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Received 10 January 2026
Revised 25 May 2026
Accepted 26 May 2026
Published 27 May 2026

Reconciling Science, Religions and Spirituality: A Pragmatic Nationalism

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Introduction

Bose spent a considerable part of his adolescence and early adulthood seeking answers to life in the religious-spiritual spheres, chasing monks and sifting through granthas, which was not out of the ordinary for those spiritually inclined. However, Netaji remains one of the rare few who engaged with this domain in a scientific manner and managed to successfully reconcile and translate the two supposedly dichotomous schools into practical application. He viewed that "Reality is, after all, too big for our frail understanding to fully comprehend. Nevertheless, we must build our life on the theory which contains the maximum truth" (Correspondent, HT, 2020).

Against the backdrop of this revelation, this chapter endeavors to gain some insight into the thought process of Subhas Chandra Bose regarding religion and spirituality. For this purpose, it follows in the footsteps of his autobiography and begins with his perspective on the religious equation which preceded him and some of the gurus who were noteworthy in sculpting and shaping his intellectual-philosophical outlook. Then, this chapter explores the ideas of Bose on various themes as outcomes of this frame of mind. Finally, it explores Bose's extreme pragmatist and scientific take on the religious and spiritual ideas encountered by him.

Sources of Scientific and Spiritual Attributes

As a child, Subhas was disinclined toward sports, choosing to spend his days devouring Sanskrit verses on ethics (Bose 1948, p. 27). These verses, in turn, began to lay the building blocks of his spiritual philosophy.

Bose's childhood was shaped by his admiration of various role models, starting with his headmaster Beni Madhav Das (Bose 1948, p.39-43). Bose writes that Das, a loyal disciple of Keshav Chandra Sen, "had succeeded in rousing in me a vague perception of moral values an inchoate feeling that in human life moral values should count more than anything else" (Bose 1948, p.44-45). Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh would soon join the ranks and leave an extraordinary

spiritual and political impact on the young Subhas.
Santanu Banerjee gives an account of spiritual influences on Bose and highlights his love and reverence for Shankaracharya's Advaita (Banerjee 2018, p.34). Advaita translates to 'not two' and is based on the principle of non-duality or monism (Sriraman & Benesch 2005, p.44). By adulthood, Bose had become well-rounded in the sphere of theology, having studied, debated, and discussed many spiritual philosophies and religious texts, ranging from the Upanishads to the Bible, from the Yogic perception to the Vaishnavic beliefs and beyond (Bose 1948, p. 142-143

Paramhansa and Vivekananda

It is well-known that Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and his chief disciple, Swami Vivekananda were the most potent spiritual influences on Subhas Chandra Bose. One can grasp the extent of this influence from what he writes about Vivekananda: “My headmaster…had not given me an ideal to which I could give my whole being. That Vivekananda gave me” (Bose 1948, p.50).

He was exposed to their teachings during his formative years, around the age of fifteen. This was a time of personal conflict for the young man, and their influence sowed within him a deep reverence for the teachings of the Vedas, Vedanta, and the Upanishads (Bose 1948, p.50). What Bose found most inspiring about Vivekananda was his practical advice to Indians. He described the essence of Swami's teachings through the Rigvedic shloka frequently quoted by Vivekananda: “Atmano Mokshartham Jagaddhitaya” meaning “for the emancipation of one's self and for the good of the universe” (Bose 1948, p.50). It was at this tender age that Subhas, impressed by the lessons of the Swami, decided to dedicate his life to the service of humankind. Sengupta has reported the key highlight of Vivekananda's influence: “He wrote to his mother, Prabhabati Bose when he himself was an adolescent and his reading of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo opened up new windows of longing to contribute to the cause of his country” (Sengupta 2012, p.198-199).

Aurobindo Ghosh

Aurobindo Ghosh Bose considered Sri Aurobindo as a successor of the religious-philosophical movement after the death of Vivekananda. He admired how Aurobindo did not keep aloof from politics and became one of the prominent political leaders by 1908 (Bose 1948, p.25). In his unfinished autobiography, 'An Indian Pilgrim', Bose remarks that he was impressed at how Aurobindo's 'synthesis of Yoga' helped him in replacing Shankaracharya's doctrine of Maya, which had become a nuisance for he could neither get rid of it nor accommodate his life to it (Bose 1948, p.79). “It was so refreshing, so inspiring, to read Aurobindo's writings,” says Bose (Bose 1948, p.80). Bose looked towards the ideals of his Gurus when in conflict, though he despaired at the sight of worship of Gurus as incarnations of God (Ghose 2001, p.196). During his struggle to decide whether to work as a civil servant

under the colonial government, he wrote in a letter, "The path of Aurobindo Ghosh is to me nobler, more inspiring, loftier, more unselfish, though thornier" (Bose 1948, p.134-136). He also admits that during this time, he was still under the influence of Ghosh (Bose 1948, p.136).

His complex feelings on Aurobindo as an ideal become clear in a letter to Dilip Kumar Roy, Bose remarked in it that "though he had great respect for Vivekananda he considers Sri Aurobindo "Gambhir" or deeper than the former" (Ghose 2011, p.201).

Pragmatic Reconciliation

Bose described the arrival of the nineteenth century as a period in which a wave of religious reawakening engulfed Indian society. He also pointed out that this wave was mostly limited to Hinduism, and reformative ideas in the Islamic community were rare or non-existent. According to Netaji, this reawakening was a combination of the Renaissance and Reformation in India, which was focused on curbing social evils within Hinduism (Bose 1948, p. 22-23). He pointed out that "Ram Mohon was the visible embodiment of the new awakening and the herald of a new era in India's history." Brahmo Samaj and Roy himself, being the champions of assimilation with Western culture, influenced many such as Devendranath Tagore and Keshav Chandra Sen (Bose 1948, p.23).

Subhas Chandra Bose was evidently a product of the Bengali renaissance of the late 1800s and early 1900s. As observed in the cases of Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, Paramhansa, and Aurobindo, it was the Vedic consciousness that substantially determined the course of the Bengali renaissance, not the Western Enlightenment. As was the case with these gurus of Netaji, the Advaita Vedantic principles of non-duality or monism (Sriraman & Benesch 2005, p.44) gave the fundamental sense of reconciliatory traits between science and religion or spirituality, which is much evident in his various writings, speeches, and activism. In one instance, Bose talks about the historical significance of religious ceremonies and how these boosts both communal relationships and local economies. He highlights that "During this period, practically every caste or profession in the village is needed for some work or other in connection with the Poojah...the whole village participates in the festivity and also profits financially from it" (Bose 1948, p.105). Netaji even organized one such poojah in 1917, the social aspect of which proved to be a great success and was hence continued in the ensuing years (Bose 1948, p.106). The next instance is related to bettering oneself through deep introspection and self-analysis, which he later discovered was a form of psychoanalysis.
A newly adult Subhas writes that "This analysis would be of two kinds - analysis of myself as I was at that time and analysis of my whole life. From the former, I would get to know more about my hidden desires and impulses, ideals, and aspirations. From the latter, I would begin to comprehend my life better…to realise my errors of the past and thereby draw conclusions for the future" (Bose 1948, p.106). He proceeded to

use this meditative technique to rid himself of nightmares, which had been intensified by his anxieties and fears. He would first introspect, analyze the cause, and then repeatedly chant the opposite of whatever he felt. He even found that this was partially successful in the suppression of powerful instincts, especially of a sexual nature, which had been one of the core reasons for his initial interest in yoga. For this purpose, he would project the image of his mother or sister on all women (Bose 1948, p.107).

In another incident, Bose comments that while Aurobindo is a genius, remaining away from "active life" leads to one-sided development. This may help a few to become Supermen, but the common man, he would prefer the path of active service (Ghose 2011, p.201). Through this, two pragmatic features of Subhas Chandra Bose become evident. First is that Netaji was not a blind believer, prepared to question the methods of his gurus, and the second is the importance he gave to the practicality and effectiveness of philosophy.

In his autobiography, Netaji relates the rise of the Brahmo Samaj and its progressive stance, which led to reactionary responses from more orthodox Hindus who claimed that all the discoveries of the West were already known to their ancestors. This conflict between the old and new resulted in the emergence of a new synthesis between the leaders propagating Eastern and Western cultures (Bose 1948, p.23-24). This synthesis was keen on reforms yet still connected to its roots, and according to Bose "the noblest embodiment of which was Pundit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar" (Bose 1948, p.24). Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and his philosophy of religion intermingled with politics and influenced the likes of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, and finally, Aurobindo Ghosh. They would go on to influence Bose a great deal, to the extent that he lays the foundation for his autobiography with a description of these events (Bose 1948, p.20-28).

Thus, these events reiterate how Bose looked at religion, especially spirituality, from a scientific standpoint to solve one's own problems as well as threads to stitch back up the fabric of society, which had been torn apart by communal conflicts.

Socio-Political Utility of Religion and Spirituality

Bose's 1926 letter to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma from Mandalay Jail efficiently underlines how integral religion is to Bose and his idea of Bharat. Netaji writes, "To us Orientals, religion is neither a social convention nor an intellectual luxury nor a holiday recreation; it is life itself. Religion is woven into the very texture of our daily and social life and it permeates our whole being, individual and national. The pages of Indian history teem with undying examples of martyrs who suffered and died for the sake of their religious beliefs. They died so that India may live. And in spite of our misery and degradation, India still lives. She lives because her soul is immortal her soul is immortal because she believes in religion" (Bose & Bose 1981, p.221-226).

Rashtravad: Nationalism

Leonard Gordon has given one of the best biographical accounts of Subhas Chandra Bose in his work titled “Brothers against the Raj” (Gordon 1990, p. 263). He has described Bose's Hinduism to be at the core of his Indian nationalism, writing: “Subhas issued no public statements on religion, but his Hinduism was an essential part of his Indianness.” Vivekananda influenced Bose's political beliefs quite directly on the matter of Nationalism and devotion to one's motherland. In an article related to Bose's rare letters, Rajeev Mani writes that this one letter from Bose in 1915 reveals how much he respected Swami Vivekananda and believed in nationalism being the need of the hour. In his own words, “Bose writes, 'I believe the great need of the hour is a tide of Nationalism sweeping us over” (Mani 2020). Sengupta remarks that, based on the activism of Sri Aurobindo, Bose “embodied an alternate philosophy of leadership based on a commitment to an uncompromising armed resistance to the British” (Sengupta 2012, p.12). In this way, Bose's nationalism was a real-life application of Vivekananda's and Aurobindo's philosophies on religion. Bose tried to fill the religion and caste-based potholes of division in Indian society with the concrete of nationalism. The INA would become a model for his attempts. In a press interview in 1943, while talking about his followers from all sections of India, particularly the Muslims, Bose gladly stated that “In my National Movement the religious question does not exist” (Sengupta 2012, p.99)

Dharmik Samrasta: Religious Harmony

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose refused to enter temples if they banned the entry of people belonging to other religions and lower castes, even at the invitation of those who funded the INA through generous donations. He exchanged greetings with religious undertones for the nationalist 'Jai Hind' and encouraged joint celebrations of religious festivals to promote the cohesion of society without threatening individual religious identities (Sengupta 2012, p.98-99).

It is not surprising that his methods worked, harmonizing Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs under the Tiranga. Pelinka argues that Bose's secularism was oriented less toward power sharing and more toward efficiency, indicating that opposing philosophies could lead to better cooperation and harmony (Pelinka 2003, p.301).

In his book, An Indian Pilgrim, Bose suggested that the animosity and conflict between religions has always been artificial and unethical. He appreciated the joint struggle of all religions in the 1757 Battle of Plassey and the 1857 First War of Independence. (Bose 1948, pp.21-22).

Dharmnirpekshata: Synthesising Religion and Politics

Without a doubt, Subhas Chandra Bose has influenced the idea of 'Indian Secularism' or Bhartiya Dharmnirpekshta. In a letter, Bose

traced an initial sense of his ideal relationship between religion and politics. "He tells how delighted he is after reading that Shankaracharya of the Sarada Matha has attended the congress and why it is necessary to infuse patriotism in the monastic order" (Mani 2020).

From this, it is quite evident that he was not a fan of the western secular idea, and would much rather have the active participation of religious intellectuals in politics.

Bose held a positive view of religion and considered one's interpretation of spiritual life to be deeply personal. "All his life, Bose himself would be a practising Hindu and yet religion would never be a part of his public persona, it would remain restricted to a corner of his room or a secluded monastery in Singapore" (Sengupta 2012, p.23). He also wiped off the tilak from his forehead, doing his best to keep his religious beliefs private (Sengupta 2012, p. 98).

In his 2003 book 'Democracy Indian Style', Anton Pelinka mentions that Bose paid great heed to the policy of restraining communalism in Bharat, going out of his way to strike a balance between Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh officers under his command. Pelinka claims while terming India secular in conscious distinction from Pakistan, that "Indian democracy today corresponds to Bose and Bose corresponds to the political system and the political culture of India after 1947" (Pelinka 2003, p.13).

Bose did not see secularity as "a dysfunction between state and religion"; rather, he saw it as "a basis of building closer links between conflicting sectarian beliefs." In her book, 'A Gentleman's Word,' Nilanjana Sengupta comments that, according to Bose, "the cultural and religious plurality of India could not be ignored but could definitely be overcome" (Sengupta 2012, p.97). His idea of secularism, unlike that of Nehru, was not exclusive but inclusive, and he believed that a vigorous understanding and acceptance of differences should be the basis of this integration (Sengupta 2012, p.21).

Freedom of Religion and Tolerance

Subhas Chandra Bose was a staunch advocate of the right to freedom of religion, going as far as to publicly debate it with his contemporaries. In 1928, one such debate took place between Rabindranath Tagore and Netaji (Times of India 2022).

Thus, Bose's pragmatic-spiritual approach once again became apparent through his proclamation that: "Whenever religions have been in conflict in our country, a synthesis has been found. Images of Hari-Hara, Kali-Shiva etc., are examples of that synthesis…There is no need for any conflict. Worship of idols by Hindus does not demean the religious beliefs of the Brahmos" (Ghose 2022, p.577).

Subhasim: A Pragmatic Approach

According to Pelinka, Bose would not fit into the current Indian political scenario as a leader because Indian democracy is primarily concerned with integration rather than efficiency. Many, such as Pelinka, see Bose as a lover of efficiency, prioritizing efficient policymaking over commitment to ideology (Pelinka 2003). They describe him as willing to sacrifice personal attachments to ideology in order to achieve a goal, which can be backed by examples such as his alliance with the Germans, who were at war with the USSR, whose cause was famously admired by Netaji. This theory suggests that had Bose's personal belief system regarding Hinduism aligned with efficient integration of the people for the national cause, he may have very well propagated the Hindu ideal over the secular ideal. Others have already tried to dilute the blood red of his struggle to their preferred shades.

However, this relevance is based on a mountain of assumptions, at the core of which is the idea that Bose's passion for a hands-on approach to working towards public good and his devotion to his religious beliefs and morals come at odds. But this can hardly be the case, as in the very essence of Bose's understanding of Hinduism itself lies the secular spirit of discourse. Thus, in conformity with the principles of Advaita Vedanta, these two parts of Bose had never really been mutually exclusive, rather his relationship with spirituality came to his aid in the integration of all religions under one spiritually charged notion of nationalism.

Pelinka has rightly highlighted that “However, his legacy and his myth and the memory of him fit very well into this India because the political culture in India is characterised by its ability to integrate its own negation” (Pelinka 2003, p.302) and that “Whether the living Bose would have found a role within Indian democracy cannot be known, of course. But the dead Bose has his role” (Pelinka 2003, p.303).

Conclusion

Religion and spirituality have always been an inseparable part of Subhas Chandra Bose as a thinker and a person, to the extent that his unfinished autobiography is titled “An Indian Pilgrim”.

On this journey, he explored innumerable philosophies, challenged numerous theories, and learned about several religions and sects. Netaji's fascination with spirituality bred in him a habit of learning from others' experiences but carving out his own path, questioning the status quo, and fighting for the truth he believed in. These habits went on to shape his worldview and his very understanding of religion. Thus, his pragmatic religious outlook aided Bose in the development of a spiritually charged, uniquely efficient, and practical Indian political philosophy.

Subhasian philosophy is, indeed, scientific in its spirit. And this spirit

continues to live on in the Bharatiya population, long after Netaji has been gone. As Bose himself put it, "One individual may die for an idea, but that idea will, after his death, incarnate itself in a thousand lives." (Correspondent HT 2020)

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