**Nehru and Socialism**

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It is well known that Nehru was vehemently opposed to doctrinaire Socialism, but for almost half a century he was trying to formulate a set of mutually consistent principles and ideas, which, if adopted as a whole, would ensure a socialist reconstruction of society through the democratic process, rather than insurrectionary violence or a cataclysm, and without democracy being undermined in the process of achieving the goal. To him the question of method was more important than anything else.

When some people lost their patience with Nehru's reference to the 'pragmatic approach', they hardly appreciated his anxiety to take account of the compulsions in the objective situation in India, which make radical economic transformation impossible for various reasons, including the lag in social transformation.

Any general attack on the problem of poverty, any movement in the direction of an egalitarian society, any basic change in the socio-economic institutions concerning the masses of the population, requires the agency and support of a political organisation like the Indian National Congress, which is India in microcosm with its divergent pulls of ideas and interests.

Any one who thinks of Nehru in the context of Socialism would do well to study how he tried to influence this peculiar political organisation in favour of broad and simple 'socialistic' principles which have become accepted principles of democracy in capitalist countries with free enterprise economies.

Nehru was perceptive enough to see that an agrarian movement was running parallel to the political movement. Although they were separate they sometimes converged and reinforced each other. Frightened by the explosive possibilities of this trend, Government introduced mild tenancy reforms, but when the Great Depression descended as a disastrous blight on India's countryside the situation, bad that it was, became worse. The Congress leaders curbed the revolutionary potentialities of agrarian discontent, although the sporadic peasant movements like the valiant Bardoli Satyagraha achieved victories for the Indian peasant. But Nehru realised more than any other Congress leader that the ultimate remedy was abolition of landlordism, removal of intermediaries and the dissolution of the feudal socio-economic structure which not only violated the human dignity of the teeming millions but also inhibited even the primary kind of economic development, because the beneficiaries of any reform supposed to benefit the peasant was the functionless landlord who extracted higher rent. This line of thinking became an essential part of Nehru's concept of socialism. Once he grasped the logic of the pauperisation of the Indian peasantry, he began his ceaseless quest for the basic socialist remedy.

**Karachi Resolution**

By 1928, according to Nehru's account, workers and peasants were astir and the youth of the country was restive. When Nehru spoke to workers and peasants in those days his main theme was that political independence was a step towards the attainment of social freedom. He says, "I
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wanted to spread the ideology of socialism especially among Congress workers and intelligentsia, for these people thought largely in terms of the narrowest nationalism'. Nehru adds in this context: "I was by no means a pioneer in the socialist field in India. Indeed I was rather backward and I had only advanced painfully, step by step, where many others had gone ahead blazing a trail. The workers' trade union movement was, ideologically, d e f i n i t e l y socialistic'. Around 1927, Nehru's main preoccupation was to seek support for socialism in the Congress fold. It was agrarian socialism which held his attention at that stage. At the instance of Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee, of which Nehru was a prominent member, All India Congress Committee accepted the principle of socialism but postponed consideration of the detailed programme. That the strategy and tactics of the political movement prevailed over the compulsions of the agrarian situation is borne out by fact that when the no-tax campaign was off after the Delhi Pact, the U P Congress asked the peasants to pay as much rent as they could in spite of the sharp fall of agricultural prices during the Depression, which raised the incidence of the already heavy rent burden.

But pressures were building up in favour of socialism. The outcome was the resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy which was passed by the Karachi Congress. Nehru's comment on this resolution in his Autobiography is significant: "In the Karachi resolution the Congress took a step, a very short step, in a socialist direction by advocating nationalisation of key industries and services and various other measures to lessen the burden on the poor and increase it on the rich. This was not socialism at all, and a capitalist state could easily accept almost everything contained in that resolution." The resolution provided for a living wage and other amenities for the masses, special property taxes and state ownership or control of key industries and services, mineral resources, railways, waterways, shipping and other means of public transport. The fact of the matter was that the resolution was one of several of Nehru's drafts on which he and Gandhi had ultimately agreed. Gandhi's moderating influence was quite evident.

Depression Hits Agriculture

As the Depression deepened the agrarian situation worsened and the conflict between landlord and tenant became sharper. Nehru sensed 'the want of equilibrium of our agrarian economy which could not be liquidated or compromised away without a basic change'. The Congress, however, counselled restraint. It advocated a fair-rent campaign rather than a no-rent campaign. This was a position to which a person like Nehru could not easily reconcile himself. In his 'Autobiography' there is evidence of his mental conflict. After the failure of the Civil Disobedience Movement, Nehru became attracted to a more radical economic philosophy. This was a reaction not only to the ugly domestic situation but also to the great crisis of humanity which unfolded itself in the nineteen-thirties. But he was convinced that leaving the Congress meant 'ineffective adventurism'. At the same time he was equally convinced that if the issue of a "really radical solution" was squarely placed before the Congress "it would split into two or more parts and large sections will leave it." The sharp criticism of the Congress by the Indian communists more or less settled the issue for Nehru. In answer to this criticism, he replied in his characteristic way: 'It is absurd to say that the leaders betray the masses because they do not try to upset the land system or the capitalist system. They never claimed to do so' (italics mine).

Differences with Gandhi

Nehru's indissoluble link with the Congress was Gandhi. Gandhi regarded socialism as an alien creed. As Nehru said: "sometimes he (Gandhi) calls himself a socialist, but he uses the word in a sense peculiar to himself which has little or nothing to do with the economic framework of society which usually goes by the name of socialism. Following his lead a number of prominent Congressmen have taken to the use of that word, meaning thereby a kind of muddled humanitarianism." Gandhi suspected all socialism, particularly of the Marxist type, for its association with violence. It is certain that he disliked Nehru's class analysis, since he was dead set against the concept of class war which meant violence. Gandhi abhorred poverty, but set his face against the craze for economic growth and the rising standard of living. His insistence on village industry, on village self-sufficiency, on evils of machinery and mass production, on restriction of wants was part of a philosophy of ethical perfectibility of the individual human being.

Nehru's value-system was different. He believed in science and technology and their application to industrial and agricultural development and a better ordering of social life. He reacted sharply against the mediaeval idea of 'trusteeship' which, according to Gandhi, was supposed to solve the problem of class conflict. He thought the problem was no longer merely a moral or ethical one. The world was clamouring for a remedy for the economic ills. It could not live by 'negation alone, criticising the evil aspects of capitalism, socialism, communism, etc, and hoping vaguely for the golden mean'. Even on the issue of violence while Nehru believed in the democratic process and could never tolerate insurrectionary violence as a means to the construction of a Socialist society, he recognised that 'force and coercion are necessary both for external defence and internal cohesion' and that 'Governments are notoriously based on violence'.

Emphasis on Rural Economy

Gandhi's integrated philosophy and his world-view were like a granite rock against which all 'isms', including socialism, dashed in vain. Nehru who did not entirely share his philosophy and his world-view but had faith in his leadership because it rested on a mass base, sought to defend his own socialist ideas against those whom he described as 'parlour socialists' of whom there were too many in India. In the course of the current polemics of those days one comes across a surprisingly rich strand of thought in Nehru's reflections on socialism. "Socialists and communists in India", he said, "are largely nurtured on literature dealing with the industrial proletariat'. In an agricultural country like India "the problem cannot be disposed of, treated effectively in terms of Industrial workers. Nationalism and rural economy are the dominating considerations, and European Socialism seldom deals with these".

Rural economy and the peasantry were the base on which Gandhi and Nehru and other great leaders of the Congress operated successfully within the limitations of the prevailing objective situation. Any attempt to denigrate them from the angle of orthodox Marxism was patently futile. It was thus possible for Nehru to repudiate the Indian communists without giving up his own stand on socialism. That this strand of thought was as old as Nehru's deep interest in the agrarian problem early in the nineteen-twenties is quite evident. That it was not merely a debating point has
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been demonstrated by the broadening of Marxist thinking in the context of communist revolution in China—a predominantly agricultural and industrial-ly backward country in which the agrarian problem was much more serious than even in India.

Exercise in Planning

The sketch that I am trying to present will not be complete if I did not refer to the exercise in economic planning performed under the auspices of the Congress and with the co-operation of the Provincial Governments in the late nineteen thirties. Nehru had shared the enthusiasm for economic planning after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927. It was, however, during the Depression of the thirties that regulation of the economic system in the interest of general welfare became a cardinal principle of public policy. In many countries, Roosevelt's New Deal and his talk of “weeding out the over-privileged and effectively lifting up the under-privileged” thrilled Nehru and found a responsive chord in his heart. “We want many New Deals in India too”, he said. Had not Lloyd George in U K come out with a New Deal?

As Chairman of the National Planning Committee Nehru had an opportunity of participating in the preparation of a blue-print for the future, which would mirror the hopes and aspirations of a backward, dependent country. He described this national exercise as follows: “As we proceeded with this work it grew and grew till it embraced almost every phase of national activity. We appointed 29 sub-committees for various groups of subjects—agricultural, industrial, social, economic, financial—and tried to co-ordinate their activities so as to produce a scheme of planned economy for India.* For me this has been fascinating work and I have learnt much from it. It is clear that any scheme that we may produce can be given effect to in a free India. It is also clear that any effective planning must involve a socialisation of the economic structure.” (italics mine). Nehru had found his bearings. He now knew what had to be done in a free India. The issue of socialism now ceased to be a bone of academic contention or a subject of barren ideological polemics.

The somewhat sketchy, but chronological, account of Nehru’s sharpening and developing reaction to what he understood by socialism may serve as a foil for trying to picture what followed in the wake of India’s freedom. Gandhi’s mantle fell on Nehru and after Gandhi’s passing, there was no need for Nehru’s distractingly polemical dialogue on socialism with his great Mentor. But the compulsions of the objective situation which had inhibited even a non-Marxist kind of socialist orientation during our struggle for freedom have not disappeared. The Directive Principles of State Policy enshrined in the Indian Constitution, clearly indicate the broadly egalitarian social and economic goals, the pursuit of which by common consent can lead to what Nehru understood by socialism. But the Constitution also contains provisions which can effectively inhibit regulatory action, thereby providing that it violates Fundamental Rights in particular contexts. Centrally directed economic planning was not specifically provided for in the Constitution: it could, however, be adopted through appropriate “interpretation” or “construction”.

Forcing the Pace

In any case, there is scope for conscientious objectors as well as vested interests to resist regulation beyond the limits of tolerance. These limits are wide enough so long as vested interests benefit by planning, but it has been easy to build up pressures in various ways when vital interests of privileged classes are endangered. I am trying to explain the objective situation, without expressing a value-judgment (for which there is no occasion in the present context). Nehru had thought that “any effective planning must involve a Socialisation of the economic structure” (italics mine). Planning came as soon as the country had recovered from the shock of the Partition and its tragic aftermath. Nehru must have readily recalled the exciting work of the National Planning Committee; and he created the machinery of planning and invited the nation to embark on economic development on modern lines with the aid of science and technology. But the country as a whole was not prepared for the socialisation of the economic structure, which he considered essential for effective planning.

In certain fundamental respects Nehru forced the pace. Landlords and princes, feudal survivals of a bygone age, against whom he used his most eloquent and moving language in his "Autobiography", went through the process of extinction without resist-
ment. The vague phrase, "socialistic pattern of society", was the initial tentative introduction of socialism as an objective of the Congress. At one stage Nehru probably thought that a break-through was possible through a cooperative approach to socialism. Thus a "Cooperative Commonwealth" was accepted as the goal of the Congress. This reminded one of Fabian Socialism and of Sidney Webb's classic, "A Cooperative Commonwealth for Great Britain". Ultimately, the Congress accepted the goal of "democratic socialism", also Fabian in inspiration.

It was not, however, the labels or the texts of successive Congress resolutions which really mattered, but the sense of purpose and direction, the determination to establish an egalitarian society, the sense of 'social chivalry' to use a striking Marshallian phrase, the sense of solidarity of the classes with the masses. Nehru died when his task of orienting the nation towards these somewhat intangible pre-conditions of a regime of democratic socialism had hardly begun. I imagine that, like his great Mentor, Nehru was increasingly aware of the constraints of the objective situation, the limitations of the material which he sought to mould.

"After Nehru, What?"

There is at least one passage in his "Autobiography" which strikingly reveals the working of his mind. "It is obvious", he says, "that the vast changes that socialism envisages cannot be brought about by the sudden passing of a few laws. But the basic laws and powers are necessary to give the direction of advance to lay the foundation of the structure... The major obstructions have to be removed. The object is not to deprive, but to provide; to change the present scarcity to future abundance". Did he succeed in getting the 'basic laws' passed? Did he succeed in persuading the country to generate the 'basic power'? Have the 'major obstructions' been removed? These are questions which would take us beyond the limits of a brief essay. We shall be paying our real tribute to Nehru if at least we answer these questions honestly. Sensible persons who would like to answer the sensible question, "After Nehru what?" instead of the silly question, "After Nehru who?", would readily see that the answer to this question would hinge upon how honestly and clearly they are able to answer the three questions I have formulated.