

COMRADES AT CROSSROADS: JAWAHARLAL & SUBHAS

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DATED: 19<sup>th</sup> December, 2014

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen and all the eminent and distinguished personalities in the dais and in the audience. Sitting here, listening to the music; and about the young Doctor Amitabh Chowdhury, I was reminded of a saying that the ancient Greeks were very fond of repeating- they used to say- those whom the God loves die young. I know it is a very poor consolation; but the only consolation which we can draw, from the untimely death of Amitabh Chowdhury, is that he is with God and may his soul rest at peace.

I am very deeply honoured and deeply privileged to deliver the Eleventh Amitabh Chowdhury Lecture. It is not just because, the Lecture is named after a very committed and passionate young man, but also because I am very humbly conscious that I come in the line of a very distinguished list of speakers; and among them atleast one of them, is somebody I consider to be my intellectual Guru- Prof Andre Beteille. There are two others, whom I count as my closest friends- Gopalkrishna Gandhi and Ram Chandra Guha. So I am very very grateful to the Chowdhury family for having asked me to deliver this Lecture. I hope, I won't disappoint them or you who have come this evening, to listen to this talk.

I will begin with the title, there are two very- it is a short title of three words- two words in the title are very crucial and I will talk about those two words. First comrades- why comrades when the conventional wisdom, particularly the part of India, that I come from Bengal- Jawaharlal and Subhas are seen to be rivals. So much so, those ardent admirers of Subhas Chandra Bose in Bengal and elsewhere, in India, continue to believe that if he had been around, he would have made a better Prime Minister of Independent India, than Jawaharlal Nehru and maybe India would have been in safer and better hands. They are projected as rivals, so why do I call them comrades? I need to explain that, before I come to what I mean by crossroads. Their lives ran very close and parallel to each other. Nehru was only eight years, Subhas's Senior. They were both born into affluence. Jawaharlal much more than Subhas of course. But Subhas was also born to a rich family. His father Janaki Nath Bose was a very successful lawyer in Cuttack. So successful, that later on in his life, he could buy a house for himself and his family at a very posh address at Calcutta- Elgin Road. But his wealth was nothing compared to nothing, compared to what Motilal Nehru, had as Jawaharlal's father. Jawaharlal himself had recorded that he grew up in a house, which had a swimming pool, a tennis Court, a large retinue of servants. Both went to Cambridge, Subhas as an outstanding student, outstanding by any definition of the word. And he fulfilled that promise at the University of Cambridge, by standing fifth, in that most difficult of examinations- the Examination to enter the heaven born Indian Civil Service. Jawaharlal was not that

brilliant a student. He went to Harrow, where his form Master said- the boy is not without brains. At Trinity, he pursued a Natural Science Degree- in which he got a descent second class. He went on to become a Barrister at Law from Lincoln's Inn. He wanted to take the Indian Civil Service Exam, we don't know whether he would have succeeded or not. But his parents did not want him to have a transferrable job- they wanted him to come back to Allahabad. So, he came back to Allahabad-as a Barrister at law, never practiced. His father had a very successful practice. He could have inherited that. He didn't practice. In fact, the only time, Jawaharlal Nehru ever donned the Silk Gown's of a Barrister at Law- was to defend Subhas's associates and friends, at the great trial of the Indian National Army. Subhas from practically his school days, had committed himself to the service to the Motherland. So, having entered the Indian Civil Service, with great aplomb and success- it was no easy thing, to stand fifth in those days. He chucked it up- he gave up the Indian Civil Service and came back to India. He came back to India, to work for his motherland, for the freedom of India. As soon as his ship docked in Bombay, he got off the Ship and the first person; he went to see was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The year was 1921- the Non- cooperation movement had just began. Subhas wanted to know from Gandhi, what Gandhi wanted to achieve, where he wanted to take the Non-co-operation Movement, what he meant by Swaraj and how soon Swaraj would come. So Subhas's coming to Nationalism was almost automatic, he had made the choice, when he was 15 years old. This was not the

case for Jawaharlal. Jawaharlal took his time, to become a Nationalist. Despite his very early meeting with Gandhi, in 1915, he wasn't overwhelmed by Gandhi at the first meeting. Neither was Subhas, in that meeting in 1921. Both were somewhat skeptical, about what this man was about to do? What this man could do? Jawaharlal is the first to be converted to Gandhi, that is because of his experience with Jallianwala Bagh, hearing about it and he was part of the investigative committee, appointed by the Indian National Congress and ofcourse, he is hearing of Gandhi's work among the Indigo peasants, in Champaran; the Mill workers at Ahmedabad and the peasants of Gujarat. So, by 21, when Subhas arrives, Nehru is already an active Congressman, and Subhas joins the Congress in Bengal, once he arrives at Kolkata under the mentorship of Chittaranjan Das, whose disciple he becomes. But, the friendship does not begin in 21, even though, and I use the word friendship very advisedly and deliberately. It begins much later. It begins in 1927-28, when Jawaharlal and Subhas are at the forefront of declaring within the Indian National Congress, that the Congress will stand for nothing less than complete Independence from British Rule. No halfway houses, like the dominion status, no compromises with more Indians participating in Administration- all little carrots that, the British Raj was holding out. They said- we donot want any of these. We want India to become complete completely independent of British Rule; and they start campaigning for this within the Congress. Both of them individually and jointly, and they do so often, against the advice of Gandhi. Particularly to

Jawaharlal, Gandhi is writing in 1927-1928: watch your step. You are going too far, you trying to go too far too fast. Watch the consequences. But there is nothing to stop these two young men. In 29, as the President of the Congress at Lahore, it is Nehru who declares Purna Swaraj, to be the goal of the Congress. It is Nehru's declaration, Nehru's public declaration. But, as an idea it is a joint manifesto of Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru. They are working on this campaign. They have been working and they continue to work on this campaign, very closely and together. This is one of the first features of their comradeship. They are at the forefront, the radical forefront, of the Congress. Their radicalism intensifies and grows together, because both of them go to Europe for different reasons. Subhas, because he has to recover from ill health. His health has broken down, because of the series of imprisonment in British Rule, and Jawaharlal because of his wife's ill health; and in Europe, they see what is happening there. The rise of Fascism; the rise of Hitler; unemployment after the depression; and as a challenge and counterpoint to all this- the rise of Socialism and Socialists ideas. Both Subhas and Jawaharlal, in the early 1930's returned to India- committed Socialists. They believed that the future of mankind, and within that the future of India, are both tied to Socialism. There is no future outside of Socialism. Therefore, in the second more profound sense, they are comrades. They are comrades because they are Socialists. That's how Socialists address one another- comrades. They are reading the same books. We have letters from Subhas writing to Nehru. Will you lend me so and so

book- do you have it in your library. The subject of those books has all to do with Marxism; communism; Socialism. They are reading these two together. This is their library...this is their common library. Is it just a political affiliation, or an ideological affiliation? My answer is NO. Because, through the ideological bonding, their develops a personal friendship. When Kamala Nehru is dying in Switzerland, only one Indian is with Jawaharlal Nehru. His name is Subhas Chandra Bose. It is Subhas who helps Jawaharlal to make the funeral arrangements for his wife. From 1935, we have letters, on Subhas's part to Jawaharlal and all the letters sign off with the words...**Love Yours ever Subhas!** This ends in 1938-1939, that word love disappears. I will come to that in a minute, why it does disappear? We also have letters...political letters, where they are exchanging political views. Suddenly, at the end, Subhas writes- *"do you hear from Indu regularly, how is she...? She must be desperately lonely in Switzerland"*. A personal query about a friend's lonely daughter. Nehru laments to J.B. Kripalini, *'I have been away in Europe, and Subhas hasn't written to me for one month. What has happened to him? Why is he ignoring me, like this?'* It's a lament. The lament about the loss or a possible loss of a friendship. But it is not a loss. Because, as soon as he lands in India, there is a letter waiting for him from Subhas, which says- *'You don't know how much I have missed you, while you have been away. Now, that you have come back we can work together on things discuss things together'*. Nehru, one of the most indignant public statement he made was when Subhas was kept in prison after his father died. He

was allowed to come out of Jail but not allowed to move out of the house, and Nehru said, what kind of regime is this, that would not allow a man to mourn his father in peace? And Subhas to Nehru, '*...Tell Motilalji...*' this is few months before Motilal dies, '*...tell Motilalji, his word is my command*'. So there is this very strong personal bonding. It is not one relationship in the 1930's of rivalry at all. Shared ideas; shared ideology; shared sorrows; a shared friendship. Now, I turn to the crossroads- where the friendship breaks or snaps. There are two issues here- both equally important. One is the more famous one. Subhas Bose wins on his own right, without the support of any faction or cabal within the Congress. He wins second time, the Presidency of the Indian National Congress. He wins it, against Gandhi's wishes; and against Gandhi's chosen candidate Pattavi Sitaramaiya. Nehru was against Subhas's standing for the second time. Not, because he favoured Pattavi Sitaramaiya, he told Subhas, '*Listen to me, I have the experience of this. The Presidency of the Indian National Congress is a pretty useless thing. We have better work to do, elsewhere, among the people of India. Free your time; don't get tied down by this administration of the Congress.*' But Subhas wanted to be, the President of the Congress the second time, maybe he wanted to do a second term because Nehru had also done a second term. But the Congress is not the hype of what he called the old guard of the Congress. Rajendra Prasad, Vallabh Bhai Patel, Rajagopalachari, Govinda Ballabh Panth, and a major player in the wings, or from the wings were G.D. Birla. Subhas added Gandhi to this old guard.

He said, '*...This old guard prevented Subhas from functioning as a President, for the second term...*' When the Congress met, it passed a resolution that, Subhas might be the President of the Congress, but the working Committee of the Congress, would have to have the endorsement, and the acceptance of Gandhi. So Subhas is saddled, in this very uncomfortable position. He is the President, but he cannot choose his own working committee. He expected at this juncture, when he was trying to negotiate with Gandhi, to come to some kind of understanding. He expected that he would have the complete support of Jawaharlal. He did have Jawaharlal's support but not complete support. The only man from within the Indian National Congress, who continuously upto the very last minute of Subhas's resignation in Calcutta in 1939, the only man who intercedes with Gandhi, on behalf of Subhas is Jawaharlal Nehru. He is writing continuously. This is the flow of letters- two or three letters every week. Bapu sit down with Subhas, talk to him. Don't get misled by his rhetoric. He is a very reasonable man. If you talk to him, you can bring him around. He will listen to you. But don't let him go. Don't create a situation, where he has to leave the Congress. It will be an extremely dangerous thing and a harmful thing, if Subhas leaves the Congress at this point of time. Subhas writes to him from Dhanbad; where he is recovering from a very bad bout of fever. He says- can you take a quick train down-Come to Dhanbad from Allahabad? We can sit down and chat, even if it for a few hours. We need to discuss things - he writes to Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru goes to Dhanbad. Before he leaves for Dhanbad, he

sends a telegram to Gandhi. Subhas has asked me to come, I am going Bapu. Then, he gives the reason, why he is going. I cannot say no to Subhas...I cannot say no to Subhas. So he goes to Dhanbad. They discuss things. He also advises Subhas to sit with Gandhi. But Gandhi is in no mood to negotiate. His attitude is simple. He advises Subhas, that Congress resolution is non-sense. *"You as Congress President, should form your Working Committee. If the Congress doesnot accept it, that is too bad. But you must form your working Committee. Why should I form it for you?"* So this is the impasse, that leads to the Calcutta Congress in 1939, where Subhas completely boxed in; resigns from the Congress. And the rest, as they say is history. He not only resigns as President, he resigns from the Congress. Within a few months, forms his own party, the Forward Block; and then as we all know, there is the heroic escape from Calcutta, which takes him to Berlin. So, that's the first cross-road-where Subhas doesnot get the expected support, from Jawaharlal. Subhas possibly expected that, Jawaharlal would also break with Gandhi and come with him. Jawaharlal was not willing to do this. And I will come to, why Jawaharlal was not willing to do this, at the end of this Lecture. The second cross road, is the very fact, that Subhas goes to Berlin. Nehru has been an Anti-Fascists, Anti-Nazi, since 1929-30; when he first saw the emergence of Fascism, in Europe. And he cannot accept it; that somebody who he had worked with; who he had seen as a Comrade, could go and seek help from the Nazi regime, and actually shake hands with Hitler. He could not accept that Subhas

could actually seek the help of the Japanese to make India Independent. It is not for India to become independent with the help of another foreign power. We have to get rid of the British, by ourselves standing on our own feet. Subhas is a patriot, but Subhas is misguided; wrongheaded. This is the second crossroad. The departure of Subhas or the resignation of Subhas following the Tripuri Congress of 1938-39 is justifiably dramatized. This is the point where Gandhi himself came out very badly. Somebody who was not above machination, petty politics, factionalism, intolerant of dissent. But in this dramatization, and I say justified dramatization, what is often forgotten that in 1936, when Jawaharlal was the President of the Congress, that famous red Vintage Ear of Jawaharlal Nehru, where he began his Congress Presidential address in Lucknow, by addressing Congressmen as Comrades. After that address, Nehru had also been subjected to the same things that, Subhas was to be subjected to in 1938-1939, the resignation of the working Committee; a reprimand of Gandhi. G.D. Birla mobilizing the opinion of the Indian capitalist's class against Nehru, calling him nothing more than an Agent of Moscow. *'Bapu please tame him, please tame this disciple of yours, he is taking India down the path of communism and there lies disaster'*. Nehru could have broken with the Congress, because the humiliation, the processes were the same as Subhas faced when he was President for the second time, in 1938-39. Nehru didn't. And as I said I would come to that at the end of this Lecture, why he didn't? To continue the story of the Subhas Jawaharlal relationship- in the early forties,

as I said Nehru is a critic of Subhas. He cannot accept Subhas's embracing of Fascism. What does Subhas do? When he arrives in Singapore, and he is about to embark with his Indian National Army to the borders of Burma, to enter India, with the help of the Japanese but nonetheless his own Army- the Indian National Army. What does he call his regiments? Three of his regiments are called- the Gandhi Brigade, the Nehru Brigade, and the Azad Brigade. Subhas cannot forget his Congress past. Subhas cannot forget that he had worked shoulder to shoulder with these men. He harks back to that memory. He does another thing- in that great address from Singapore, the first of his addresses which became legendary. '*This is Subhas Chandra Bose speaking to you from Singapore*'; '*...ami Subhas bolche...!*' In that first address he spoke directly to Gandhi. He didn't speak to the people of India. He spoke directly to Gandhi and was the first to hail him as the father of the Nation. This is your struggle. We are coming to India, at the head of an Army. But our first duty will be to lay down our Arms at your feet and fight with you again to throw out the British. Not for nothing did Gandhi say, around the same time 1943-44, Subhas is like my long lost prodigal son. He has taken a different boat to India's freedom. What about Nehru? There is a small note in the Nehru papers which says that when he got the news, that Subhas had possibly died in an Aircrash in Taipei, he cried. It is worth remembering, that the only other time Nehru Jawaharlal publicly wept, was when he walked into or ran into Birla House on the evening that fateful evening, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948, and he found the dead body of Gandhi lying on the

floor, with a thin white cloth covering it. Eyewitnesses say that he put his head on the feet of the Mahatma and sobbed like a child. Two occasions Jawaharlal cries in public- one the death of a comrade, the second the death of his Bapu. As I said he defended the INA, he got to know what Subhas had done: the heroism, the sacrifice, the attempt to preserve the Hindu Muslim unity. His opinion of Subhas changed. He even said once, under similar circumstances who knows, I might have done the same thing that Netaji did. Referring to Subhas as Netaji not Subhas. In the 50<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Subhas Bose, he paid a handsome tribute. He said it is an open secret, that Subhas and I had differences, political differences; ideological differences. But he was like my younger brother, and I have never known a greater patriot, and a greater soldier for India's freedom. So, yes at the crossroads in the late 1930's and the early 1940's, the two comrades parted ways. But post mortem, post the death of Subhas. Nehru regained that friendship. He recalled it and he remembered Subhas not only as a patriot but also that personal bond that he had shared like my younger brother. The question that haunts Historians and it haunted Subhas's till his dying day, was why did Jawaharlal never break with Gandhi? This question is important because no one and I say this with some emphasis; No one within the Indian National Congress articulated his ideological differences with Gandhi as strongly and as explicitly as Jawaharlal Nehru. The Doctrines put forward by Gandhi in hind Swaraj are harmful and dangerous. They are wrong. They will do damage to India's progress. I quote these

lines from the Autobiography of Nehru 1935-1936, and this is not a one off. This is a continuous debate and discussion and dialogue between Gandhi and Nehru, right through the 30's and 40's. This is not the ideal; India cannot go back to its villages. India must go forward with the help of Science, technology, modern Industry. Religion...the invocation of religion in politics, is doing harm to India. It is a divisive instrument. These are not criticisms being made in private behind Gandhi's back. These are open criticisms that Nehru makes. Yet he does not break with Gandhi, he does not leave him. There is somewhere dependence, particularly after the death of Motilal in 1932. A dependence of Nehru on Gandhi's sheltering wisdom. He needs that anchor. He needs that anchor not just emotionally. He needs that anchor, because politically he has seen with his own eyes, through his own experience, that nobody, no public figure in India. No political figure in India reads the pulse of the people, as well as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The people of India do not follow, any other leader with as much passion and commitment, as they do Mahatma Gandhi. You have brought to us struggle and an epic dimension. He writes to Gandhi just before the Dandi March.

There is another aspect to consider. I don't know if there any historians in the audience. But if there are, there is ...we know those of us who work in the archives, that there are these rare moments when suddenly, in the drudgery of looking through all papers, documents, you come across a letter or a memorandum, which suddenly makes you...makes your hair stand on end. It gives

you goose pimples. Am I reading these? Is this quite correct? You read it not once, twice, thrice, to check the veracity. It happened to me last year. It was a letter written by Sardar Ballav Bhai Patel, to Nehru. July 1933...3<sup>rd</sup> July, if I am not mistaken, the date of the letter. A few days before that, Nehru had come away from Gandhi's Ashram, and obviously they had had a very strong and heated argument, and the Sardar writes. *'Since, you left and you must have had an exchange of words. Bapu has not been himself. He hardly talks to us. He hardly eats. I don't know what you said. But he keeps saying, if this is what Jawaharlal thinks of me, I should retire from public life. I shouldn't take part in politics any more. Please come back! Come back soon'*. Patel write and puts a salve on Bapu's wounds, calm him down. And then comes these lines, the last line of that letter. *'Perhaps you don't know, Bapu loves you more than anyone else, in the world. Perhaps you don't know, Bapu loves you more than anyone else, in the world'*. Year is 1939: Kasturba is alive all of their children are alive. But Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi loves Jawaharlal Nehru more than anybody else in the world. Subhas believed and perhaps rightly, that he and Jawaharlal could make history together. Nehru did not disagree with this. But he knew that the destiny of India could not be made without Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. So, he never broke from him.

Thank you!