

Jawaharlal Nehru and his Socialism

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FOR Jawaharlal Nehru, from his student days onwards, and for half a century, socialism was a tantalising proposition, which he made part of his credo. First attracted to it during his days as a student in England, Nehru, the man of ideas and the thinker that he was, found in socialism a continuation of his love of nationalism. As he evolved through the various stages of his life--as a philosopher of history, a passionate nationalist, a political agitator, an active politician, a skilful negotiator and as prime minister—he found socialism to be a component part of his nationalist idealism. If nationalism was the obverse of the coin, socialism was the reverse. To him both were inextricably connected.

Socialism with Nehru was neither ideological nor institutional. Noticing all round him various brands of socialism being discussed and debated, and calmly observing the Russian model taking shape step by step, Nehru wisely decided that there was no point in being dogmatic. Adopting a non-doctrinaire attitude, he championed the cause of socialism in contra-distinction to capitalism and imperialism. His study of world history convinced him that socialism was the next stage of human civilization, but he was equally sure that it could not be uniform the world over, since socio-economic conditions differed from country to country and from region to region. Socialism to Nehru was an evolving idea acquiring, like a pearl, layer over layer of meaning.

LEGITIMISING SOCIALISM

Hence Nehru adopted a flexible policy towards socialism as far as India was concerned. He wanted to plant the idea in as many minds as possible and he wanted it to germinate. He spoke about it with passion. He made every possible effort to convert his colleagues within the heterogenous and amorphous Congress. He tried to define socialism with the widest possible meaning. For about thirty years, Nehru made an earnest attempt to get the idea legitimised and accepted, with the widest consensus, as part of the credo of the Congress. And, during the 17 years of his Prime Ministership he made it possible for the basic concepts of socialism to be incorporated

into the Constitution of India, into the infrastructure of the Government of India and the policies that guided the Planning Commission.

“Nehru and his socialism”. This is a fascinating theme for a doctoral thesis. Though a few persons ranging from Dr. A. Appadorai to Dr. Bimal Prasad and from Sankar Ghose to M. Chalapathi Rau have written about some aspects of the subject, full justice has not been done to it. The present article, circumscribed by limitations of space, cannot pretend to be more than a synopsis, an outline of a proposed book.

II

The evolution of Nehru the socialist, alongside Nehru the nationalist, has been a fascinating process of ideas having an impact on a sensitive mind that had both a historical perspective and a scientific training. But, the day to day life of a young nationalist involved in all manner of political activities directed against the alien ruler, enabled him to refine the socialist ideas. The spells of incarceration in jail provided the time for the contemplation of the ideas in terms of practicality—especially as suited to Indian conditions.

In the case of Jawaharlal Nehru, all this is really remarkable for he was born in the lap of luxury and in the days of cooperation to non-cooperation and back again to cooperation.

NEHRU'S CONVERSION

With the candour that was so characteristic of him, Nehru confessed in his autobiography :

“I am a typical bourgeois, brought up in bourgeois surroundings with all the early prejudices that this training has given me.”

Notwithstanding this upbringing, during his days at Eton and Cambridge, he exposed himself to new ideas—especially those of socialism, and of Fabian Socialism in particular. In a letter to George Bernard Shaw, Nehru had written :

“Like many of my generation who had grown up in company with your writings and books, I suppose a part of myself such as I am today has been moulded by that reading.”

After completing his education, he kept up this keen interest in following the contemporary trends of thought. Before he returned to India, he wrote to his father, Motilal Nehru, to open an account with the Times Book Club so that he could build up a library of his own. His choice of books ranged from those of Trotsky to Kropotkin, Maurice Dobb to Scott Nearing, from those of John Reed to Jack London.

Another important factor was his contact with Indian revolutionaries in Europe, with Virendra Chattopadhyaya (brother of Sarojini Naidu) M. N. Roy, Shyamaji Krishnavarma, Mahandra Pratap and others.

However, it was during the twenties that there came about a qualitative transformation in Nehru's ideas, which led to his greater identification

with socialism. Two major events led to the concretization of Nehru's ideas on socialism.

One was his active participation in the 1927 Brussels session of the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities, at which he met some of the leading young nationalists like Leopold Senghor and Ho Chi Minh and some progressive intellectuals like Ernst Toller.

The other was his visit to Soviet Russia in 1927 for the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Russian Revolution along with his father. He was so fascinated by the progress made by the USSR that he wrote several articles for "The Hindu", which were later collected and published in book form in 1929.

It was in 1929, at a labour session of the Congress that Nehru made bold and proclaimed himself to be "a Socialist and a Republican and not a believer in Kings and princes". That year he also presided over the sessions of the Trade Union Congress.

In his presidential address to the Lahore Congress in 1929, Nehru asserted that "the philosophy of socialism has gradually permeated the entire structure of society the world over and almost the only point in dispute is the pace and methods of advance to its full realization. India will have to go that way to end her poverty and inequality though she may evolve her own methods and may adopt the ideal to suit the genius of her race."

In the course of the same speech he insisted that "man should not be sacrificed for money". He also managed to smuggle some "revolutionary" ideas into the then Congress ideology. This is what he said :

"Our economic programme must therefore be based on a human outlook and must not sacrifice man to money. If an industry cannot be run without starving its workers then the industry must close down. If the workers on the land have not enough to eat then the intermediaries who deprive them of their full share must go. The least that every worker in field or factory is entitled to is a minimum wage which will enable him to live in moderate comfort and human hours of labour which do not break his strength and spirit. The All Parties' Committee accepted the principle and included it in their recommendations. I hope the Congress will also do so and will in addition be prepared to accept its natural consequences. Further, that it will adopt the well-known demands of labour for a better life and will give every assistance to it to organize itself and prepare itself for the day when it can control industry on a cooperative basis."

Two years later in 1931, at the Karachi Congress, Nehru drafted the famous resolution which was passed under the presidentship of Sardar Vallabhai Patel and which formed the basis of the Constitution of India—especially its Directive Principles—when it was drawn up after much debate and discussion by the Constituent Assembly.

THE KARACHI RESOLUTION

Since the Karachi Resolution is a landmark in the evolution of our identity and sovereignty as a nation a few excerpts deserve to be quoted. Besides, they provide an insight into the thinking of Nehru the visionary. Here are a few excerpts.

“The Congress, therefore, declares that any constitution which may be agreed to on its behalf should provide or enable the Swaraj Government to provide for the following:

- I.
 - (a) Every citizen of India has the right of free expression, the right of free association, and the right to assemble peacefully and without arms, for purposes not opposed to law or morality.
 - (b) Every citizen shall enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice his religion, subject to the public order and morality.
 - (c) The culture, language and script of minorities and of the different linguistic areas shall be protected.
 - (d) All citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and to the exercise of any trade or calling.
 - (e) No disability attaches to any citizen by reason of his or her religion, caste, creed or sex in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and to the exercise of any trade or calling.
 - (f) All citizens have equal rights and duties in regard to wells, tanks, roads, schools and places of public resort, maintained out of State or local funds, or dedicated by private persons for the use of the general public....
- II.
 - (a) The organization of economic life must conform to the principle of justice, to the end that it may secure a decent standard of living.
 - (b) The State shall safeguard the interests of industrial workers and shall secure for them, by suitable legislation and in other ways a living wage, healthy conditions of work, limited hours of labour; suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workmen, and protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment.
- III. Labour is to be freed from serfdom and conditions bordering on serfdom.
- IV. Protection of women workers and especially adequate provision for leave during maternity period.
- V. The State shall own or control key industries and services, mineral resources, railways, waterways, shipping, and other means of public transport.

- VI. Relief of agricultural indebtedness and control of usury direct and indirect.
- VII. The State shall provide for the military training of citizens so as to organize means of national defence apart from the regular military forces."

The following passage from Nehru's autobiography gives the background of the Karachi Resolution and an idea as to how he managed to get a "socialist" resolution accepted.

"The idea of getting the Congress to pass a resolution of this kind was an old one. For some years the UP Provincial Congress Committee had been agitating in the matter, and trying to get the AICC to accept a Socialist resolution. In 1929 it succeeded to some extent in getting the AICC to accept the principle. Then followed civil disobedience. During my early morning talks in Delhi with Gandhiji in February and March 1931, I had referred to that matter, and he had welcomed the idea of having a resolution on economic matters. He asked me to bring the matter up at Karachi, and to draft a resolution and show it to him there. I did so at Karachi and he made various changes and suggestions. He wanted both of us to agree on the wording, before we asked the Working Committee to consider it. I had to make several drafts, and this delayed matters for a few days, and we were otherwise much occupied with other matters. Ultimately Gandhiji and I agreed on a draft, and this was placed before the Working Committee and later before the Subjects Committee. It is perfectly true that it was a new subject for the Subjects Committee and some members were surprised. However, it was easily passed by the Committee and the Congress and was referred to the AICC for further elucidation and enlargement on the lines laid down."

III

A peak-point in the evolution of Nehru the socialist was reached when he delivered his presidential address at Lucknow in the course of which he made certain categorical statements about socialism.

First Nehru proclaimed his firm belief that socialism was the only way by which India's problems could be solved. He said :

"I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems lies in Socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. Socialism is, however, something even more than an economic doctrine; it is a philosophy of life and as such also it appeals to me.

"I see no way of ending the poverty; the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism.

"That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structure the ending of vested interests in land and industry, as well

as the feudal and autocratic Indian State system. That means the ending of private property, except in a restricted sense, and the replacement of the present profit system by a higher ideal of cooperative service. It means ultimately a change in our instincts and habits and desires. In short, it means a new civilization radically different from the present capitalist order."

Then he pointed to the Russian example and indicated how we in India could benefit from following that example, with modifications to fit in with our own "national genius."

"Some glimpse we can have of this new civilization in the territories of the USSR. Much has happened there which has pained me greatly and with which I disagree, but I look upon that great and fascinating unfolding of a new order and a new civilization as the most promising feature of our dismal age. If the future is full of hope, it is largely because of Soviet Russia and what it has done, and I am convinced that if some world catastrophe does not intervene this new civilization will spread to other lands and put an end to the wars and conflicts on which capitalism feeds.

"I do not know how or when this new order will come to India. I imagine that every country will fashion it after its own way and fit it in with its national genius. But the essential basis of that order must remain and be a link in the world order that will emerge out of the present chaos.

"Socialism is thus for me not merely an economic doctrine which I favour; it is a vital creed which I hold with all my head and heart. I work for Indian independence because the nationalist in me cannot tolerate alien domination. I work for the inevitable step to social and economic changes."

CONGRESS AND SOCIALISM

But Nehru also had some reservations about the Congress which he confessed thus:

"I should like the Congress to become a socialist organization and to join hands with the other forces in the world which are working for the new civilization. But I realise that the majority in the Congress as it is constituted today, may not be prepared to go thus far....

"Much as I wish for the advancement of Socialism in the country, I have no desire to force the issue in the Congress and thereby create difficulties in the way of our struggle for independence. I shall cooperate gladly and with all the strength in me with all those who work for independence even though they do not agree with the socialist solution. But I shall do so stating frankly and hoping in course of time to convert the Congress and the country to it, for only thus can I see it achieving independence."

And finally he added : "How does Socialism fit in with the present ideology of the Congress? I do not think it does."

For a student of history, it should be a matter of interest that Nehru took great pains to convince and convert the Congress to socialism—especially during the thirties.

After all this just imagine Nehru writing to Gandhiji on August 13, 1934 that socialism has “a clearly defined meaning in the English language”. And, Gandhiji in his reply commented, “I have looked up the dictionary meaning of socialism. It takes me no further than where I was before I read the definition. What will you have me to read to know its full content?”

In one of his letters to his daughter, Indira Priyadarshini, (which later formed part of Nehru’s “Glimpses of World History”) Nehru makes an attempt to define the word so that this young daughter could understand. Nehru wrote thus: “Socialism, I have told you, is of many kinds. There is general agreement however, that it aims at ‘the control by the state’ of the means of distribution like railways, etc. and also banks and similar institutions. The idea is that the individual should not be allowed to exploit any of these means or institutions or the labour of others to their own personal advantage.”

In Nehru’s “A Bunch of Old Letters” can be found a letter in which he clarifies one aspect of socialism :

“Am I a socialist or an individualist?

“Is there a necessary contradiction in the two terms?

I suppose I am temperamentally and by training an individualist and intellectually a socialist I hope that socialism does not kill or suppress individuality. Indeed, I am attracted to it because it will release innumerable individuals from economic and cultural bondage.”

It was an uphill task for Jawaharlal Nehru to explain and elucidate socialism and to get it accepted by the Congress.

It may be noted here that after the 1936 Lucknow Congress, when he included Acharya Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash Narayan and Achyut Patwardhan in the Working Committee, the orthodox Gandhians who sincerely believed in “villagism” and Gandhian values, protested and resigned. They were Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhai Patel, C. Rajgopalachari and J. B. Kripalani, Later, after Gandhiji’s intervention, they withdrew their resignation.

Throughout his life, Nehru faced this hostility towards his socialism from the Congress which (apart from the masses) had among its leaders those who objected to socialism. They were landlords and businessmen, bankers and industrialists who found in Nehru’s socialism a danger to their vested interests.

Notwithstanding this opposition, Nehru pursued his ideal. In 1938, after Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was elected as the President at Haripura, a beginning was made towards a planned economy. The All-India National Planning Committee was set up and Nehru was requested to take over its chairmanship. Gandhiji was quite alarmed that there was much talk about “planning” and “heavy industries”. But those connected with the Committee,

notably Nehru, allayed Gandhiji's fears by indicating that the khadi and village industries would find their due place in any planning exercise for this country.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE

This concept of planning—socialist planning—was pursued by Nehru even after the attainment of Independence and the framing of the Constitution of India. The Planning Commission was set up and the Five-Year plans were launched. To give them ideological validity and support from the Congress, Nehru and his colleagues got the Congress to pass a resolution at the Avadi session of 1955 which said :

“The national aim is a welfare State and a socialist economy. This can only be achieved by a considerable increase in income and much greater volume of goods and services and employment. Economic policy must, therefore aim at plenty and at equitable distribution....

“... In view of the declared objective being a socialist pattern of society the State will necessarily play a vital part in planning and development. In particular, it will :

- “1. Initiate and operate large scale schemes providing services such as power transport etc.;
- “2. Have overall control of resources, social purposes and trends, and essential balances;
- “3. Check and prevent evils of anarchic industrial development by the maintenance of strategic controls, prevention of private trusts and cartels, maintenance of standards of labour and production;
- “4. Plan the economy of the nation in its basic and broad aspects....”

Nine years later in 1964, a little before he died, Nehru managed to get another important resolution passed at Bhubaneswar. This, and the earlier Avadi resolution are important. Nehru got his ideas of socialism permanently incorporated into the Congress ideology and made socialist planning the main plank of the Congress economic programme. Here is an extract from the Bhubaneswar resolution :

“To establish a socialist society, the foremost aim has to be the removal of poverty with all its attendant evils. This calls for rapid economic development with continually rising levels of production, agricultural as well as industrial. The slow growth of our economy has hitherto been due to our inability to exploit natural resources and this, in turn, is explained by our failure to take sufficient advantage of the advance in science and technology....

“Planning should take place with the view to the establishment of a socialistic pattern of society where the principal means of production are under social ownership or control, production is progressively speeded up and there is equitable distribution of the national wealth. In 1957, the Congress formally adopted the establishment, by peaceful

and legitimate means of a Socialist Cooperative Commonwealth as its objective, in Article 1 of the Constitution. Thus the establishment of a Socialistic Pattern of Society came to be adopted as the aim and objective of the Congress. Throughout its eventful history the Congress has been steadily and consciously moving towards this objective. . . .”

This gargantuan effort on the part of Jawaharlal Nehru to get socialism accepted as part of the Congress credo ended up with only a “socialistic pattern of society”—and not socialism, pure and simple—incorporated in its resolutions.

This is all the more interesting for throughout the period 1920–1960, there was much loud talk about socialism and communism in the country. Socialists and communists, there were aplenty in the country, discussing the tweedledum and tweedledee of socialism. But their discussions, strategies, theses and statements belonged to the realm of arm-chair politics and arid ivory-tower intellectualism.

As Dr. Dietmar Rothermund of the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, has pointed out :

“So it was once more Nehru, who carried the message of socialism to the Indian people, while the avowed representatives of socialism tried hard to keep pace with him and often failed to match his efforts even though they may have surpassed him in ideological vigour.”

This view has been endorsed by M. Chalapathi Rau (Editor, “National Herald” and a friend of Nehru) who in his biography of Nehru as one of the “Builders of Modern India” has remarked : “Jawaharlal educated the Indian people in two intensive lessons, gradually and with the help of experience that planning was necessary in India and that planning in Indian conditions could be only socialist planning. The experience was more conclusive than the theory”.

M. Chalapathi Rau has also pointed out that “the Congress as a whole was not equal to his ideas and did not share the power of his conviction, but the Congress had shown itself capable of changing and moving to the left if it was properly led. He found in the Congress a mighty instrument but he was not strictly a party man and he was releasing the forces of socialism far beyond the range of the Congress. He created the climate for socialism and while he knew it could not be brought about overnight, he knew he was making it possible to come about.”

In this context, it may not be out of place to quote what Nehru wrote in the signed introduction to the Third Five-Year Plan Document (1962–67). Here he has categorically explained how he set about the grand enterprise of “democratically planned collectivism” which would do the maximum good to the greatest number. And, by then, he had made the Congress Party and the State, into “instruments of social change.” Here is what Nehru wrote :

Early in 1950, following the adoption of the new Constitution by the Constituent Assembly of India, the Government of India established the Planning Commission to assess the country’s mineral, capital and

human resources and to formulate a Plan for their most effective and balanced utilization.

"In the Constitution, the basic objectives were set forth as "The Directive Principles of State Policy." Among those "Directive Principles" were that :

"The State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting, as effectively as it may, a social order in which justice, social economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of national life".

Further that—"the State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing

- (a) that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood;
- (b) that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good;
- (c) "that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment."

"These general principles were given a more precise direction in December, 1954, when Parliament adopted the 'socialist pattern of society' as the objective of social and economic policy. The concept, which embodies the values of socialism and democracy and the approach of planned development, involved no sudden change, and had its roots deep in India's struggle for freedom."

In conclusion it must be said that the man who "with all his mind and heart loved India and the Indian people", and to whom the Indian people were "indulgent" and "gave of their love most abundantly and extravagantly" tried throughout his later life to associate the entire Indian people in what he called "the great enterprise" of a socialist India. Nehru laid the foundations, but he left the word "socialism" to acquire further connotation and denotation with the passage of time. Nehru's understanding of history impelled him not to be rigid about the meaning of the word, nor to be dogmatic. Out of the schisms and factions, socialism would emerge constantly, acquiring new dimensions suited to each generation according to evolving contemporary demands. But he ensured that there would be no going back on socialism.

The most revealing statement about his achievement was made by Nehru when Andre Malraux, the celebrated French scholar, asked Nehru, "what has been your greatest difficulty since Independence?" Nehru's instantaneous reply was : "creating a just society by just means". And, he added : "Perhaps too, creating a secular state in a religious country. Especially when its religion is not founded on any inspired book."

There is enough to ponder over in these pithy remarks and enough to reflect over in what has been assembled in this article by way of quotations. Indeed, Nehru was a gentle colossus and an "acharya" who grafted socialism onto Indian vocabulary and Indian consciousness. □