



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 Fifth Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lecture was delivered by Professor Bidyut Chakraborty on 19 December, 2014. Professor Subha Sankar Sarkar, Honorable Vice Chancellor of Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) presided over the occasion. The programme was organised by NSOU at the Conference Hall of its newly built Headquarter at DD-26, Salt Lake City, Kolkata-64.

Professor Bidyut Chakraborty, a Political Scientist makes an attempt to assess the effectiveness or otherwise of Bose's foray into the troubled domain of trade unionism. He contextualises this aspect of Boses's activities against the perceived need of the ongoing non-military national movement for widening its support base from the confines of predominantly urban middle class to the hitherto underexplored segment of industrial workers. Industrialisation brought in its train the possibility of labour unrest and the problems got compounded by the fact that the owners belonged to the indigenous capitalist class doing business against the usual odds imposed by the colonial power. The emerging



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national bourgeoisie in dependent India had the plain excuse for their stiff handed dealings with the disgruntled workers in that they had tough time in the face of market fluctuations and declining profit. There were also complaints of alleged instigations coming from outside, mainly communist, trade union leaders.

Notably, in almost all such scenarios the trajectory of events passes through wage denial, job loss, confrontation, strikes and lock out—the 'deshi' capitalists proving no less oppressive than the metropolitan counterpart. This was a tricky situation for the nationalist leaders who could not countenance indigenous ventures shutting down due to internal tensions; neither could they dream of enlisting the growing mass of industrial workers without somehow trying to mitigate their sufferings. Since the latter were the real victims of such a situation, they easily fell prey to politically motivated lures of collective bargaining and unsuspectingly got unionised. The union leaders, left or right, could not all claim to have a clean hand in the process.

This basically economic phenomenon therefore had political ramifications. The speaker/ contributor has made much of the urgency of the National Congress to expand its support base without emphasizing this turf war aspect of early trade union movement in this country. The other aspect of this vexed issue is the increasing failure of the National Congress to retain its hold on the rural agricultural folk, due mainly to the vested interests of the landed gentry still at the driving seat of the party. The plight of disguised unemployment of the rural poor was hardly addressed with any seriousness, with the consequence that excess labour on land had to seek a bare livelihood by joining the factory bound exodus and settling for a meagre living in slums around. But the status quo could not last long because of the long shadow of depression in external market affecting industries exporting raw or semi-processed materials from the colonies. By then the 'deshi' bourgeoisie had developed significant connections with the nationalist leadership, and hence the recurrent industrial disputes presented a highly promising opportunity for the latter to come up with a 'deshi' solution to break the deadlock. When Bose was chosen by the Congress High Command to enter the fray, presumably because of his wide acceptability to the masses, and devise some sort of a fair solution with the maximum available relief for the workers without overly affecting the staying power of local venture capital, he encountered an unenviable situation. On the one hand he had to neutralise the division among labourers already created by radical and non-



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radical factions in the trade union sphere. On the other, he could not remain oblivious of the felt need of the Congress to bring the workers back into their fold.

The way Chakrabarty deals with the prevailing scenario somehow makes light of the heavy burden shouldered by Bose. He has chosen three or four episodes [1929 Jute workers' strike, 1928-29 railway strike, 1929 TISCO and Tin Plate strike] to offer a detailed narrative of each. The avowed purpose of this exercise seems to be examining the nature of Boses's initiative at the behest of the Congress to enlist support of the workers for the larger cause of freedom struggle, if one has to give any credence to the subtitle of this lecture, namely, "search for new constituencies of politics". Or, as he says more explicitly in the text, "here an attempt will be made to show how far he succeeded in organizing the working class on the basis of a nationalist democratic ideology for freedom struggle" (p.99). But what Chakrabarty has actually done is to demonstrate the limited effects of Bose's collective bargaining strategy which neither satisfied the disgruntled workers nor advanced the cause of the so-called "democratic ideology" among the workers. Regarding political recruitment, he mixes up this larger goal with the transitional imperative of a localised phenomenon, i.e., the need of Bengal provincial Congress to stem the withering of its once lively base after C R Das's demise (pp.99-100): emphasis added). In this connection one is really struck by certain statements of Chakrabarty, which might carry meanings not quite consistent with the stated line of enquiry, and certainly spell little that puts the negotiating capability of Subhas in a positive light in the industrial landscape where he is rather made to appear as not quite deep going. One such observation: "he (i.e. Subhas) supported the labour cause in his public speeches but his active participation was partly the result of the High Command's instruction." (p.99) Does it mean that Bose was temperamentally not quite prepared to go the whole hog and do instead as directed from above? This is further implied when he says: "Instead of being one of the participants from the outset (p.99)...Bose preferred to take on the responsibility of leadership once the movement achieved some prominence (p.99)".

- All citations taken from *Debnarayan Modak and Chandan Basu Edited Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Memorial Lectures Series A Compilation (Volume I), Published by The Registrar, Netaji Subhas Open University DD-26, Sector I, Salt Lake City, Kolkata - 700 064 & Alphabet Books 5/1, Ramanath Majumdar Street, Kolkata - 700 009, 2017.*



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