politically threaten the British of an agitation. Again, in his fourth letter, he took an approach based on virtue & righteousness. This kind of approach is also visible in his political movements & *satyagrahas*. For example, after arriving in India, he first travelled & tried to understand the people for 3-4 years, and only then started the Non-Cooperation movement. Then he took a break of 7-8 years & worked at the grassroots for building on a mass movement of Civil Disobedience.

One more thing which might have influenced the Britain's decision of exempting the death penalty could be the change of ruling party in Britain. In the elections of 1945, the Labour Party achieved a landslide victory (this was the first time they formed a majority government) & defeated the Conservative Party. It was quite an established fact that Winston Churchill (PM from Conservative Party) hated Indians, especially Gandhi. Anyways, the Conservatives were known for their belief in racial superiority – actions depicting similar expression was also evident in the colonies. So, there is a possibility that when Clement Atlee

of the Labour Party (a more liberal party than Conservative Party) assumed power, he commuted the death penalty.

Now coming to the popular notion from where the article started - that whether political difference between Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Bose were restricted to that or extended further. Its true that Gandhi never endorsed methods of Netaji Subhas. It gets pretty clear that when it came to humanitarian issues of this kind, political ideologies seldom mattered. Jyotishchandra wrote in one of his chapters –

“Approaches of both were different, but the aim was same”

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