

Memories of Another Nationalism

SHEFALI JHA

This slim volume tells of the unusual life and career of Abid Hasan “Safrani,” a name that will be familiar to those who know something of the history of Subhas Chandra Bose’s Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army [INA]). To the efforts of his niece and nephew, compilers of the present volume, belong the credit for disseminating the story of Bose’s Man Friday more widely, especially in these forgetful times. It should be of interest to historians of the period, Hyderabadis old and new, and to a reading public curious about an alternative vision of the Indian nation-to-be, embodied by the faithful and well-travelled soldiers of the INA.

This is a community that could only be assembled at a time of empires breaking up into nation states, a time of what seem today to be conflicting allegiances—to the founding of a sovereign postcolonial nation state, for instance, with the help of

Abid Hasan Safrani: Netaji’s Comrade-in-Arms

compiled by Ismat Mehdi and Shehbaz Safrani, foreword by Sugata Bose, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp 148, price not available.*

the most brutal totalitarian political formations of the time. This book does not address these questions, sticking very close to its brief of outlining the events of a life lived in the shade of war and revolutions, in Safrani’s own evocative words, and his friends and family’s memories of the time spent with him. To the family he remains “Zainu manna,” from his original name Zain-ul-Abedin, and the book veers between the personalities of the fondly remembered Manna and Abid Hasan, the barely known public figure.

Parts of the latter’s story may touch some contrapuntal chords in the present, not to learn lessons from the past or sigh over lost unities—though some

of that is undoubtedly intended—but to discern traces of alterity, for political meanings rapidly eroding into illegibility today. Consider the sobriquet “Safrani,” “derived from the word for saffron, a colour associated with sacrifice in the Indian subcontinent,” the compilers note, and without a hint of irony at its current semiotic, elaborate: “for Abid Hasan, it meant giving up everything for the sake of winning freedom for his country” (p 19).

“Pluralistic Hyderabad,” home to Safrani’s family and deserving of more attention than was possible in this book, is yet another example. Even into the early 20th century, community identities here were permeated and bounded by ritual prescription, loosely overseen by a largely unintrusive state. Similarly, nationalist politics was treated with benign distrust until the late 1930s. Thus Hasan’s father, a government employee, was reprimanded in the 1920s for his mother’s spectacular anti-colonial bonfire of foreign clothes and knick-knacks but without any serious damage to employee or employment. After all, the Hasans were neighbours and friends

with Sarojini Chattopadhyay, soon to be Naidu, possibly Hyderabad's favourite Congress nationalist—and loyal subject of the Nizam. Gandhian Non-Cooperation, in these early years of the seventh Nizam Osman Ali Khan's rule, was regarded not as a threat to princely authority but to the overlordship of the British, from which the ruler suffered as much, if not in some respects more acutely, than his subjects. The rupture from mainstream Indian nationalism was at least a decade into the future, but this story has little to do with Safrani, whose association with the INA and his subsequent diplomatic career makes his an unusual Hyderabad story, with all the action experienced on the front lines in Europe and South-east Asia.

Communities of the Future

The intellectual core of this account lies in Safrani's articles, reprinted here for the benefit of readers (like this reviewer) ignorant of the activities of the Kolkata-based Netaji Research Bureau. The adventures of the "underwater" submarine journey from Germany to Japan, on which he was Bose's chosen companion, and accounts of his meetings with the Germans and Japanese, as well as the tragic fate of the army on the battlefield—these are the most engaging parts of the book. But the account of cultural refashioning, and its importance for the INA, are possibly more thought-provoking. This was a project to build the kernel of a future national community embodying the secular vision of Bose, itself forged in the fires of early 20th-century Bengali politics.

The INA was a multireligious, multi-regional force with a mission that precluded the use of British principles of military organising. By this account, Safrani played a significant role in managing difference, both within the INA and in the public outreach required for it to survive, being a "free spirit" endowed with a gift for languages (p 137). In some quarters, his name is remembered for coining the lasting salute, "Jai Hind!" (p 3), whose brief origin story is only one of the many anecdotes about his rhetorical abilities. The most

interesting of these, however, tells of his struggle to persuade Bose to use plain Hindustani over his Delhi comrade's Persianised Urdu for his public speeches, and of the various experiments in translation he undertook to bridge the divides between not only spoken and written but also ordinary, poetic and conceptual registers of the various languages he commanded. One wishes that these themes had been dwelt on more than the format of the book allows.

The account of the lines drawn, crossed, and redrawn in negotiations of religious difference also make one wish for more, but we are fortunate to have other accounts to supplement the one. In Sugata Bose's 2011 biography of his grand-uncle, *His Majesty's Opponent*, Safrani is credited with instituting joint mess facilities for the soldiers, irrespective of their religious affiliation and ritual preferences in the matter of food ("Gradually, Muslims and Sikhs gave up their insistence on being served meat ... that accorded with the appropriate method of slaughter"; p 226). What Bose encouraged was "a process of cultural intimacy among India's diverse communities" (p 258), according to his biographer, and he could not have had a more enthusiastic lieutenant than Safrani, who writes here (in the chapter titled "Netaji and the Communal Question") with awe of his leader's point-blank refusal to attend a ceremony at Singapore's wealthy Chettiar temple unless the rules were changed to admit all comers. And change they did, at least on one occasion to welcome a multireligious crowd of INA recruits and Bose's admirers (p 114).

But there were instructive gaps between the leader and lieutenant's understanding of "cultural intimacy": an instance is Bose's severe disapproval of the zeal of his Hyderabad "comrade-in-arms" in helping invent a common prayer, to be used by all soldiers of the INA. Bose was firm in his belief that instrumentalising religious attachments for the building of national communities was fraught with risk: "If you use religion to unite yourself today, you leave the door open for someone to attempt later to separate you using the

same sentiment," Safrani records his reproof (p 113).

Hindustani/Hyderabadi

Whether military ideals of community translate well into post-conflict civilian life is a question beyond the scope of this memorial volume. What it does tell us is that ordinary political activity may have been impossible for Safrani after his days in the INA, though anyone familiar with the knotty politics of Hyderabad state in the post-war years would have appreciated some unpacking of a statement like this: "he tried to work with the Congress Party in Hyderabad for sometime (sic). But he was highly disillusioned and left" (p 64). The Nehru regime, however, made good use of his talents: Abid Hasan became part of the Indian Foreign Service, and held several important posts during his career, from Europe to the Arab world. In this section of the account, we have notes from his niece Ismat Mehdi about the household's life in Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus, bearing witness to the phenomenon of Nasser and the Egyptian revolution sweeping whole societies off their feet. Safrani appears to have been the government's eyes and ears in Iraq, tuned to the Arab nationalist ferment which led to the 1958 toppling of the Hashemite monarchy by the military.

This too was evidence, the book suggests, of Hyderabad state's cosmopolitan ethos, consisting of as much of an intimate familiarity with the Perso-Arabic world as the ability to host large dinner parties for strangers anywhere. Moreover, as Geeta Doctor's tender memory of a childhood encounter underscores, "Safrani showed us how to be gracious in accepting the hospitality of strangers, who could also be family" (p 136). Doctor's account is also notable for a cameo many who do not know of

Economic & Political WEEKLY

available at

Vidhi News Agency

Rustum Ali Dhal, B/H KB Comm Centre
Near Gujarat Samachar, Kanpur
Ahmedabad 380 001
Ph: 2530064, 2530024

Abid Hasan will recognise: his late niece, Suraiya Hasan Bose (1928–2021) or “Suraiya apa” as she was almost universally known, and another embodiment of old Hyderabad urbanity.

Labours of love must rank near the very top of the list of hard-to-review books. As in the case of this volume, there is a certain facticity about them: there is much that is left out, much that could have been done better—but the work is

what it is, put together by these people and no other because no others could really do it. In addition to the compilers, others of the family were deeply involved in bringing this book out, as Sumanta Banerjee notes in his “preface” (p xxiii); Banerjee and Sugata Bose also bring familial regard to their introductory remarks. What lies before us, then, is a deeply personal account of a remarkable life, which pushes us to revisit visions of

a future nation different from the one we are currently trying to survive.

Shefali Jha (shefali.jha@daiict.ac.in) teaches at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar.

REFERENCE

Bose, Sugata (2013): *His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle Against Empire*, New Delhi: Penguin India.