Nehru Era

WE are too near to him to be able to assess Nehru, for one cannot judge the height of a Himalayan peak unless one moves away far back to the foothills. It is by the imprint that he leaves behind and the impact that his thoughts and actions produce on the people of the present and succeeding generations that a historical figure like Nehru can be judged. Any assessment, viewed in this light, must be premature. How can one say today how much of Nehru will endure?

Perhaps hustled into contributing to the 'After Nehru' section of this Number, which it was decided in advance would be its main theme, several contributors have thrown caution to the winds and have spoken out, some boldly and some with reservations, but none with tongue in the cheek. The outcome is surprising, almost breathtaking. Almost all are agreed that Nehru's achievements and the country's actual progress during his period of office have been nothing much, if not disappointing. Why has it been so? Why have his achievements fallen so short of his own aspirations, and the country's expectations? No one denies Nehru either his love for his country or his inspiring vision of its future. Did he fail to communicate, enthuse and carry the people with him? That would indeed be a fatal shortcoming in a leader of his stature. For, aren't leaders expected to mould men of clay into heroes, raise them from the dust, give them self-respect and confidence? That he certainly did, for Nehru's popularity with the people, his capacity to draw multitudes and hold them spell-bound by his speeches, not even his severest critic will deny.

Even so, the secret of Nehru's appeal to the masses, remained a mystery to the end. True, there was the halo of the prince charming, turned overnight into the grandeur and majesty of the shahenshah. He could electrify the people, make them hold their head high and look the world in the face. Wasn't he feted and given a regal welcome in every capital in the end. True, there was the halo of faith in religion and who, in his dress, speech and demeanour, was so distant from them and so far apart?

Did the people then hold him in awe? That was all true, but look at the other side. Aristocratic and aloof Nehru could be a hero for them, but how could the Indian people take to how could the Indian people take to faith in religion and who, in his dress, speech and demeanour, was so distant from them and so far apart?
That, again, most certainly they did not.

His was no charisma in the sense in which Weber used the word, but something different. The capacity which Nehru shared with Gandhi of giving people who had never come into direct contact with him a sense of intimacy so that, after Nehru’s death, it was not the nation that mourned; millions of people, men and women, in different walks of life, felt a personal loss, of losing someone whom they had known intimately, and for whom they cared. Gandhi was to the millions a father image — Bapuji was there to take care of them, they had only to listen to him and, if anything went wrong, Bapuji would know what to do about it. That was the man to trust and millions had put their trust in him implicitly. With Nehru it was different. One could make fun of him in a good-humoured sort of way, with affection, but an affection tinged with regard. Not with Gandhiji. Yet it was Gandhiji who had the twinkle in his eye.

After Nehru’s part homage, part an assessment of the Nehru era and part speculation about the future. We are already supposed to be in the post-Nehru era which raises the question: do the Nehru era end with the passing away of Nehru? Taking a synoptic non-Marxist view of history, or even a Marxist view, if the changes of yuga are to be associated with the names of those who initiated or inaugurated them, the outstanding figures in history either begin an age or close one. What period of history did Nehru close, which did he begin? If Nehru meant anything to India and the world, certainly the Nehru era cannot terminate with his passing away. His image has not crystallised yet like that of the bent figure of Gandhi on the Dandi March, pressing ahead firmly, leaning on his staff, light of build but determined, putting forth all his energy and resolve. The image of Nehru has yet to form itself in the ganamanasa. It is no accident of history that the men who changed the world in their time left behind no trace of their likeness on paper, canvass or stone. The image of Buddha or Christ was carved, cast in metal or painted centuries after they had passed away. And what was carved, cast in metal or painted was not their likeness— that no one knew — but the image which had formed over the centuries in the minds of men. If Nehru has left a legacy, if he has set minds in movement, the Nehru era cannot, and does not, end with the death of Nehru.

True homage to Nehru, therefore, is not the deer park on the banks of the Jamuna, not the mausoleum that will be raised, not the endowments that would be set up by governments and peoples of many countries, and not only those of his own. The fit homage is the dedication by such of his coun­trymen as were inspired by him, whose hearts were kindled by the fire that burnt in him and who were stirred by the spirit that moved him. They, along with him, had a tryst with destiny. They too have their promises to keep and miles and miles to go.

Those who look at his political achievements are almost all agreed that Nehru’s life-work was not so much of having started a revolution as of providing a durable basis to India’s democratic institutions. The following judgement of W H Morris-Lones will be widely endorsed by political scientists: “Perhaps (it is a possibility to be admitted) India without Nehru’s leadership might not so firmly have acquired this political system, might not have been able so quickly to let it take clear shape. But now the network of canal courses along which power has to run is cut deep into the political soil, and limits are set. No one will quite walk in Nehru’s exact footsteps, but Nehru’s great achievement may be to have made this unnecessary. There is a good path.” Nehru laid that path.

In the march to freedom Nehru was one among many. He stood out from others in being able to see clearly that political freedom, while a condition precedent for it, would not save the country without a social revolution. It is by holding up the promise of socialism that he captured the imagination of the people, especially of the youth. If Nehru brought democracy to India, gave it real meaning and content, why did he diddle with socialism until nothing of it was left. Why did he allow himself to be baulked by his party? If he could not carry the party with him, why did he not come out of it and go to the people?

There is no answer except in terms of Nehru’s great abiding faith in the people to decide for themselves. The first planning expert whom Nehru had called in had advised him to go out of the Government and prepare the country for socialism. Some years later he had once thought of retiring. That could be a determined move to break away from the administrative and party shackles that bound him and to lead the people from outside. But he stuck to office and to the civil service and administration, which he knew, was sabotaging what little socialistic con­tent there was in the measures that were adopted by the Government. And any way, why did not he change the administration, knowing full well how it hampered him? To the latter, perhaps, the answer is his love of good form, his weakness for outward show and lofty disregard of unpleasant necessities.

Nehru is not to be judged by the achievements of his administration or by the economic progress of the coun­try during his period of office. The vision that he put before the people, the ideal that he held up to them, that is the socialist legacy he has left for India. That he shrank from austerity which would have imposed burdens which would be resented by the vocal, microscopic minority, that he looked the other way when stark poverty and destitution stared him in the face and wore his rose to protect him from the stink — these are not of the essence. He did not acquire his history. Will judge him not by the concrete achievements in the economic field, not even by what he did for science and culture but by what he did to free the minds of men and set them in movement, to release his people from the grip of a parochial nationalism and choking allegiances that diminished man. Perhaps it was not backsliding either, but slow, patient waiting, until the minds of men were prepared for the great march forward. Such inexhaustible patience in one who was always in a hurry, notoriously impulsive and impatient, is itself the biggest enigma of the enigma that was Nehru.

In a moment of pique, it had been mentioned in these columns that the occasion would arise to write an epip­taph to the Nehru era if such and such a thing happened. But that was only in a moment of irritation. The time has not come yet to write that epitaph. Nehru era has not ended. It has only begun. Nehru gave us the vision, it is for us, lesser men, to draw up the programmes and implement them.

It is on those who intellectually and emotionally grew up with Nehru that the special responsibility rests of com­pleting his unfinished task. The responsibility is all the greater because they have less time than the new genera­tion to make a reality of his dream. They are the ones haunted by the voice that keeps telling them, “If only we had listened...”. 