

# The Nehru Years in Indian Politics

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***THE NEHRU YEARS IN INDIAN POLITICS: FROM A  
HISTORICAL HINDSIGHT***

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**The premise**

Not surprisingly, Jawaharlal Nehru's years (1947-1964) as the first Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy have attracted the attention of historians and other social scientists. Most of the works on Jawaharlal have, however, tended to be biographical in nature, and sympathetic in content. The best example of this trend is S. Gopal's three-volume masterpiece. Amongst other historical biographies on Nehru, one should mention B.R. Nanda's The Nehrus, R. Zakaria's edited A Study of Nehru, Michael Brecher's Nehru, a political biography, Norman Dorothy's, Nehru: The First Sixty Years and Frank Moraes' Jawaharlal Nehru: a biography. The latest in the biographical series comes from Judith Brown, and is simply entitled Nehru.

Amongst the books celebrating Nehruvian ideals it also possible to include the earlier works of Rajni Kothari, particularly his Politics In India (1970) where he discussed the Congress system developed under Nehru. Kothari argued that this Congress system signified the dominant core of the country's political institution which allowed for the dominance of a political centre as well as dissent from the peripheries,

with opposition parties functioning as continuations of dissident Congress groups. Kothari celebrated the coalition-building and consensus-making under the leadership of a Nehruvian modernising elite, determined to transform the society and promote economic development. Following the same intellectual tradition another recent work thus describes the years between 1951 and 1964 as ‘those of maturity and achievement’ when ‘the country began to progress in all directions’<sup>1</sup>

Some Soviet scholars like Modeste Rubinstein were also impressed by Nehru’s professed socialist bent of mind. In the words of Rubinstein:  
Two paths were open to the newly liberated countries - the capitalist path and the socialist path. Nehru was an advocate of the socialist path and under his leadership there is the possibility for Indian to develop along socialist lines<sup>2</sup>.

Yet another Indologist in erstwhile Soviet Union Ulyanovsky was equally impressed:

Looking at all the facets of Nehru’s work as a political and public figure, as a philosopher and historian, it should be stressed that all that is best in his legacy - and we are deeply convinced of this - was due to his attraction to socialism and progress, and his interest in scientific socialist theory, which considerably influenced his world-outlook and politics<sup>3</sup>.

We have further Indian representation of this understanding in the writings of such eminent Communist parliamentarians as Hiren Mukherjee who remarked:

It needs to be stressed, however, that whatever his inhibitions and hesitations in the sphere of practice, there was nothing evasive or half-hearted in his concepts of socialism<sup>4</sup>.

Or, take the contention of another Communist theoretician in India,

Mohit Sen:

It is wrong to brand Nehru as a representative of the national bourgeoisie ... One need not question the subjective sincerity of Nehru. He did want to make India a modern, socialist society<sup>5</sup>.

However, we do have critics of Nehru too, and, they come from two extremes: the ultra rightists who condemn Nehru to be a pseudo-secular and pseudo-socialist the and the Communist commentators like Zhukov and Dyakov who would regard Nehru as a representative of the reformist and class collaborationist trend in Indian politics. To quote Zhukov:

The Nehru Government orientates itself in its policy not only towards London, but also towards Washington and is participating actively I the formation of the Pacific or the East-Asian Bloc which is to be a continuation of the aggressive North Atlantic Pact which serves the aim of preparing for a new world war<sup>6</sup>.

This advocacy was in consonance with the understanding of such Indian Communist leaders as Ajoy Ghosh or CPI intellectuals such as Narahari Kaviraj who asserted that Nehru pursued in independent India nothing but the capitalist path<sup>7</sup>.

Clearly the time is ripe for an assessment of Nehru's career in politics which attempts to chart a path somewhere between these variously partisan accounts. To begin, it is desirable to commence where the standard biographies end. Rather than develop a discourse that revolves around the personality of Nehru, an alternative entry point could

be the process of nation-building in India, with which Nehru more than any one else became deeply involved.

### **Nehru and nation-building**

Most Third World states are artificial creations of the departing European powers. Consequently, in most of these successor states, which were inevitably pluralist states, there did not occur a convergence between the state and the nation. The territorial boundaries of these new state usually did not pay sufficient attention to ethnicity, indigenous historical divisions or even, at times, geography. In such circumstances the ruling classes of these states had to undertake, what has come to be known, as a nation-building process. This was also seen in India, and in this process Nehru occupies a seminal position. For Nehru was not only a leading light of the nationalist struggle, but he became the first Prime Minister of independent India, guiding the destiny of this country for a little less than two decades.

Throughout the nationalist struggle Nehru symbolised the left and secular force within the Indian National Congress. His visit to the USSR in 1927 gave him a first hand experience of socialist experiment which he always cherished. He remained the staunchest critic of fascism and Nazism and he himself went to Spain to boost the morale of the republicans fighting in the Spanish Civil War. He proved to be a source of inspiration especially for the youth and subordinated sections of the Indian society, and when the truncated settlement was imposed on the subcontinent on the midnight of the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 it was this

firebrand nationalist who through his historic ‘Tryst with Destiny’ speech proclaimed to the world India’s awakening as a free nation. We recall here his role in introducing planned economy, initiating the process of industrialisation, developing science and technology, trying to rear an apparatus of political democracy and endeavouring to foster a secular spirit<sup>8</sup>. Nehru deserves the credit of legitimising the status of Congress leadership in post-colonial India by trying to create ‘the developmental state’<sup>9</sup>. Again, as one of the founding fathers of the Non-aligned movement Nehru made India a force to reckon with in international politics. It is thus often said that today, when India is faced with challenges to its economic political sovereignty and threats to the secular credentials of Indian constitution, that we need to return to the basic Nehruvian values of secularism, pluralism and welfarism and non-alignment to help the country out of its’ present crisis.

There were thus positive facets of Nehru’s contribution to nation-building in India. But the story does not end there, for Nehruvianism also witnessed certain distortions in India’s nation-building process and much of the present day dichotomies in Indian polity are to be found rooted in these distortions. It is important to highlight of these facets of Nehruvism,. But in the process I would hope that my critique of the Nehruvian system does not become confused with the current communalist criticism of Nehruvism. While the sectarian political forces which have unfortunately wrested control of the Indian state take to task the progressive features of Nehruvism, my own critique would rest on the premise that Nehru did not become as progressive as he could have been.

That instead, there were significant gaps between what Nehru preached and what remained the ground reality.

The following negative traits in Nehruvian polity can readily be identified: (i) a basic element of continuity with the British style of governance; (ii) the strengthening of the Right in the Congress ; (iii) the establishment of the governmental supremacy over the Party and (iv) the victory of political centralism within Indian federalism.

### **1: Continuities between colonial and Nehruvian regimes**

It can be reasonably argued that despite certain obvious outward changes in forms of governance or employment of new political hyperbolas, the Indian government under Jawaharlal Nehru represented in many respects a continuation of British attitudes both in form and substance. Hamza Alavi has shown that like other post-colonial regimes the Indian state was ‘overdeveloped’<sup>10</sup>. The British Raj had reared a repressive state apparatus which exceeded the needs of an ‘underdeveloped and poor post-colonial state’. The Congress government after 1947 unfortunately chose not to ‘develop an alternative State structure’, but maintain the police, paramilitary and other civil organisations inherited from the British<sup>11</sup>. Studies by scholars like Betelheim<sup>12</sup> show, the administrative system in independent India ‘was renewed without being remodelled, thus retaining many of the colonial system’s imperfections’. The Indian people were thus in most cases ‘confronted with the same civil servants, the same policemen who treated them with the same scorn and brutality as under British rule’. N.K. Bose,

by no means a leftist critic of the Indian polity, thus summarised the situation in the late 1950s:

... by virtue of the circumstances of peaceful transfer of power, the Congress inherited an administrative structure which it tried to use for a new purpose. Its idea became, not to disrupt the status quo, but to build up its 'socialistic pattern' of economy on the foundation of the existing order without a violent disturbance. In this prosaic task of reformation, the Congress party ... had tried to convert every problem of national reconstruction into an administrative problem ... The identification of the Congress with the status quo, even if the ultimate intention may be of using it as a spring-board for reform ... has made the organisation unpopular ... The loss of ethical quality in the contemporary endeavours of the Congress in the reorganisation of its party machinery, or in the matter of running an old administrative machinery without sufficient proof of desire or capability of reforming the latter, has created a kind of frustration, and even of cynicism amongst those who had made the attainment of political freedom synonymous with the advent of social revolution or moral regeneration<sup>13</sup>. (Bose 1958)

This element of continuity between colonial and immediate post-colonial regimes in India becomes particularly evident from the Nehru-led Congress government's relationship with the police and military. This relationship signified a shift from 'ostensible antagonism until 1947 to increasing interdependence ... in the post-colonial period'<sup>14</sup>. Between 1949 and 1950 the Congress government at Delhi used about 12,000 armed police personnel to curb the Telengana peasant upsurge; in the first decade of independence as many as 800 recorded deaths resulted directly from police actions during the same period; the police expenditure of Indian government increased from Rs.9 million in 1951-52 to Rs.800 million in 1970-71; and the army assisted civil authorities to



restore order on 476 occasions between 1947 and 1970 and 350 times between 1980 and 1983<sup>15</sup>.

It can readily be argued that the historical context of this element of continuity between the departing British regime and the new regime under Nehru was created during the working of Congress provincial ministries in the aftermath of the 1936 elections., a period when Nehru with Gandhi's blessings was at the helm of Congress affairs. Recent studies have demonstrated that the Congress election machinery set up to contest the 1936 legislative elections had a distinct conservative leverage. Candidates were generally selected from local businessmen, contractors and landlords who could not only take care of their own campaigns but also replenish the party's exchequer<sup>16</sup>. Defections from non-Congress parties were also encouraged in provinces where the party's organisation was not yet strong<sup>17</sup>. This process 'increased the strength of the conservatives'<sup>18</sup>. and it was this section inside the party which clinched political power when the Congress formed ministries initially in the six provinces of Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, Orissa, Bihar, United Provinces and later in the North-West Frontier Provinces and Assam.

The rightist orientation of Congress ministers was reflected in similarities between their style of functioning and that of the preceding British officers<sup>19</sup>.. Several members of the I.C.S. noted with relief that 'fire-eating agitators' had turned into 'responsible ministers'. D.

Symington, for instance, observed this metamorphosis in Bombay:

It was a momentous occasion when, in the month of April, we came under the rule of the party which had been agitating against the British Raj for more than twenty years.

But, if anyone at the time expected dramatic and revolutionary changes, he was in for an anticlimax. Our new Government had enough sense and experience to realise that nine-tenths of its work would lie in the field of day-to-day administration, and that spectacular reform must be a fringe activity<sup>20</sup>.

C.H. Masterman, then a Secretary in the Madras secretariat, had a roughly similar story to tell when he proudly noted: 'He (Rajaji) told me once that he had much greater confidence in the judgement of his British secretaries than in his Indian colleagues'<sup>21</sup>..

This element of continuity between the 1936-37 Congress ministries and their British predecessors could be also felt in respective reactions to various strands of popular protest. By December 1937 the Congress governments were faced with a dilemma: while the Kisan Sabhas - enthused by the formation of 'popular regimes' - pressed for fundamental agrarian reforms, the landlords urged the Congress to contain the 'radical elements'<sup>22</sup>. The Congress choice proved to be more with the latter than the former. In Bihar the 'credibility' of the Tenancy Act was considerably undermined when the Congress submitted to landlord pressures at every stage of the legislation<sup>23</sup> which prompted Sir C.P.N. Sinha to remark appreciatively:

the Government in Bihar ... were very reasonable and some concessions were secured by zamindars in Bihar which no other Government would have allowed<sup>24</sup>.

In this context Rajendra Prasad's advice to the Bihar peasants is worth quoting: 'The Kisans should maintain those relations with their landlords which were in existence. They should not create any friction

with the landlords'<sup>25</sup> Sardar Patel went a step further when he warned in April 1938:

We do not want a Lenin here ... Those who preach class hatred are enemies of the country<sup>26</sup>.

The Bihar government even imitated the Raj in undertaking a vilification crusade against popular Kisan Sabha activists, and Congressmen in such 'trouble-prone' districts as Saran were instructed to shun all association with the Kisan Sabha. In the United Provinces too there was throughout the 1930s 'a steady movement towards Congress by landlord elements'<sup>27</sup>. The Madras government of Rajagopalachari did not likewise hesitate to prosecute such prominent Socialist leaders as Yusuf Meherally and S.S. Batliwala<sup>28</sup>. Likewise, the Bombay Home Minister K.M. Munshi followed the British practice of using the Criminal Investigation Department against Communists and other leftist political agitators<sup>29</sup>.

The Ministry period coincided with an upswing of labour militancy: a 158% rise in strikes and lockouts; a 131% increase in the number of strikers; and a 230% upward swing in the curve of mandays lost<sup>30</sup>. The Congress governments, however, sought to tackle this situation not by supporting the labour against capital but 'by a system of government sponsored arbitration', and this strategy found its best reflection in the Bombay government's Industrial Disputes Act of November 1938. Strikes or demonstrations in Bombay were now met with police brutality. In Madras the government pursued a 'policy of internal settlement', and this meant accommodation with employers' interests. A case-study of labour dispute in the Tata Iron and Steel Company demonstrates how the Bihar ministry's policy of 'compromise

and restraint' remained silent on the 'Company misdeeds' but emphasised 'maintenance of discipline in the works'. The UP government employed the section 144 of the Criminal Procedural Code - the very law introduced by the Raj for counteracting nationalist agitations - to imprison Kanpur labour leaders. At the behest of the Congress High Command a new organisation - the Hindustan Mazdoor Sabha - was also established in 1938 to counteract non-Congress and Leftist influence within the trade union movement. These moves were intended to assure the indigenous capitalists of protection 'from an assertive labour force'.<sup>31</sup>

R.P. Dutt was not wide off the mark when he remarked:

The dominant moderate leadership in effective control of the Congress machinery and of the Ministries was in practice developing an increasing cooperation with imperialism ... (and) acting more and more openly in the interests of the upper class landlords and industrialists, and was showing an increasingly marked hostility to all militant expression of forms of mass struggle ... Hence a new crisis of national movement began to develop<sup>32</sup>.

Many biographers of Nehru would argue that inside the Congress Jawaharlal privately expressed his unhappiness at the way the Congress governments dealt with popular protest. On 28 April 1938 he wrote to Gandhi:

I feel strongly that the Congress ministries are ... adapting themselves far too much to the old order and trying to justify it ... we are losing the high position that we have built up ... in the hearts of the people. We are sinking to the level of ordinary politicians who have no principles to stand by and whose work is governed by a day to day opportunism<sup>33</sup>.

On another occasion Jawaharlal noted:

The Congress has now attracted into its fold thousands who are not eager for achieving Swaraj or to join the fight, but

are merely seeking personal gains ... (The) Congress has lost the ... opportunity of action, of fighting imperialism directly and thus of deriving more strength<sup>34</sup>.

Such confessions, however, left little institutional impact on the party since Jawaharlal and his group refused to make public their critique of the Congress governments on the pretext 'We cannot agitate against ourselves'<sup>35</sup>. He even cast aspersions on such Kisan Sabha leaders as Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, remarking:

We find today all manner of strange people who have never had anything to do with the peasantry before, talking in terms of programmes of trying in their uncouth way to woo the peasantry. Even political reactionaries of the deepest dye discuss unctuously agrarian programmes<sup>36</sup>.

Attention ought also be drawn to Nehru's reaction to the rising militancy of peasant nationalism in the 1930s:

The movement of the peasants no doubt deserves our support; but if peasants' councils mushroom like this here, there, and everywhere, that will harm the freedom movement led by the Congress<sup>37</sup>.

Besides this, Jawaharlal did not dispute the All India Congress Committee resolution of September 1938 which warned those who 'have been found in the name of civil liberty to advocate murder, arson, looting and class war by violent means'<sup>38</sup>. This was presumably done to provide organisational sanction for the use of state force by provincial Congress governments against protest politics. In fact, by 1938 the Right inside the Congress gleefully noted: 'Jawaharlalji has been veering around to our view and the differences which used to be so marked between his

viewpoint and ours on many points is less prominent today<sup>39</sup>. Vallabhbhai

Patel was more candid when he wrote to Gandhi:

He (Jawaharlal) has done wonderful work, and has been burning the candle at both ends. We found not the slightest difficulty in co-operating with him and adjusting ourselves in co-operating with him and adjusting to his views ...<sup>40</sup>

To Sardar Patel none else but Gandhiji wrote as early as 1934:

Jawaharlal's explosion is not as frightening as it seems from the flames. He had a right to let off steam which he has exercised. I think he has calmed down now<sup>41</sup>.

Shortly before independence Gandhi made yet another prophetic remark when he wrote to Nehru:

You have no uncertainty about the science of socialism but you do not know in full how you will apply it when you have the power<sup>42</sup>.

The stage was being set for Nehru to become the epitomical figure providing a centrist leadership to a Right dominated post-1947 Indian National Congress.

## **2: The strength of the right within the Nehruvian Congress**

In all his theoretical exercises Nehru considered socialism as the panacea for India's social and economic distress. To quote him:

I am convinced that the only key to the solution of world's problems and India's problems lies in socialism and when I use this word I do not use it in a vague humanitarian way but as a scientific economic doctrine ... I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and subjection of Indian people except through socialism ... That means ending of private property except in a restricted sense and the replacement of the present profit system by a

higher idea of cooperative service. It means ultimately a change in our instincts, habits and desires. In short it means a new civilisation radically different from the present capitalist order<sup>43</sup>.

Commentators have thus drawn attention to Nehru's endeavours in creating the institutional and policy framework to realise his vision of a 'new egalitarian and more prosperous society'<sup>44</sup>. But what was the ground reality? Despite his 'leftist' pretensions, Jawaharlal opted in the Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 for a 'socialistic' and not a 'socialist' pattern of society. The panacea was found in Five Year Plans and a mixed economy. What actually followed was 'a move towards state capitalism' with considerable participation by the private sector. To the secretary to the Planning Commission Nehru thus once wrote:

It should be our endeavour to effect enormous transformation without challenging the existing order<sup>45</sup>.

In another context he explicated his stand thus:

There is of course no question of doing away with private capital, though it has to be controlled in the interests of the people<sup>46</sup>.

Even S. Gopal admits that by the end of the day 'terms like capitalism and socialism had ... for Nehru lost their ideological edge'<sup>47</sup>. The following table demonstrates the importance of the private sector during Nehru's stewardship of the country:

	<b>First Five Year Plan</b>	<b>Second Five Year Plan</b>
	(Crores of rupees in current prices)	

<i>Public Expenditure</i>	55	938
<i>Private Expenditure</i>	283	850

**Source:** A. Chaudhuri, Private Economic Power in India: A Study in Genesis and Concentration (People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1975) p.160.

In fact, according to one estimate about nine-tenths of the total domestic product came from the private sector at the close of the Third Plan period while the public sector's share increased by only 4% in the first fifteen years of India's independence. In terms of the relative contribution to the National Income the picture was similar: the private sector's contribution ranged between 90% in 1950-1951 and 85% in 1960-1961, while the public sector's ratio increased from 7.4% in 1950-1951 to only 10.7% in 1960-1961. The few top business houses with a strong communal and regional character - 20 according to the Mahalanobis estimate and 75 according to the Monopolies Inquiry Commission Report of 1965 - retained a controlling voice in the economy; the public sector failed to meet its designated goals of self-sufficiency and balanced economic development<sup>48</sup>. Besides, the foreign capital transactions throughout this period had been considerable: the volume of direct foreign investment rose from Rs.2,176 million in 1948 to Rs.6,185 million in 1964. The share of foreign companies in gross profits of the Indian corporate sector also increased from 29.8% in 1959-60 to 33.3% in 1962-63<sup>49</sup>. Realising the growing importance of private sector in Nehruvian economy the Congress Socialist leader \* **Jayaprakash** Narayan bluntly reminded Nehru:



You want to go towards socialism but you want the capitalists to help you in that. You want to build socialism with the help of capitalism<sup>50</sup>.

Yet another perceptible pro-Congress commentator D.R. Gadgil noted in his 1962 Convocation Address at Nagpur University:

The dominance of the rich and the influential in all projects and programmes was a marked feature of the Indian situation. The private sector was expanding with the help of the state, which made no effort to control it. Production before distribution was a plausible thesis, but it was very doubtful if this could later be reversed to secure distributive justice. A group of leading capitalists had virtually taken over the economy, politics and society. The 'ugly businessman' was the major character on the Indian scene, making large profits, promoting corruption, securing the support of officials and manipulating the administrative machinery<sup>51</sup>.

Nehru is said to have privately endorse this observation and even admitted that some of his basic social engineering schemes like land reforms had turned out to be a joke<sup>52</sup>. A part of the failure of land reform was Nehru's decision to continue paying privy purses of Rs.5.5 crores to the princes while allowing them to retain their huge estates. In some cases, where surplus land was vested with the government, the quantum of compensation was such that on an average the additional revenue of the state government as a result of the process would be a bare 4.71% of the total compensation paid. This was pointed out by the Congress leader H.D. Malaviya himself<sup>53</sup>. Moreover, by the end of the 1950s the burden of taxes on agriculturists had increased as much as 400% in most areas while the price of primary products had registered a downward trend, further adding to the misery of the rural population<sup>54</sup>.

An important effect of the absence of land reforms was the non-development of an internal market for industrial goods which jeopardised planned industrial growth. The Planning Minister Gulzarli Nanda in Nehru's cabinet thus made the following significant statement on 12 October 1953:

On the one hand, there was the complaint that the country did not produce enough consumption goods. But when they increased production and took credit for it, they were suddenly faced with accumulation of stocks<sup>55</sup>.

Even the otherwise pro-Nehru biographer Gopal acknowledged: the planned development under Nehru's regime did not pave the way for socialism but promoted capitalist enterprise in both industry and agriculture<sup>56</sup>.

Significantly enough, state capitalism as it developed in India, received the tacit approval of leading indigenous industrialists. As early as 1944 G.D. Birla, J.R.D. Tata, A.D. Shroff and John Mathai had formulated the Bombay Plan which was not much different from the 1951 draft outline of the First Five Year Plan. The Indian bourgeoisie rapidly carved out its own niche within the Congress. Not surprisingly, subsidies for the party's organisational work were forthcoming from all major business houses. In 1957-58 alone the Tata Electric Company had contributed Rs.300,000 to the Congress party's coffers. The industrialists also liberally supported the Congress in times of national and provincial elections. During the 1962 poll - the last to be held under Nehru's premiership - the three highest declared donations to the Congress were from the Tata and Birla groups (Rs.1.0 million each) and a cement

company (Rs.500,000)<sup>57</sup>. Financial connections between the Congress and Indian industrialists were such that the latter were not apprehensive of Nehru's socialist jargons and in 1956 Birla is on record as having expressed his agreement with Congress socialist ideals<sup>58</sup>. Six years later and two years before Jawaharlal's death Tulsidas Kilachand, the spokesperson of the Indian bourgeoisie, more confidently announced:

The business community is in complete agreement with the socialistic objectives of the government and there are no two opinions on that score. There is no fundamental or ideological difference between the business community and the government<sup>59</sup>.

Some scholars have opined that conservative sections within the Congress prevented Nehru from pushing through many of his socialistic schemes, but one wonders how far we can push this argument. Rather, it seems that Nehru was more interested in preserving the unity of the party by adopting a centrist posture. After all, the Congress ideology from its inception aimed to harmonise the conflicting interests of classes and groups. An inevitable upshot of such a compromising approach was a substantial rise in the absolute number of people below the poverty line, accompanied by a high degree of concentration of wealth. There are reasons to fear that the size of the poor by the turn of the century will be found to have exceeded the total population of the country at the time of independence<sup>60</sup>. The dreams of better standards of living for the common multitude in independent India are thus far from being fulfilled and Nehru's middle of the path economic policy has much to answer for this discomfiture of the country.

The sustenance of the conservative lobby within the Congress party during the Nehru years was facilitated by a particular method of decision-making within the Congress. This was the reliance on consensus and it helped the Right to continue its stranglehold on the party. Why? Because there was a 3:1 ratio in favour of the Patel-led conservatives in the Congress Working Committee since the mid-1950s and the modus operandi of consensus proved to be propitious in maintaining the force of the status quo. What followed was a 'sort of democratic centralism', where the Right-wingers could make their weight felt, while the 'Left' minority had to be satisfied with concessions. Thus, while Nehru adopted an anti-capitalist and anti-landlord stance in his public pronouncements, he refrained from incorporating such sentiments in the party's election manifesto and restricted himself to such vague assurances as lowering of land rents. Similarly, when his eulogy of socialism in election speeches invited the wrath of the business community he hastened to clarify that his mention of socialism was only 'incidental'<sup>61</sup>. Compromise with the Right for the sake of consensus remained the persistent trait in Nehru's political life as the first Prime Minister of free India, and Nehru himself acknowledged: 'My politics had been those of my class, the bourgeoisie'<sup>62</sup>.

Judith Brown contends:

By the end of Nehru's life the Congress at its base was no longer an elite, urban party, but reflected the diversity of Indian society, and partly the numerical socio-economic significance of substantial rural caste groups<sup>63</sup>

I would, however, go further to argue that a particular shift in power that we notice within the Congress in the Nehruvian period was a

shift from urban and intellectual groups to a new rural-urban mix of medium size landowning dominant castes, cultivating owners and superior tenantry, small town middling groups and the upper middle classes in the larger cities, especially the new industrial and commercial classes. What is important is that this shift helped buttress the influence of conservatives within the Congress party<sup>64</sup>. Apart from this, the hegemony of the Right within the Congress High Command was further guaranteed by a systematic marginalisation of dissent. The manner in which the Socialists under Acharya Narendra Dev were forced to secede from the parent body in 1948, and certainly not without Nehru's support is a case in point. When in 1948 the Socialists, following their resignations from Congress, surrendered their seats in the UP legislature and sought re-elections, the Congress mobilised its new 'electoral machinery and patronage resources' to defeat all thirteen Socialist candidates and prove the 'political wilderness' of the opposition<sup>65</sup>. This trend of exploiting official power to dismember opposition within the Party was carried to its perfection by none other than Jawaharlal's daughter Mrs. Indira Gandhi, of course, with disastrous consequences for Indian democracy. The Congress no longer symbolised national aspiration in its widest sense but became a party 'representing its members and those who voted for it'<sup>66</sup>.

### **3: Nehru and the Congress-government relationship**

Contradictions between the Congress party and the government it ran can be traced back to 1946 when Jawaharlal Nehru - on being appointed the leader of the Interim Government in 1946 - had to

surrender the Congress presidency. The new Congress President \***Acharaya** J.B. Kripalani - perhaps because of his close links with the Congress central office - demanded that all important pronouncements by Congress members of the Interim Ministry should receive prior ratification by the Congress President and the Working Committee. On the other hand, Jawaharlal was acutely conscious of the 'co-ordinating and leadership' roles of a Prime Minister in a cabinet form of government and he looked for a limited role of the party. The Nehru-Kripalani differences reached a crisis point when Kripalani publicly disapproved of the government's 'timidity' towards Pakistan, advocated an economic blockade of Kashmir, and demanded revocation of 'standstill agreements' with the Hyderabad Nizam<sup>67</sup>. Such overt reprobation of government's policy presaged Kripalani's resignation from the Congress presidency in November 1947. In a moving speech before the AICC delegates Kripalani thus emphasised the ideological content of his stand against government's supremacy over the party:

If there is no free and full co-operation between the Governments and the Congress organisation the result is misunderstanding and confusion, such is prevalent to-day in the ranks of the Congress and in the minds of the people. Nor can the Congress serve as a living and effective link between the Government and the people unless the leadership in the Government and in the Congress work in closest harmony. It is the party which is in constant touch with the people in villages and in towns and reflects changes in their will and temper. It is the party from which the Government of the day derives its power. Any action which weakens the organisation of the party or lowers its prestige in the eyes of the people must sooner or later undermine the position of the Government ....<sup>68</sup>

Judged in historical hindsight, the exit of Kripalani was a foretaste for the future. His interim successor Rajendra Prasad rendered an yeoman's service to Nehru by neutralising the Party's challenge to its parliamentary wing. The next President Pattabhi Sitaramayya, too, accepted the restricted role of the Party in his Presidential address before the Jaipur session of the Congress with the following words:

A Government must govern and is therefore concerned with the problems of the day, and with the passions of the hour. Its work is concrete, its solutions must be immediate... The Congress is really the Philosopher while the Government is the Politician... That is why the Government of the day requires the aid of unencumbered thinking<sup>69</sup>.

It is true that there was a bid to retain the supremacy of the organisational wing of the Party in August 1950 when P.D. Tandon won the presidential election, despite Nehru's covert opposition. This was the time when India was confronted with political turbulence caused by communal violence in East Pakistan and the influx of Hindu refugees into West Bengal, which strengthened Hindu conservative forces inside the Congress. Driven by a fear that the new Congress President might infringe upon governmental prerogatives, however, Nehru fomented a crisis by resigning from the Working Committee on the pretext that Tandon had alienated nationalist Muslims like Kidwai. The consequence that followed was preordained: Tandon's forced resignation and his replacement by Nehru himself in September 1951. This episode virtually ended the party-Government struggle and confirmed the primacy of the Prime Minister in the Indian polity.

Viewed from a historical perspective, this trend of replacing a potential recalcitrant president by a more 'manageable' one, evidenced initially after the Tripuri Congress and replicated in Kripalani's resignation in 1947 and Tandon's exit in 1951, foreshadowed the growth of the dynastic cult of the Nehru-Gandhi family which provided a spurious stability to Indian polity in post-independent India. Henceforth, Jawaharlal saw to it that each of the Congress Presidents after 1954 - U.N. Dhebar (1954-9), Mrs. Indira Gandhi(1959-60), Sanjiva Reddy (1960-2) and D. Sanjivayya (1962-4) - belonged to the 'secondary generation' of Congressmen who were not yet distinguished enough to question the Prime Minister. The new line of Congress Presidents readily accepted their subordinate position. In the words of U.N. Dhebar:

It is a mistake to consider that there is a dual leadership in the country. India, for the last forty years, has been accustomed to think in terms of a single leadership and by the grace of God, we have been endowed with men who had borne the brunt out of consideration or service to the country singularly well. There is only one leader in India today and that is Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Whether he carries the mantle of Congress Presidentship on his shoulders or not, ultimately, the whole country looks to him for support and guidance<sup>70</sup>.

From such eulogies of Nehru's supreme leadership, the authoritarian slogan of 'One Nation, One Leader' of the Emergency days was but a short step.

Many commentators, including Judith Brown, refer to Nehru's conscious efforts to establish his authority within the Congress in the context of an ideological need to counteract conservative thinking within



the party<sup>71</sup>. I would submit, however, that we need not discount Nehru's determination to imprint his personal stamp on the Congress party as a possible factor behind the Government-Party tussle. In August 1963 an attempt was indeed undertaken to enhance the Party's influence over the government through, what came to be known as 'the Kamaraj Plan'. The idea was to revert back government ministers to party positions after a certain tenure and vice versa. Jawaharlal sympathised with the theory, but hardly put his weight behind its implementation. Instead, his colleagues like Moraji Desai alleged that he used the Kamaraj Plan to remove all possible contenders 'from the path of his daughter, Indira Gandhi'<sup>72</sup>. Besides, the Kamaraj Plan created a new dispossessed group within the Congress who had been deprived of their ministerial positions. This increased intra-party factional squabbles. The spirit of the Kamaraj Plan was thus greatly lost.

Interestingly enough, during the entire period of Congress Party-government conflict a contradiction between theory and practice was clearly manifest in Nehru's political discourse which left a deep impact on the country's emerging political system. Jawaharlal had at one stage agreed in principle to the objection that the high offices of Prime Minister and Congress President should not be held by the same person. But when he was offered the Congress Presidency, once in 1951 and again in 1953, he accepted it on the supposed grounds of having 'no alternative'. In his Presidential address before the fifty-eighth session of the Congress Jawaharlal thus placed the onus on his party colleagues and the emergent political situation:

I am here at your bidding ... And yet, I feel a little unhappy once again as Congress President ...I tried hard that this

should not occur and pleaded with my comrades ... to make some other choice, but their insistence and the circumstances were against me in this matter. I felt that for me to go on saying 'No' in spite of the advice of so many of my valued colleagues, would not be proper<sup>73</sup>.

But the political crisis, as we had seen, which led to Nehru's assumption of the dual responsibility of the country's premiership and Congress leadership largely resulted from his perceived threat to the maintenance of his unquestioned political supremacy. Power politics rather than ideological rigidity appear to have determined Nehru's approach to the question of Party-government relationships.

The same lesson was driven home when Indira Gandhi was 'unanimously' elected the Congress President in 1959. Nehru reportedly initially expressed 'surprise' at the idea, remarking:

I gave a good deal of thought to this matter and I came to the conclusion that I should firmly keep apart from this business and not try to influence it in a way except rather generally and broadly to say that it had disadvantages ... it is not a good thing for my daughter to come in as Congress President when I am Prime Minister. (Times of India, Delhi, 8 February 1959).

Yet, he never vetoed the proposal, knowing full well that none could be chosen as the Congress President without his explicit concurrence. Perhaps Nehru thought it more expedient to ensure a convergence between the offices of Prime Minister and Congress President rather than to uphold a pious theoretical premise. Seeds of the future 'dynastic democracy' had thus begun sprouting.

Nevertheless, the triumph of Nehruvian centralism was not total, even among the Prime Minister's closest followers. During the last days of his presidency U.N. Dhebar, for instance, had expressed uneasiness at the increasing 'bossism' of 'government leaders in party matters'<sup>74</sup>. He even publicly called Nehru to task for intolerance with 'party criticism'. Sanjiva Reddy went a step further to regret that as a Congress President he was treated 'as Mrs. Gandhi's chaprasi'<sup>75</sup>, thus hinting that what lay at the root of the issue was not only a bid to maintain Nehru's personal supremacy but a dynastic dominance. It needs, however, to be stressed that this cleavage between the organisational and governmental wings of the Congress could be found in the case of most of the parties which assumed power following a process of decolonisation that experienced no telescoping of political and social revolutions. Sukarno of Indonesia, Nasser of Egypt, Kenyatta of Kenya and Nkruma of Ghana - all sought centralisation of personal authority, causing erosion of the efficacy of their respective political parties.

#### **4: Nehru and the ascendance of political centralism**

Professor Brown aptly remarks: 'To Nehru the role of the state was paramount in the achievement of change'<sup>76</sup>. Extending this contention, I would argue that when Jawaharlal imparted an overtly centralised character to the Indian state a certain dichotomy followed. The political system that developed under Nehru had a particular duality. On the one hand, the country imbibed one of the world's broadest spectrum of political formations. On the other hand, the establishment of Congress hegemony resulted in an one-party political order. The Congress party

won impressive majorities in each parliamentary election and maintained a considerable organisational strength outside the legislatures; the opposition groups, except the Communists and Jana Sangh (now the BJP), were mostly formed by rebels from the Congress itself, many of whom either rejoined the parent body or became champions of local interests. The opposition groups failed to present a united national front against Nehru, thus enabling the Congress to corner 60-80% of parliamentary seats without winning 50% of the votes cast. The Congress dominance came to coexist with ‘competition but without a trace of alternation’<sup>77</sup>.

Social scientists have pondered over possible reasons behind the ability of the Congress under Nehru to establish its hegemony over India’s political space. Some have argued that social complexities and ambiguities prevented the growth of sufficient class polarisations and other contradictions that could ‘fracture’ the all-embracing alliance of interests represented in the Congress<sup>78</sup>. Others connect the Congress success to its reliance on the spirit of conciliation, a traditionally revered value in Indian society<sup>79</sup>. But the most plausible clue to the strength of Nehruvian Congress probably lay in its management skill: its ability to co-opt discontented social groups through the apparent maintenance of democratic rites and display of concern for minorities and backward communities<sup>80</sup>.

In reality Nehru accepted opposition so long as it remained ‘diffused and articulated within the orbit of the Congress system’<sup>81</sup>. Each non-Congress provincial regime thus fell victim to the hegemony drive of

the Nehruvian Congress party. Between 1952 and 1964 Nehru imposed President's Rule (a constitutional term for Central Rule) on federal units at least five times either to dislodge non-Congress Chief Ministers \* (PEPSU 1953; Kerala 1959) or to offset the collapse of merger moves between the Congress and non-Congress groups (Andhra Pradesh 1954; Kerala 1956; Orissa 1961). In fact, Nehru's 1953 election slogan of 'The Congress is the country and the country is the Congress' was sought to be imparted as the national political spirit.

The one party domination under Nehru thus distorted the functioning of Indian federalism. Undue political, administrative and financial centralisation under the Congress guidance became the hallmark of the Indian polity. 'The most important state leaders were attracted to the Centre, and the Centre had enough prestige to bring local party leaders and legislators into line'<sup>82</sup>. State governors were inevitably 'hand-picked' by the Centre; efforts were always undertaken to have 'malleable' Chief Ministers even at the cost of elevating personalities with no local base, as was the case with installation of Dr. Katju in Madhya Pradesh by Nehru in 1963. Such a centrist process, smacking of the Viceregal Style, has been called 'the dominance of gubernatorial politics'<sup>83</sup>. The Planning Commission which formulated the Five Year Plans, the Finance Commission that allocated financial resources for the states, the University Grants Commission which oversaw the higher education, the All India Radio that ran the broadcasting network - all these were and are still controlled by the Central government. The Centre-State relationship with its decisive tilt in favour of the central

authority led to, as the veteran Marxist leader B.T. Ranadive aptly remarks,

distortions in the functioning of the constitution and concentration of all powers in the hands of the Centre, leading to inequalities in economic advance<sup>84</sup>.

Big business, urban professionals and bureaucracy - civil and military - provided the main social force behind this centralised political structure<sup>85</sup>.

Undoubtedly, such unitary features bred ‘corrosive tensions’. Regional deprivations caused centrifugal tendencies, ‘their outbursts often taking the forms of sectarian violence and political anomie, which undermine the very basis of national unity that centralisation is supposed to achieve’<sup>86</sup>. In a multi-ethnic state with uneven economic and political growth under a centrist bourgeois-landlord rule any ethnic or linguistic dissension acquired an anti-Delhi character<sup>87</sup>. This has happened for much of the protest movements in India. To quote Ranadive again:

The secession and the Centre-State problem again is the problem of Indian democracy, of building a state where all will feel equal part of the struggle to become a modern nation<sup>88</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In April 1953 Nehru had been confident:

I shall not rest content unless every man, woman and child in the country has a fair deal and has a minimum standard of living ... Five or six years is too short a time for judging a nation. Wait for another ten years and you will see that our Plans will change the entire picture of the country so completely that the world will be amazed<sup>89</sup>.

But a decade after he breathed his last breath, this optimism had proved to be an illusion. The present submission has hopefully argued persuasively that the basic inadequacy in Nehruvian style of governance lay not in a faulty vision, but in an inability to create new institutions to implement the programme of national development and social change.

This view is in tune with Professor Brown's assertion:

Nehru did not have the political skills to operate in this fast-changing environment ... What was needed was a new type of leadership, almost certainly from a less privileged background, which recognised the validity of the political environment and was sensitive and skilled in its management. The skills and standards of the Brahmin and the patrician were increasingly dysfunctional in the management of India's developing political system<sup>90</sup>.

As the first prime minister of India Nehru was certainly faced, as has been remarked, 'with daunting tasks'<sup>91</sup> But the question remains: why did Nehru fail to create the correct instruments of governance? This dysfunctionality was linked to a structural factor, connected as it was, to an imperfect Transfer of Power on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1947. What occurred on that day was, to borrow a Gramscian phrase, 'a passive revolution', where the political transfer of power was divorced from a socio-economic transformation. There was in August 1947 no telescoping of political and socio-economic revolutions. The social forces which were created in the quest for freedom thus proved to be grossly inadequate and unsuited to the task of qualitatively transforming and developing a large country and the great mass of its population. The Nehruvian system then failed to create the new political movement needed to bring about social revolution and fundamental economic

transformation required. This constitutes perhaps the weakest spot in the Nehruvian legacy for India.

The question of how to get rid of the ills plaguing the country - much of which are rooted in the Nehruvian legacy - demands a separate analysis. On the whole the recipe should involve a restructuring of the socio-economic order, a reorganisation of Centre-State relations, and the enrichment of a common Indian nationhood based not on the much-trumpeted slogan of 'unity in diversity' but on the alternative dictum of 'diversity in unity'. We need to think not of representing India down from Delhi, or in terms of West Bengal or Karnataka being an alternative to power in Delhi, but we have to create a situation whereby India is represented as Calcutta, Visakhapatnam, Calcutta and Amritsar. In other words, a nation of localities, rather than a nation of states, or a single super-state.

National unity and integrity are of course inviolable concepts. But the point is how are they to be defined. To begin with, we should differentiate between the Nehruvian concept of integrity and the idea of integration. Instead of relying on the much trumpeted call for national integration by the ruling power in Delhi, the time has come to develop a left-democratic alternative that seeks cultural pluralism, an extension of democracy to the grassroots, and the abolition of socio-economic discriminations that draw sustenance from the existing exploitative and oppressive socio-political structure. Only then can the nation-building process that began with Nehru avoid degenerating into a nation-



destroying strategy, and ethnic and religious pluralism could become a source of sustenance rather than of dissidence for the Indian federation.

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