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Reprinted From

Maharshi Dayanand University Research Journal (Arts)

Volume 4, Number 2, October, 1989

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NEHRU: THE ARCHITECT OF THE MODERN INDIAN STATE

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No account of the rise of India to modern nationhood can be complete without taking into account the contribution of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime-minister. This brief paper seeks to analyse Nehru's role as the builder of modern India in four distinct fields viz. the establishment of parliamentary democracy, building a modern industrial, welfare (socialist) state, setting the foundations of a secular polity and development of science.

Nehru : the Builder of Parliamentary Democracy:

Ever since British rule was established in this country, the British model of parliamentary democracy fascinated educated Indians. All the Congress luminaries right from Dadabhai Naoroji down to Gokhale, Ranade and even Ambedkar had strived for its establishment. Nehru was no exception. Not that he was unfamiliar with alternative models, but for various reasons, he made a deliberate and conscious choice in favour of the British model. In 1946 when the Constituent Assembly debated the question of which road to political development India should adopt, some had argued in favour of a government based on a network of panchayats. However, Nehru and others preferred to opt for the British model of the parliamentary form of government instead. As a consequence, panchati-raj came to find mention only as one of the directive principles of the constitution. Nehru did not share Gandhiji's preference for the panchayat based democracy for two reasons. One was his rather poor opinion of the Indian village as a den of factionalism, casteism and superstition. Second was Nehru's reluctance to bestow too much power to grass-root institutions. Nehru sought to ensure and preserve the newly won independence of the country by having a representative but strongly centralized government.

Nehru was also well acquainted with "Soviet Democracy". In his early years Nehru was considerably influenced by the Marxist doctrine. In his Autobiography Nehru expressed the view that economic interests determine the political ideologies of classes in society and that "neither reason nor moral considerations override these interests."¹ He even claimed that "the theory and philosophy of Marxism lighted up many a dark corner" of his mind. And yet Marxism did not satisfy him completely. In the *Discovery of India* Nehru particularly expresses dissatisfaction with the Marxist doctrine of historical inevitability because it sought to reduce human history "to a rigid logical system with something of the inevitability of fate or *kismet* about it."² Again, Nehru strongly felt that Marxism ignored certain basic urges of the individual which constitute his personality.

Nehru was too much of an innate democrat to accept with equanimity Marxist dogmatism. He was not a value absolutist who believed that there is an absolute truth which men have merely to accept. If anything, he was a value relativist who believed that truth was relative to time, place and circumstances and had to be discovered by free debate and

discussion. In the *Glimpses of World History* Nehru writes, "Can we presume to imagine that we know the whole truth and to force this down the throat of our neighbour. It may be that we are right. It may be that our neighbours are also right."³

For Nehru democracy was a way of life, a way of solving problems by discussion, debate and persuasion. He did not equate democracy with licence. Democracy also implied restraint and self-discipline. Thus when in the early fifties, Nehru the democrat, was forced to introduce the Preventive Detention Bill, he defended it precisely on the ground that the measure had become necessary because the people lacked self-discipline. The measure was necessary to curb the excessive resort to agitations and direct action which had begun to endanger the democratic structure itself.

During his uninterrupted tenure as Prime Minister, Nehru endeavoured to lay the foundations and establish the conventions of parliamentary democracy. Nehru was accepted and treated like a monarch by the people. Had he therefore chosen to become "a life time Caesar" he could have easily done so. But he chose not to. To illustrate: in 1950, Nehru wanted C. Raj Gopalachari to be India's first president, but rather than thrust his choice on reluctant colleagues, he accepted their verdict in favour of Rajendra Prasad. In this context, it may also be recalled that Nehru twice offered to resign as prime-minister, once in 1954 and again in 1958 but was persuaded not to do so.

Again, thanks to Nehru, the attempts at undermining parliamentary democracy by setting up the presidency as a rival centre of power were checkmated. In 1960 Dr. Rajendra Prasad claimed that no provision in the constitution required him to be bound to act on the advice of the Council of Ministers and urged jurists to study the matter. Nehru reacted very strongly to this suggestion. Dismissing the president's remarks as "casual", he clarified that politically and constitutionally the position of the Indian president was akin to that of the British King. Thanks to Nehru not only was the supremacy of the parliament and cabinet maintained but the august office of the President was saved from being politicised.

However, Nehru was responsible for setting up one unhealthy practice which tended to hurt parliamentary democracy and particularly the practice of collective responsibility. This was his tendency to ignore cabinet colleagues when taking vital decisions. In 1956 C.D. Deshmukh resigned as Finance Minister complaining that such vital decisions as the decision on the future of Bombay city and the separation of Andhra from Tamil Nadu, were announced to the public without consulting the cabinet. Nehru of course refuted the charge, but what is important and revealing is that Nehru made an emphatic statement to the effect that he disagreed with Deshmukh's views regarding the powers of the P.M. Nehru contended that the P.M. had every right to make such statements. "The P.M. is the linchpin of government," he said and hence "to say that the P.M. cannot make a statement is a monstrous statement itself."⁴ In short Nehru was trying to justify the P.M. making policy statements of vital concern to the people without cabinet having yet approved of the policy.

Nehru: Builder of a Modern Industrial, Socialist State:

Unlike Gandhi, Nehru had a sense of history. His study of western nations made him realize that political democracy in substance, and not just in form, had followed economic development and not preceded it. Again, thanks to his acquaintance with Marxist doctrines, Nehru realized that political democracy, without an economic content, would be a mere

formal democracy. If democracy was to be meaningful two things were essential; one was economic growth or development, second was economic justice. Just as Nehru was aware that economic growth by itself does not guarantee political democracy he also realized that there could be no political democracy without economic justice. Hence Nehru sought both economic growth and economic justice to give real content to political democracy.

Nehru's model of economic development visualized an emphasis on the development of large scale industry. India was a large country and could not afford to live all the time on foreign aid and imported goods. It had to become a self-sustaining economy. Hence again and again Nehru would talk of the need to industrialize. Now it is to Nehru's credit that he grasped the crucial point that the way to industrialize was by beginning with heavy basic industries, or, what Nehru preferred to call "mother industries," like iron, steel, cement and power. In 1953, he informed the members of the Associated Chambers of Commerce, "If we are going to industrialize this country, we are not going to industrialize it by having a multitude of industries supplying consumer goods. These are useful, no doubt, but if we are to industrialize we have to have certain basic, key, mother industries in the country, the machine-making industry, the steel industry and so on, out of which other industries grow. If we do not do that we shall remain dependent on others."⁵

And Nehru kept on returning to this subject. In the Lok Sabha in 1960 while initiating discussions on the third plan he observed, "A number of textile mills in Ahmedabad or Bombay or Kanpur is not industrialization; it is merely playing with it. I do not object to textile mills; we need them; but our ideas of industrialization will be limited, cribbed, cabined and confined by thinking of these ordinary textile mills and calling it industrialization. Industrialization produces machines, it produces steel, it produces power. They are the base. Once you have that base it is easy to build..... However much we might have built the smaller industries, we would always have to depend on outside aid."⁶

Nehru did not consider such an emphasis as harmful to employment. In his Lok Sabha speech in 1956 he declared, "Every country which boasts of full employment today is a country which is technologically advanced. Each country which is not technologically advanced has unemployment or under employment."⁷

It cannot be said that Nehru's emphasis on "mother industries" was misplaced. This is clear from the fact that long after his death, the shortage in the area of such vital inputs as iron and steel, cement and power, continued. The considerable self-reliance we have achieved in these fields today is due to Nehru's endeavours.

Nor can it be said that Nehru's emphasis on developing the basic or mother industries constituted a lop-sided emphasis on large scale production, or, large industry. In his model there was enough space for the growth of the small and tiny sector too. Thus in his Lok Sabha speech he went on to say that we must have village and small industries on a wider scale producing consumer goods and he gave two reasons for why small industries were necessary (1) "to give employment to large numbers of people" and (2) "to produce goods in large quantities of a certain type for rural areas."

Such a model of economic growth necessitated planning and a public sector with commanding heights. Explaining the inevitability of planning, Nehru stated in his Lok Sabha speech of May 1956 : "The essence of planning is to find the best way to utilize all resources of man-power, of money and so on.... We want to arrive at a stage when we can assess accurately what the next stage is going to be, visualise our problems in advance and take appropriate action before events force our hands."

Nehru, it is said, personally re-wrote a good portion of the draft of the Government of India resolution setting out the terms of reference of the Planning Commission. He did this with a view to establish a direct link between the work of the Commission and the Directive Principles of State Policy embodied in the Constitution. Thanks to this endeavour of Nehru the objectives of the Five Year Plans came to be clearly enunciated as full employment and the avoidance of concentration of wealth and economic power in private hands.

Planning according to Nehru was an instrument for not only allocating scarce resources but also achieving economic justice. If planning was accepted, Nehru had no objection to the private sector because planning (to quote Nehru) "would ensure that the private sector functioned under certain broad strategic controls."⁸ Nehru was opposed to the abolition of the private sector or the so called monopoly houses. He visualised for the private sector a significant role but not a position of "commanding heights" in the economy. He was opposed to the destruction of the private sector because he knew that way led to state socialism and to Soviet style regimentation. In this sense Nehru's model of development may be called a "democratic socialist model." It was not the communist socialist model. In a letter he once wrote to Subash Chandra Bose, Nehru clearly stated that he was opposed to a socialism that destroyed individuality.⁹

Today, with the advantage of hindsight we can say that Nehru did wise in not establishing state socialism. Today, when disillusionment with state socialism is widespread - what with even Russia, China and Vietnam beating a hasty retreat towards market economics - we can better appreciate what Nehru did.

One question often raised regarding the Nehru model of economic development is : did his model neglect agriculture? It is generally said in criticism of Nehru that his model had a lop-sided emphasis on industrialization. This is not true. Even before independence, Nehru had a strong desire to develop the Congress into a vast peasant organization. In fact he accused the Indian communists of neglecting farmers and only associating with industrial workers in big towns. His constant emphasis on co-operative farming also indicates this concern. Secondly, a cursory look at the investment pattern in the Five Year Plans shows that Nehru never neglected agriculture. Thus in the first three plans, the total investment in agriculture was 22.7%, investment in economic infrastructure and power was 37.7%, while investment in social services was 18.1%. In fact the scientific breakthrough in agriculture came during Nehru's life time - thanks to the various irrigation projects, and schemes of land reforms like land ceilings.

Nehru's Endeavours to Develop Science in India:

Nehru had a fervent desire to develop science and science mindedness in India. He described science as "mankind's greatest enterprise." Nehru felt a genuine aversion towards superstition and old time beliefs. On one occasion he openly confessed that he could not understand how or why people could become so enthusiastic to trek miles to bathe in the holy waters in the hope of getting themselves rid of the sin they thought accompanied the capture of the sun or moon by evil spirits. Much before independence Nehru was committed to the development of science and the scientific temper. In the *Discovery of India* Nehru advocated elementary scientific training for all boys and girls. "Only thus can they understand and fit into the modern world and develop, to some extent at least, the scientific temper," he wrote.¹⁰

Nehru was not for a science that destroys life but for a science that builds and enriches human life. In the *Discovery* Nehru informs us that though in the West everyone pays tribute to science, "yet the west is still to bring the spirit and the flesh into creative harmony."¹¹

As for India, Nehru was convinced that it was only by developing the scientific temper and the questioning attitude that India would be able to fight the inertia and stagnation of centuries as well as combat communalism, casteism and rampant superstition. Secondly, Nehru wanted to increase the wealth of India and raise the standards of living of her people, and this could only be done by the application of science to industry. He once told his audience in Bangalore, "Poverty has ceased to be inevitable now because of science."¹² Similarly while writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (7th Sept. 1958) Nehru states, "I do not see any way out of our vicious circle of poverty except by utilizing the new sources of power which science has placed at our disposal."

After independence the Nehru Government left no stone unturned to develop science and foster science awareness. From 1946 till 1964 when he died, Nehru made it a point to religiously attend every annual session of the Indian Science Congress. Explaining the reason Nehru confessed before the scientists gathered at the 1958 Science Congress that although his coming every year might not be doing much good to them, it might nevertheless be doing some good to others who were not interested in science, in inducing them to take some interest in it.

From 1947 to 1950, in addition to being the P.M. and the Minister of External Affairs, Nehru also insisted on being the minister in charge of scientific research. He relinquished this post only in 1951 when the separate Ministry of Natural Resources and Scientific Research was established. In parliament, Nehru would often assume responsibility for presenting and defending the budget demands for scientific research. From the time the Department of Atomic Energy was established within the Government of India in 1954 until his death, Nehru kept that department directly under his charge. He made Dr Homi Bhabha his personal friend and it is reported that Dr. Bhabha would appear on Nehru's appointment-schedule for tea or dinner, as often as twice a week though Bhabha was stationed in Bombay.

Perhaps the most significant step the Nehru government took to build up science and develop scientific research in the country was the setting up of a chain of 31 national research laboratories and the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.

However, two comments can be made regarding Nehru's endeavours to develop science in India. In the first place, the extensive patronage and role played by the Government led to the bureaucratization of scientific institutions. Nehru personally involved himself in the appointment to key posts; he exercised initiative in the inner councils or governing bodies of research institutions and often personally determined the allocation of resources. Perhaps such initiative and involvement was necessary then. However, today, most scientists opine, that the bureaucratization of scientific and research institutions is doing more harm than good to the cause of science and research.

Another factor that Nehru overlooked is that the utilization of science, in the form of technology, is a cultural specific. Nehru did set up research laboratories, but the gap between laboratory research and production was not bridged. Perhaps it would be better to encourage Indian industry to set up in-house research rather than set up applied science research laboratories outside industry.

Nehru's Attempt to Build a Secular India:

Nehru was by temperament and upbringing a secularist. Much before he became the prime-minister, Nehru had expressed his dislike of the "uncritical credulousness" and "the reliance on the supernatural" which he described as the common features of all religions. Thanks to this early skepticism regarding religion, Nehru's nationalism did not acquire any revivalist overtones and was distinct from the spiritual or religious nationalism of Tilak, Dayananda and Vivekanand, or for that matter even Gandhi. In fact, Nehru was often distressed by what he considered Gandhi's attempts to mix religion with politics and his attempts to give a religious colour to things. In the Autobiography, Nehru admits that quite some of Gandhi's phrases like "Ram-rajya" as the Golden Age "jarred upon me."¹³

In 1931 at the Karachi session of the Congress, Nehru was mainly instrumental in drafting the resolution which read, inter alia, "The state shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions." Two decades later in 1950 Nehru saw to it that the spirit of this resolution was embodied in the new constitution. The various clauses of the constitution not only gave all Indian citizens religious freedom but also sought to bring about a separation of religion and politics. While the faithful were given the right to profess, practise and even propagate their faith and all religious institutions the right to hold property, care was simultaneously taken to give powers to the state to regulate the secular activities of religious institutions and to impose reasonable restrictions on religious freedoms in the interest of public health, law and order and morality.

How firmly Nehru was committed to the secular ideal can be seen by contrasting Nehru's political style with that of Jinnah. Like Jinnah, Nehru was fully aware of the hold of religion on the Indian masses, but unlike Jinnah he stoutly refused to exploit it for political purposes or goals. Throughout his life Nehru remained critical of those Congressmen who were communal in nature and exploited religion if situations so demanded.

Nehru saw clearly the dangers, particularly for a country like India, in identifying with any particular religion. Any attempt to identify India with one religion would exclude sections of the population and the excluded elements would harbour feelings of second class citizenship. Secondly, Nehru argued, any attempt to identify India with one faith would give nationalism itself a restricted meaning and then in Nehru's own words "we would have

to consider Hindu nationalism, Muslim nationalism, Sikh nationalism, Christian nationalism and not Indian nationalism".¹⁴ Thirdly, it was Nehru's contention that even if Hindus alone had resided in India, it would still not be easy to dispense with secularism. R.S.S. spokesmen once asked Nehru : Can't we have Hinduism as the state religion and still be tolerant? Panditji's reply was typical. Hinduism of which sect will be the official religion? he countered question, and went on to add, "In view of the highly fragmented nature of Hindu society, India would have needed secularism even if it sheltered the Hindus alone."

On the basis of Nehru's various writings, speeches and action, we can say that he understood secularism in three distinct senses and exerted to promote secularism in all the three senses viz. (a) as the attempt to keep religion out of politics, (b) as equal respect for all religions and (c) as an attempt to transcend the narrow loyalties and identities of caste, creed and region by building a more broad based Indian identity.

Nehru fought communalism tooth and nail throughout his life. Perhaps his only weakness lay in considering majority communalism a far greater danger than minority communalism. He felt that the Hindus given their larger number and economically dominant position could more easily thrust their religious views on the rest of the population and hence he constantly pleaded with Hindus to set the example of secular behaviour and act more generously, thus perhaps unwittingly encouraging minority communalism.

To conclude, Nehru did bequeath this nation a rich legacy viz. a modern, democratic, socialist, secular state. In one sense, Nehru could not have come on the Indian scene at a more opportune time. After the mid-nineteenth century fascination with Western ideas and culture, the Indian Renaissance went back to its Indian roots and there took place a somewhat aggressive revivalism. The rise of Nehru stemmed this tide which could have isolated India from world developments and instead gave Indian nationalism a wider perspective by identifying it with the larger forces of anti-colonialism and economic re-construction.

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