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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Netaji Bose — Revolutionary Nationalism and Its Contemporary Relevance

 **THE HINDU**

23 January 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**HISTORY & CULTURE****POLITY****GS PAPERS****GS1****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS1

GS2

 The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 1

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

“Parakram Diwas was declared to honour Netaji's legacy of courage and action. Critics argue that celebrating Bose's embrace of Axis powers risks valorising questionable alliances. How do you assess Netaji's strategic choices? What lessons does his revolutionary nationalism offer for contemporary India?”

WHY IN NEWS

India observed the 129th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose on January 23, 2026, as Parakram Diwas. The Ministry of Culture organised celebrations at Sri Vijaya Puram (formerly Port Blair) — where Netaji hoisted the Tricolour in 1943 — and 13 other locations nationwide, reviving debate about how India should remember and interpret his legacy.

THE COURAGE OF THE INCONVENIENT FIGURE

There is an almost ritual quality to how democracies commemorate inconvenient heroes: they honour the emotion while sanitising the politics. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose presents India with exactly this challenge. He was the Congress president who was democratically elected and then forced out; the revolutionary who chose Axis alliances as a strategic tool; the military commander whose INA galvanised the country but could not defeat the British on the battlefield.

The celebration of Parakram Diwas is a genuine and well-deserved honour. But honouring Netaji fully — not just emotionally — requires grappling honestly with what he stood for, what he chose, and what those choices cost him.

THE CONGRESS SPLIT OF 1939 — A DEMOCRATIC RUPTURE

The 1939 Tripuri session of the Indian National Congress is one of the most underanalysed moments in the freedom struggle. Bose defeated Pattabhi Sitaramayya in a democratic election for Congress President — Gandhi's preferred candidate lost. Yet Bose could not form a working committee, resigned, and eventually left the Congress entirely.

The deeper issue was about the nature of political authority. Gandhi, who had no formal position in the Congress for much of this period, exercised a veto that superseded democratic procedure. The 1939 episode illustrated both the Congress's strength (it could hold a genuinely contested election) and its structural contradiction (democratic forms could be overridden by the moral authority of an unelected leader).

From Bose's perspective, the Congress was moving too slowly, too cautiously, too deferentially toward British timetables. He wanted a mass-movement ultimatum — give us independence within six months or face mass civil disobedience. Gandhi and Nehru believed the timing was wrong and the British were not yet ready.

History did not vindicate either side fully. Gandhi's non-violent approach ultimately succeeded, but independence came only after Bose's INA, the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny, and the post-war exhaustion of British imperial will. The question of which path was "right" is not easily answered.

THE AXIS ALLIANCE — ETHICS OF WARTIME DESPERATION

Bose's alliance with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan remains the most contested aspect of his legacy. His critics — including some contemporary Indian liberals — argue that alliance with fascist powers was morally indefensible, regardless of the independence goal.

The defence of Bose's choices requires historical contextualisation, not moral evasion:

First, Bose was not ideologically aligned with fascism. He was a democratic socialist who had studied European social democracy and saw in the Soviet and German models tools of economic modernisation, not templates for India's governance. His engagement with Hitler (1942) was transactional — he needed a base, a declaration, and weapons — and he got very little of any of these.

Second, the wartime world presented few clean choices. Britain was simultaneously fighting fascism in Europe and denying freedom to 350 million Indians. India's nationalists made varied strategic choices: Gandhi called for Quit India; Nehru joined the war effort after Pearl Harbor; Ambedkar supported the British war effort as a path to post-war concessions; and Bose sought to use Axis pressure.

What separated Bose was not the willingness to compromise but the scale of risk he took personally. He submarine-transferred between German and Japanese vessels in the Indian Ocean — a journey that could easily have ended his life — because he believed that India needed an armed challenge to complement mass movements.

THE INA'S ACTUAL HISTORICAL IMPACT

The INA failed militarily. The Imphal-Kohima campaign (1944) ended in catastrophe — among the worst defeats suffered by Japanese-aligned forces in the war. Bose's plan to enter India and spark a mass uprising never materialised.

But the INA's **political impact** far exceeded its military failure. When the British decided to try INA officers at the Red Fort in late 1945, they made a catastrophic miscalculation. The trials turned the accused into national heroes. Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh officers stood side by side on trial — Shah Nawaz Khan, P.K. Sehgal, Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon. The communally inclusive symbolism was powerful in an India already heading toward partition.

General Claude Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief of India, wrote privately that “the Indian soldier” could no longer be reliably deployed against Indian nationalists — the INA had altered the political calculus inside the army. This assessment contributed to the British conclusion that holding India was no longer militarily or politically sustainable.

PARAKRAM DIWAS AND THE USES OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

National commemorations serve multiple purposes: they educate, they inspire, and they create identity. The question for Parakram Diwas is what version of Bose it commemorates.

The risk is that Netaji becomes a brand — a symbol of courage disconnected from his specific politics. His democratic challenge to the Congress in 1939; his socialist economic vision; his commitment to a secular, inclusive India (his Azad Hind Government had Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh representation across all leadership posts) — these substantive positions are precisely what make Bose relevant today, not just as a martial icon but as a political thinker.

The opportunity is to use Parakram Diwas for genuine historical education — including the contested, uncomfortable parts of his story — in a way that deepens citizens' understanding of the complexity of freedom struggles, the moral ambiguity of wartime alliances, and the enduring question of ends and means in political action.

A courage that survives honest scrutiny is the only kind worth celebrating.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Tripuri session 1939 (Bose defeats Pattabhi Sitaramayya); Forward Bloc 1939; Azad Hind Govt October 21, 1943 (Singapore); INA trials 1945-46 (Red Fort; Bhulabhai Desai defence; Shah Nawaz Khan, P.K. Sehgal, G.S. Dhillon); Imphal-Kohima campaign 1944; Parakram Diwas declared 2021.

*Netaji in freedom struggle; debate on armed resistance vs non-violence; Congress split 1939; INA's contribution to independence; Axis alliances in context of colonial anti-imperialism. **GS-2:** Democratic vs charismatic authority within political organisations; historical memory and state commemoration.*

FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

KEY DATES:

Born: January 23, 1897, Cuttack

ICS rank 4th 1920; resigned 1921

Congress President: **1938** (Haripura) + **1939** (Tripuri — defeated Pattabhi Sitaramayya 1,580 vs 1,377 votes)

Forward Bloc: **1939**

Great Escape: **January 16–17, 1941**

Met Hitler: **1942**

Azad Hind Govt: **October 21, 1943**, Singapore

Tricolour hoisted Port Blair: **December 30, 1943**

Imphal-Kohima campaign: **1944** (Operation U-Go with Japanese)

Taiwan plane crash: **August 18, 1945**

INA Trials: **1945–46**, Red Fort

Parakram Diwas: **2021** (first observance)

INA TRIALS — ACCUSED AND DEFENCE:

Accused: Shah Nawaz Khan (Muslim), P.K. Sehgal (Hindu), Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon (Sikh) — symbolically inclusive

Defence counsel: **Bhulabhai Desai** (led); Nehru also appeared

Outcome: Charges were ultimately dropped due to political pressure

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Haripura session (1938): Bose's first Congress Presidency; first session with aeroplanes overhead (Nehru piloted one) and electricity

Jawaharlal Nehru was the opposing voice at Tripuri but later reconciled with Bose's legacy

Royal Indian Navy Mutiny (1946): 78 ships, 20,000 sailors; considered a direct outcome of INA's moral influence on Indian soldiers

Auchinleck's internal assessment: Indian soldiers could no longer be reliably used against Indian nationalists

Sources: The Hindu, National Archives of India

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