



NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

School of Social Sciences

DD 26, Sector I, Salt Lake, Kolkata – 700064

Website: www.wbnsou.ac.in

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture Series

The School of Social Sciences (SoSS) of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) has been organizing this prestigious annual lecture consistently since 2010, the members of the School are also engaged in publishing the lectures regularly at due time. The University authority has decided to organise Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture every year to pay its tribute to the great living legend dedicated for the freedom of the motherland from the colonial shackles, and entrusted it's largest academic unit at that time, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, with the responsibility to conduct it in a rightful manner. Subsequently, however, the School was ramified and three Schools of Studies, viz School of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, and School of Professional Studies were formed in the year 2015. As such, the newly constituted School of Social Sciences, emerging from the erstwhile School of Humanities & Social Sciences, is now entrusted to hold the annual Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture on behalf of the University. Thus, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture has been initiated at NSOU as mark of respect to the undying spirit of "Netaji ", the great patriotic soul and an indomitable symbol of struggle against all the social oddities. Over the years, it has become one of the most prestigious and befitting annual event in the NSOU.

The Second Lecture was delivered by Professor Sugata Bose on March 16, 2011. The Second Lecture was held at the Conference Hall of the then NSOU Headquarter at 1, Woodburn Park, Kolkata-20 and Professor Manimala Das was on the chair. The title of the lecture was "Universalism and Cosmopolitanism: The Globalized Imagination of the Colonized".

Bose claimed that Rabindranath Tagore was a proponent of universalist aspiration. This specific claim was part of a larger contention that modern history could be interpreted - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially - as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonized did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future. Their cosmopolitanism flowed not from the stratosphere of abstract reason, but from the fertile ground of local knowledge and learning in the vernacular. Universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism are words and concepts



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jostling for interpretive space in new global, interregional and transnational histories. Different universalism in my connotation of the phrase shares significant common ground with the meaning of vernacular cosmopolitanism as evoked by Homi Bhabha or local cosmopolitanism as enunciated by Engseng Ho or rooted cosmopolitanism as described by Anthony Appiah while diverging in subtle points of emphasis. Both notions of universalism with a difference and cosmopolitanism springing from vernacular roots are dramatically at odds with the dominant discourse and debates within the charmed circle of contemporary British and North American analytical philosophy. Champions of cosmopolitanism who see detached reason as its only source display a visceral distaste for patriotism, confusing it with the narrowest forms of particularism. Colourless cosmopolitanism is assigned a high moral ground; colourful patriotism is deemed to be seductive, but devoid of any ethical content. A figure like Rabindranath Tagore can be annexed to this version of cosmopolitanism only by denuding him of much of his poetry and music and all of his passion and moral philosophy. Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as 'an ardent nationalist'. The large ethical claims made by votaries of a brand of cosmopolitanism that is dogmatically opposed to patriotism need to be put to the test on the ground of t In this presentation Professor Bose highlighted the contributions of Rabindranath Tagore in a large way. We do not miss the point that, apart from myriad aspects of the genius of Tagore, he had been a pioneer of open and distance learning not only in India but also in the countries of the East. His experiments with Lok Siksha (mass education) were path breaking and as such it represented the true spirit both of the missions of Netaji and NSOU.

In Bose's book *A Hundred Horizons*, he had claimed that Tagore was an eloquent proponent of a universalist aspiration, a kind of universalism with a difference. This specific claim was part of a larger contention that modern history could be interpreted - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially - as an interplay of multiple and competing universalisms. The colonized did not simply erect defensive walls around their notions of cultural difference. They were keen to be players in broad arenas of cosmopolitan thought zones and wished to contribute to the shaping of a global future.



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Their cosmopolitanism flowed not from the stratosphere of abstract reason, but from the fertile ground of local knowledge and learning in the vernacular. Universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism are words and concepts jostling for interpretive space in new global, interregional and transnational histories. Different universalism in his connotation of the phrase shares significant common ground with the meaning of vernacular cosmopolitanism as evoked by Homi Bhabha or local cosmopolitanism as enunciated by Engseng Ho or rooted cosmopolitanism as described by Anthony Appiah while diverging in subtle points of emphasis.

Both notions of universalism with a difference and cosmopolitanism springing from vernacular roots are dramatically at odds with the dominant discourse and debates within the charmed circle of contemporary British and North American analytical philosophy. Champions of cosmopolitanism who see detached reason as its only source display a visceral distaste for patriotism, confusing it with the narrowest forms of particularism. Colorless cosmopolitanism is assigned a high moral ground; colorful patriotism is deemed to be seductive but devoid of any ethical content. A figure like Rabindranath Tagore can be annexed to this version of cosmopolitanism only by denuding him of much of his poetry and music and all of his passion and moral philosophy. Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial stance. He simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Bose reiterates that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as 'an ardent nationalist'. The large ethical claims made by votaries of a brand of cosmopolitanism that is dogmatically opposed to patriotism need to be put to the test on the ground of the history of colonial empires. Cosmopolitanism would serve as a weak pillar of any theory of human justice if it ruled out as illegitimate most modes of anti-colonial resistance. Fortunately for the idea, that was not the dominant kind of cosmopolitanism that animated the colonized world in the age of global empire. There were various forms of patriotism perfectly compatible with a cosmopolitan attitude that transcended the lines of particular cultural differences.

Bose claims that in order to contest the universalist boasts of Europe, it is important on both conceptual and empirical grounds to recover the universalist aspirations emanating from the colonized world. For scholars of literature or textual traditions an evocation of cosmopolitanism in the sense of generous exchange beyond narrow particularisms, qualified by the linguistic and cultural specificity of the vernacular, may be a sufficiently deft semantic move. For modern historians, however, universalism animates a field of power that can hardly be abandoned; it can only be inflected by the



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countervailing energy of difference. The spirit of different universalism that appealed to anti-colonial nationalists may have been water-borne across the Indian ocean, but was never quite defined by an expanse of water. It is best in this context not to exaggerate the contradiction between oceans and continents that has crept into some of the scholarly literature. The myth of continents has been subjected to a powerful indictment with some justice as a meta-geographical concept hopelessly tainted by the hubris of European imperialism.

The idea of Asia, however, or of Africa, Bose added, was not a singular one and had almost as many variations as it had individual authors. More important, it was certainly at variance with the concrete expression of Asia invented by nineteenth-century European geographers and cartographers as part of what has been debunked as the modern myth of continents. There were strands within Asian thought-worlds that merely inverted and did not undermine the Europe-Asia dichotomy, being content to invest the latter with a higher order of value and virtue. That forms a less interesting dimension of the modern tug-of-war between Europe and Asia. Far more fascinating was the imagination of Asia as an abstract entity transcending the imperial and national frontiers being etched by colonial powers on to the physical and mental maps of the colonized, and thereby serving as a prism to refract the light of universal humanity. The Swadeshi (own country) cultural milieu of early twentieth-century India, despite its interest in rejuvenating indigenous traditions, was not wholly inward-looking; its protagonists were curious about innovations in different parts of the globe and felt comfortable within ever widening concentric circles of Bengali patriotism, Indian nationalism, and Asian universalism. Aspiring to reconcile a sense of nationality with a common humanity, they were not prepared to let colonial borders constrict their imaginations. The spirit of Asian universalism was brought to India by two turn-of-the-century ideologues—Okakura Kakuzo and Sister Nivedita. Once Sister Nivedita introduced Okakura to the Tagore clan, a formidable cultural bridge was established between East and South Asia. Japanese artists Taikan Yokoyama and Shunso Hishida soon followed Okakura's trail to Calcutta.

Bose concluded that the idea of Asia and the spirit of Asian universalism were in important ways products of cosmopolitan thought zones created by passages across the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the continent and the ocean were not necessarily in an adversarial relationship but provided different contours of inter-regional arenas animated by flows of ideas and culture. Benoy Kumar Sarkar, writing in the *Modern Review* in the 1910s, stressed both sea-lanes and land-routes in creating what he called an 'Asia-sense'. During the modern age it has been a constant struggle not to allow universalist aspirations of the colonized to degenerate into universalist boasts and cosmopolitanism be replaced by bigotry. The tussle goes on in new post-colonial



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settings. The outcome is yet uncertain, but the ethical choice before us seems clear enough.

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