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Use of the English Language by Subhas Chandra Bose: A Study of Three of his Speeches

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Abstract

Indian orators in English since the nineteenth century have been using the English language to address a cosmopolitan gathering; in spite of English language being the colonizer's language, it has functioned effectively to construct an Indian identity and to voice nationalist aspirations. Freedom fighters of the early twentieth century in India gave voice to the spirit of nationalism, each in their own way and each representing a phase of the evolving nationalistic consciousness. The writings of Nehru have been discussed in almost all the literary history of Indian writing in English. But it is a pity that Subhas Bose has been ignored by almost all the literary historians of Indian Writing in English although his complete works extend to several volumes.

Keywords

Language Use; Indianized English; Subhas Chandra Bose; Speeches.

Indian orators in English since the nineteenth century have been using the English language to address a cosmopolitan gathering; in spite of English language being the colonizer's language, it has functioned effectively to construct an Indian identity and to voice nationalist aspirations. Freedom fighters of the early twentieth century in India gave voice to the spirit of nationalism, each in their own way and each representing a phase of the evolving nationalistic consciousness. They were not imprisoned in the language of the colonizers but rather proved the fact that language "is still a system for possible statements, a finite body of rules that authorizes an infinite number of performances" (Foucault 30). The national movement gained momentum in the twentieth century with the Partition movement in Bengal, when the cult of the Swadeshi and boycott of foreign goods was born. However, the English language was never boycotted either in social or political circles, even though anti-British feelings continued to grow in the last three decades before independence, particularly since the Amritsar massacre in 1919. In this context, English functioned as a lingua franca as observed by Agnihotri and Khanna: "For freedom fighters coming from different parts of the country, it [English] constituted a shared mass of knowledge and a means of communication among themselves" (28). Simultaneously, the interference of the Indian languages - Indian idiomatic expressions, cultural details etc. – with the English language also constructed another layer of linguistic behaviour which could be shared.

From the late second and third decades of the twentieth century, Indian nationalistic discourse incorporated in itself socialistic ideals of which Subhas Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru were two of the main professors. The writings of Nehru have been discussed in almost all the literary history of Indian writing in

English. Binoo K. John gave an interesting account of the amateurish writings on the life and works of Nehru (John 129- 153). But it is a pity that Subhas Bose has been ignored by almost all the literary historians of Indian Writing in English although his complete works extend to several volumes. In fact, Sugata Bose and Sisir Bose commented aptly that "the popular perception" about Bose is that of a warrior rather than as a writer ('Introduction', 1). However, with special reference to three of his speeches, his Presidential address at the Maharashtra Provincial Conference, held in Pune, then Poona, delivered on May 3, 1928, his Presidential address at the Students' Conference held at Lahore, October 19, 1929, and his famous speech at a rally in Burma in 1944, I would like to analyse how Bose's nationalistic consciousness interacted with his linguistic skills contributing to the growth of a national literature in the English language; on the other hand his speeches are important in the context of 'Indianization' of the English language. English had most often been the preferred means of communication for Bose while he wrote – be it letters or history or an autobiography [1]**.** In the speeches delivered in English he spoke in the Standard English of the English-educated young men of the twentieth century and the Indian words and translations of Indian phrases used by Bose also represent the distinct acrolectal [2] variety of the nativized English shared by the English-educated mass in India.

In his speeches Bose did not suppress the spontaneous interference of mother-tongue on his English; he often used words and expressions which are peculiar to Indian users of the English language. Bose began his address in Pune with an expression of gratitude which translated a common form of expression in Bangla and other Indian languages: "Friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the high honour you have done me by requesting me to preside over the deliberations of the Sixth Session of the Maharashtra Provincial Congress" (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 29). The speech at Lahore also began in a similar fashion: "I thank you from the core of my heart for the warm

and cordial welcome you have given me on the occasion of my first visit to the land of five rivers" (*Selected Speeches* 48). Instead of thanking earnestly or sincerely Indians prefer to thank from the "core" or "bottom" of the heart. There is another such expression which is peculiarly Bengali: "Friends …I ask you to lift your eyes from the realities of the present and attempt to scan the future that looms before us" (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 32). Such expressions are also found in Vivekananda's and Tagore's speeches, such as "burning fire of materialism" (Vivekananda, *Lectures*, 3) or the phrase "joint family" (559) in Tagore's speech, "The Philosophy of Our People". A word which gained in currency during the early twentieth century was *hartal.* The word was originally used in the context of religion but developed the political significance of 'general strike' following Gandhi's calling a *hartal* in the wake of the Rowlatt Act in 1919. The word gained in currency and is also used by Bose in his speech in Pune: "The movement will reach its climax in a sort of genereal strike or country-wide hartal coupled with a boycott of British goods" (*Selected Speeches* 36). It is interesting that while 'boycott' entered into several Indian languages *hartal* became a part of the English vocabulary of Indians. Simultaneously, the word has got the new significance in Indian languages. Indian users of English have also developed some idioms. The phrase "Himalayan miscalculation" first used by Gandhi and "tryst with destiny" first used by Nehru have become idioms for Indian writers of English. But there are some expressions, which do not owe their origin to famous personalities. One such expression is the phrase "chalk out" meaning "to make a plan before commencement of action". The idiom was used by Subhas Bose in the speech in Lahore: "They should chalk out for themselves a programme of action which they should try to follow" (*Selected Speeches* 52).

In his Presidential address delivered in Pune, Bose used what may be termed as a "transfer of context" (Kachru, *Indianization* 131-32): "As long as India lies prostrate at the feet of Britain the right [to shape one's destiny] will

be denied to us" (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 31). To lie prostrate before a deity is a ritual act of worship among Hindus, but to do so before a person is a posture of surrender and acceptance of lordship. The European equivalent is to bow. In a feudal society bowing or lying prostrate is not uncommon, but in a democratic society, one may lie prostrate in very rare circumstances. In India today, the act is often referred to in words to mean surrender but the action is seldom carried out. One might discuss of Tagore's short-story "Postmaster" and Satyajit Ray's adaptation of the story in celluloid in the first film *Teen Kanya*. In the end Tagore's postmaster offers Ratan some money, but Ratan falls at the feet of the postmaster and begs him not to give her money. In Ray's film, Ratan does not do so. In the last shot, Ratan ignores the postmaster while carrying a pail of water and the postmaster looks at her with wonder. Ray, as an artist of the latter half of the twentieth century, could not accept Ratan lying prostrate at the feet of the postmaster. In retrospection, in the light of feminist and Marxist literature, one may justify Ray's bold decision to change the ending of the story of an undefined relation between a poor girl working as maid (in modern terms, a child labour) and a young man from the city posted in a remote village. In Ray's time the values imbibed from Marxism and socialism was in the air and could not be ignored. Ray's Ratan has an air of professionalism in her character while Tagore's character is relatively more burdened with the plights of feudalism, colonialism and patriarchy. At the same time worship is an expression of love in Tagore's songs. From that perspective, Ratan's falling at the feet of the young man is suggestive of her great love. But Subhas Bose, although a contemporary of Tagore, upheld the values of socialism and democracy and was intent on shaking off the burdens of feudalism and colonialism from the social psyche. Hence he considered the posture of worship as unacceptable from the socialist and democratic perspective: "as long as India lies prostrate at the feet of Britain the right will be denied to us." Bose's sentence is symbolic of the anxiety of a nation

desperate to stand on her own feet and assert herself instead of lying prostrate before a capitalist colonizer. Interestingly, the same anxiety is echoed in the speech in Lahore: "There is hardly any Asiatic today to whom the spectacle of Asia lying strangled at the feet of Europe does not cause pain and humiliation" (*Selected Speeches* 52). It may be argued further that the use of expressions common in Indian languages were also part of a "shared mass of knowledge" and consequently these expressions helped the nationalists like Bose to reach out to the common man enthusiastic of the imminent political sovereignty of India.

Subhas Bose attempted to silence all the critics of Indian nationalism through his speeches. In his Presidential Address at the Maharashtra Provincial Conference, he attacked the colonial assumption that democracy is a "Western institution" (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 30). In the process he drew the attention of his listeners to those terms in Indian languages, which indicated the democratic framework of Indian society. For example, according to Bose, terms like *'Nagar Sreshthi* (*i.e.* our modern Mayor)' (*Selected Speeches* 30) and 'village Panchayats' (*Selected Speeches* 30) were suggestive of the "democratic institutions handed down to us from days of yore" (30). Bose also took on the skeptics who thought that Indian nationalism was "a hindrance to the promotion of internationalism in the domain of culture" (*Selected Speeches* 30). He presented the counter-argument that Indian nationalism was 'inspired by the highest ideals of the human race, viz., Satyam (the true), Shivam (the good), Sundaram (the beautiful)' (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 30). Thus Indian loan words were used strategically, highlighting the legacy of democracy and idealism to consolidate his nationalist discourse. Further, in the last example, Bose adapted ideas from ancient scriptures to the secular content of his speech. Bose did not speak of God or of the search for Absolute Truth but of values which are comprehensible by all and sundry, which may be harmonized with the socialistic and secular character of his vision. In his Presidential

address in Pune Bose used the word 'labour' in a similar manner. Like Tagore, Bose brought about a semantic extension in the word "labour" to include the "peasants": "…I plead for a coalition between labour and nationalism (I am using "labour" here in a wider sense to include the peasants as well)" (*Selected Speeches* 31). Thus Bose adapted the socialist discourse to suit the Indian reality.

The use of Indian mythology as subtexts has been a common theme in Indian writing in English, for example in R.K.Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. Subhas Bose's description of the sacrifice of Jyotindranath Das in the student's conference in Lahore in 1929 is one of the most memorable use of Indian myth to describe a freedom fighter. Interestingly, Bose also referred to a piece of English poetry. He described the martyrdom of Jatindranath Das in these words, borrowing a phrase from Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*: "Jatin today is not dead. He lives up in the heavens as a star of 'purest ray serene' [3] to serve as a beacon-light to posterity" (*Selected Speeches* 49). However in the same speech, he evaluated the supreme sacrifice of Jatindranath Das from an Indian perspective: "I therefore, envy your great city [Lahore] which has been the *tapasyakshetra* – the place of penance- of this modern Dadhichi" (49). One of the hallmarks of Indian writing in English is that it readily appropriates and blends the cultural influence of both the East and the West. Bose's speeches as a leader of the Indian National Congress are evidence of that quality.

As a speaker, Subhas Bose is remembered for his famous appeal: "Give me blood and I promise you freedom." The words were the concluding part of a speech in a rally of Azad Hind Fauj in Burma in 1944. It was as the vanguard of the Azad Hind Fauj (or the Indian National Army) that Subhas Chandra Bose enthralled the entire nation with his heroism, adventure and sacrifice. The nation was all ears when he spoke, either in a rally or in the radio station. Bose's speech in Burma is not a great instance of Indianization, but the speech

is an important milestone in the history of English in India. Unlike the political situation of the nineteenth century, nationalism was no longer a privilege of the elite and the educated in the 1940s. Gandhi's 'Do or die' and Bose's 'Give me blood…' baptized the nation in the religion of sacrifice for the motherland. Although both the statement had their popular translated versions, the wide currency of the English version was not an insignificant fact. Language was an important issue at that time especially in the context of Mahatma Gandhi's disapproval of English. As far as the issue of national language was concerned, Bose, in his Presidential address at the fifty-first session of the Congress at Haripura in 1938, prescribed Hindustani with the Roman script (Bose, *Selected Speeches* 75). As commander of the Azad Hind Fauj he adopted Hindoostani as the national language. But Tamil and English were also used in public meetings and proclamations (Bose, Sugata 256-57). Bose's legendary speech in 1944 at the rally in Burma demonstrates that one is not necessarily imprisoned in the language one speaks or writes.

Although Bose was speaking to his soldiers his appeal for sacrifice caught the imagination of the entire nation. He began in a matter-of-fact note and gradually climbed on the emotional scale. Before appealing to the emotion of his listeners, Bose set the stage by analyzing the political situation. He attempted to analyze to his listeners that it was the right time and a "God given opportunity" ("Give me blood" 156) for the freedom-fighters because the British forces were encountering defeats in many fronts in the World War. He also reminded his soldiers of the "gigantic movement going on inside India" (156). However Bose did not attempt to lead his soldiers to a fool's paradise. He explained the "problem of supplies and transport" (157) and also the advantage of "men, money and materials" (157) on their side. He said that he had got enough of "men, money and materials" but that alone was not enough, for without motivation and "brave deeds and heroic exploits" (158) the battle could

not be won. He impressed upon his listeners that "heroic exploits" could give them victory. Then, finally he appealed to his soldiers:

> Gird up your loins for the task that now lies ahead … We should have but one desire today- the desire to die so that India may live- the desire to face a martyr's death, so that the path to freedom may be paved with the martyr's blood. Friends, my comrades in the War of Liberation! Today I demand of you one thing, above all. I demand of you blood. It is blood alone that can avenge the blood that the enemy has spilt. It is blood alone that can pay the price of freedom. Give me blood and I promise you freedom (158).

The clause 'Gird up your loins' is interesting, as it is a very common idiom in English as well as in many Indian languages having the same meaning: 'prepare for energetic action'. In the passage quoted above from Bose's famous speech, the repetition of the word 'desire', 'blood' and the clause 'It is blood alone' lifts the emotional pitch to the climactic appeal. Bose's speech inspired his audience to selfless action.

The philosophy inherent in the passage is initially the philosophy of revenge, of 'tooth for a tooth': "It is blood alone that can avenge the blood…" However, what appealed most to Indians is the last sentence of the speech, where the theme shifts from revenge to sacrifice, of which the blood of Christ is the most universal symbol. The image of blood in this last sentence does not suggest revenge, but sacrifice of life for the country. Thus, in this speech Bose participated in a quasi-religious discourse.

The unique feature of Bose's speech is that the quasi-religious discourse subverted the capitalist discourse of pay and receive. There is an economical barter-like structure in the last sentence – Give me…and I promise you… The dichotomy between form and content sometimes generates a heightened effect in poetry. One may refer to T.S. Eliot's poetry: the beginning of 'A Game of Chess' in *The Waste Land*: "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,/

Glowed on the marble" (lines 77-78). The reference to Shakespeare's portrait of Cleopatra in the context of decadence in modern society heightens the impact of decadence. Similarly the discourse of capitalist economy of 'Give… and I promise…' heightens the spiritual appeal of the words of Subhas Bose. The speech is therefore an invocation to the spirit of sacrifice in human beings and at the same time a critique of capitalism. Thus what Bose achieved in this speech is something more than just forming a nationalist discourse, because he brought about a modernization of the nationalist discourse. He incorporated the traditional Indian temperament, the western heroic cult of shedding 'blood' for the nation as well as subversion of capitalist discourse, which represented a modern facet of Indian political consciousness.

The term 'Indian' and 'Indianness' have never exhausted themselves. In the words of Makarand Paranjape,

> …debates over what constitutes Indianness or on the cultural politics of Indian representations are really a part of what one might call the larger process of Indian self-apprehension and self-awakening. This process has been underway for several millennia; it is in this sense that we might say that the wonderful thing about India and its traditions is that they are never finished. ("Indian English")

In this constantly changing scenario of Indianness, Bose's speech posited one of the most updated versions of Indianness.

Notes

1. Much of Bose's personal letters are written in English. *The Indian Struggle* is a important historical work written by Bose in English and his unfinished autobiography *The Indian Pilgrim* was also written in English. See *The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose,* edited by Sisir

Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, Netaji Research Bureau, Calcutta, Delhi, O.U.P., 1997 and *The Indian Struggle,* New Delhi, O.U.P., 1997.

2. According to Barbara A. Fennell, 'It is usually the case that a society in which develops displays a continuum of language varieties, which we refer to as a post-creole continuum. The varieties that coexist in such circumstances range from a still relatively reduced 'basilectal' variety, through a range of more standard-like 'mesolectal' varieties to 'acrolectal' varieties, which are very close to the dominant (lexifier) language, but which retain features of grammar, lexicon and pronunciation that still mark them off from the national (often European) standard variety (Fennell 4). The terms acrolect, mesolect and basilect are now used in contexts beyond creoles, in indigenized variants of a language. For example, Kamal K, Sridhar categorizes the English used by clerks and receptionists in India as 'mesolect' and the English used by journalists and professors as 'acrolect' (Sridhar 42-43). Hence the texts that I discuss in this paper may be called 'acrolect'.
3. The phrase 'purest ray serene' is taken from line 53 of the fourteenth stanza of Gray's *Elegy*:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom"d caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness in the desert air.

Allusion to English literature may be found in Bose's other speeches. For example, in his Presidential address at the Haripura Congress, there is an allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'I shall only ask you if there is not "something rotten in the state of Denmark" that such bright and promising souls as Jatin Das, Sardar Mahavir Singh and others should feel the urge not to live life but to end it' (*Selected Speeches* 68). His 'Vision of a Free India', the Presidential address of Pune, ended with an

allusion to Tennyson's *Ulysses*: 'Let us all stand shoulder to shoulder and say with one heart and with one voice that our motto is, as Tennyson said through Ulysses, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield"' (*Selected Speeches* 38). Although he was a confirmed enemy of the British government, Subhas Bose was a lover of English poetry.

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