The Meaning of Jawaharlal Nehru

Rajni Kothari

The greatest contribution of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, to the development of the Indian nation was neither the policy of non-alignment nor the conception of the five year plans, but the practical achievement of providing a durable basis to India's democratic institutions and of endowing them with an aura of legitimacy.

It is an achievement more lasting and pervasive than any of the doctrines by which he used to move India's intellectuals from time to time.

Nehru's life-work was not so much of having started a revolution as of having given rise to a consensus.

Curiously, he did not himself see the real significance of his work.

NEHRU'S role in the development of a national consensus has been rather complex. He both embodied its spirit and worked for its substance. The former aspect has attracted more attention than the latter, his "charismatic" power more than his role as a nation-builder. Now no one can deny the great unifying role of a powerful personality symbolising a new age, quickens the pace of history, and drives and presses diverse elements into a single stream. Nehru did all this and thereby consolidated the more subtle bases of the Indian polity. But he did more. He gave to it a more durable foundation by incorporating his life's work—and the work of all his distinguished forbears—into a framework of rules, institutions and conventions.

Beginning, Not End

Nehru doggedly allowed free scope to parliamentary government, was the chief operator of its mechanism of power, and through his long tenure legitimised its institutions and working principles. He was himself not too confident of this aspect of his work and often held too exaggerated a view of his own personality in holding the country together, and of the possible danger of disintegration after him. But here he reflected the empty mood and narvete of the Indian intelligentsia who projected him as their chief showboy than his own achievements as a politician and a man of affairs. It was in his social engineering capacities rather than his neat ideological formulations that Nehru's lasting contribution lies.

We have been told that with the passing away of Nehru an era has come to an end, but the fact is that the era of which Nehru laid the foundations through his long and uninterrupted leadership is only now beginning to take roots. Nothing has ended with the passing away of Nehru: everything of value he left behind is going to last. Indeed, from all indications, things may take a turn for the better.

Proof of Maturity

The ease with which the success issue for long a bogey of both western and westernised intellectuals has been settled is a testimony to the maturity to which this country's institutions have arrived. In many ways we have now entered a period which is more fruitful and one with greater developmental potential than the one we have been through. Every developing society has to go through an integrative stage before it can think of building its productive powers and its national strength on an organised basis, or of even formulating a policy to this end. It cannot be different with India. Those who have so often lamented at the failing of the Indian political system have done so because they have put their fingers on the wrong problems and because they lack a perspective on national development. What the country has achieved under its first Prime Minister is no mean achievement by any standards. And it is not just the achievement of one man.

Several factors have contributed to this maturing of the nation's institutional growth under Nehru's leadership. The first biggest factor no doubt was the work done and the legacy left behind by the nationalist movement led by the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. A proper appreciation of the role of the nationalist movement in India's nation-building has not been made by academic historians. Working simultaneously on so many fronts and adopting a strategy remarkable in its unifying character, the "movement" took the Indian people to a new level of self-awareness. The legacies it left behind have also served us for a pretty long time. Firstly, there was the organisational legacy, a structure around which men and institutions could function at various levels, channelise their loyalties and draw upon the loyalties of others. It was, secondly, a leadership legacy, the availability of tall men the like of which has not been found in any newly-independent country after the United States. It is true that both these legacies have, with the passage of time, thinned out, the organisation has been weakened, and the men have been demoralised under the strain of more exacting tasks. And this has its problems. Meanwhile, however, other structures have been created and these are likely to take roots.

At the Grassroots

Secondly, building on the legacy of the nationalist movement, there has been the penetration of the country by new institutional developments, especially at the lower tiers of the nation. In this, the system of patronage to which the Congress has given rise in the States and the districts is of great importance. It has enabled the spreading of distributive benefits and the involvement of traditional elites and entrenched social interests in the political-competitive processes of Indian democracy. The great drive of the Congress to either capture or neutralise labour and peasant organisations, to set up ancillary agencies in the cooperative, community development and local government sectors, and to penetrate caste and community organisations, has led to an integration into the national mainstream of critical subsections of the public. Finally, there is the new multi-tier system of Panchayati Raj which has led to a further penetration into society of democratic institutions adopted by the modernist leadership at the national level.
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The third factor that contributed positively to India's institutional growth is the result of the legislative-deliberative process. It consists in the removal of major sources of cleavage and disaffection from the Indian polity. The end of feudalism and landlordism removed the biggest single source of antagonism from the Indian countryside. The reorganisation of the States on linguistic basis removed a major source of cleavage from the political elite. Legislation dealing with labour disputes and providing protection and welfare to workmen contained, and brought contentment to, this potentially volatile section of the public. Laws dealing with property and inheritance rights, as well as with compensation for forfeiture of inherited rights, removed gross inequalities in the treatment of different classes and legitimised a more rational system of economic relations. And, finally, the partial success in handling the communal problem has helped contain the forces of disruption. Such a policy of neutralising social fissures has made obsolete the "class conflict" model of development in the Indian case. This is one important reason why stability has been made possible. To gather in the institutional growth factors mentioned above, these measures have provided us with a remarkable consolidation of our independence.

Amorphous with a Purpose

Fourthly, and providing the framework to these other factors, has been India's—and primarily Nehru's—faith in the values and institutions of democracy; and sincere and sustained efforts to put these into practice through the general elections. There is no doubt that without this last factor, all the other factors mentioned above would not have resulted in the present national consensus which is Nehru's greatest legacy. Even the mechanics employed by Nehru, which were the object of frequent criticism, such as the "balancing" of political groups and the consequent "amorphousness" of the political structure, had a role to play in the integrative stage of our development. It ensured that no single element in the Constitution of the nation was carried too far, lest this may disrupt the entire nation-building enterprise. It is true that at times Nehru carried his apprehension of disruptive forces a little too far and this often inhibited a free competition between opposing points of view. But the logic of his approach is quite clear. It is also true that Nehru's preoccupation with the maintenance of his own personal power and ascendancy often led to acute political factionalism and the need for political scapegoats from time to time. This affected morale and gave rise to bitterness. On the other hand, by basing political power on self-interest (thus going against the canons of India's political tradition), Nehru gave rise to a pragmatic orientation to politics, taught Indian leaders the art of managing men and institutions, and based political solidarity on the complex mechanics of secular relationships rather than on neat notions of sacrifice and transcendental nationalism. Nehru's role (often unconsciously played) was both to hold groups together under him and to tie them into a competitive web of relationships which would crystallise into more normal channels once his own personal weight was lifted.

Gift from China

There are also negative factors which have contributed to our stability and institutional development. Thus a substantial dose of political realism was injected in this nation through the Chinese aggression. By stirring the nation to its depths, the Chinese action forced us to come face to face with our strengths and weaknesses, destroyed our illusions and even managed in distributing the all too comforting symbol provided by the late Prime Minister. The results have in the long run been salutary. The Chinese would never have expected the constructive and integrative impact of their action on this country. Secondly, the bitter struggle for power that ended in the implementation of the "Kamaraj Plan" crystallised forces whose effects are only now being realized. The remarkable instrument of power and discipline called the Congress High Command that was forged by Mahatma Gandhi, and which was allowed to be overshadowed by the personality of Jawaharlal Nehru for some time, has again reasserted itself and is likely to hold power for a pretty long time. Thirdly, even the Prime Minister's illness in Bhavanasi and in Delhi thereafter led to a crystallisation of individuals and positions which accounts for the ease with which the transition to the new collective has been made possible. It is this smooth transition, after a brief period of open confrontation and trial of strength, that has given a stamp of legitimacy and competence to the institutional development that has been described above.

Path Clear for the Centrists

As said in the beginning, we have arrived at a stage which may be more fruitful and exciting for the country's development. There are many reasons to support this point. For one thing, the wholly artificial left-right dichotomy in our politics will now lose much of its force. For all practical purposes, the "Left" in the Congress was both an unnecessary usurpation from the opposition and an unnecessarily assertive against the traditional leadership of the Congress party. It now seems that this leadership will find the crystallisation which was not possible under the shadow of Jawaharlal Nehru. After nearly fifteen years, the traditional Congressmen will again come into their own. It should be realised that these are powerful men, that the small and weak men who had found shelter for so long will have to go, and that a powerful and homogeneous group will emerge.

More important—and without this such a pragmatic group could not have emerged—is the fact that there has taken place and has crystallised over the last few years an ideological consensus in this country, a consensus that has been ably summed up in the "Democracy and Socialism" resolution of Congress party. Academic critics of the resolution have characteristically missed the substance in it which consists in the compromise and consensus that it represents. It is a consensus to the making of which Nehru's life work was devoted. Significantly, the new leadership has emphasised this very aspect: Prime Minister Shastri, in his first broadcast to the Indian nation on June 11, described the task ahead as the building of a "socialist democracy".

Finally, and providing a framework to all these, is the crystallisation of the party system of India. It is a party system which is in many ways without parallel. It can be characterised as a one party dominance system which, while it is open and competitive, assigns rather special roles to the opposition parties on the one hand and the state and national factions within the ruling party on the other. Again, the passing away of Nehru has brought into bold relief the clear features of this party system—the importance of the Congress High Com-
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mand as a collective, the complex relationship between the High Command, the Parliamentary Party and regional Congress chiefs, and the crucial role of the party organisation in critical decision-making, and of party discipline in cementing differences. At any rate, single personalities will now play a lesser role in the party system than was the case so far. And the articulation and further crystallisation of the political consensus will be based on a more complicated inter-group structure than was the case so far, and on ideas and policies which are more the product of compromise and bargaining and less of theoretical or administrative rationale.

**Genesis of the Consensus**

Observers of Indian affairs have often praised the "consensual" approach to politics and have traced it to conformist trends in Indian tradition. What these writers overlook is the vital fact that every society must find its way to forming a consensus, and that a modernising society has to do so even more assiduously, especially where a colonial interlude has shaken traditional structures and values without replacing them with anything more durable. It is true that traditions of social and ritualistic conformism have left a deep mark on contemporary India, although contrary traditions can also be traced. It is also true that such conformist trends often militate against competitive politics and inhibit organisations built around the competitive principle. It is important to realise, however, that there is more than meets the eye here, that the emphasis on consensus and integration reflects an important problem of contemporary nation-building and is not just a carry-over from the past, that the democracy we study here is democracy at a particular stage of development, and that at this stage of development the competitive component in it is not the only or even the most important component to attend to. It is imperative at this stage to maintain order in the midst of change, to hold the temper of political struggle low, and to maintain a balance between competitive and consensual elements in the operation of democratic institutions.

At the same time, as seen above, the consensus that has been developing in India is not any single product of social conformism but the result of an involved process of interactions, in which force of personality, organisational discipline, penetration of political forms in society, political and factional struggle, and a drive for the removal of major sources of dissen­sion have played their respective parts. The result is an increasingly pragmatic orientation of politics, a political culture that manages to be consensual by being accommodative and flexible, and a complicated structure of political decision-making. It would be a mistake to view the consensual forms in which Indian politics operates out of both the historical and the situational contexts that I have mentioned here. The best and most recent example is the "consensual" form in which Shri Kamaraj announced his party's decision on the question of the succession to Prime Minister Nehru.

My attempt in this article has been to describe more than to assess. Consequently, it perhaps leaves more of an impression of optimism than I had intended. However, this does not mean that I undervalue the tasks that lie ahead. There are many and in some ways overpowering. They can be divided under two broad heads. The first are the consolidation tasks. The work of consolidation and integration is not yet over. The task is to meet the impending critical problems with equanimity, to keep the ideological temper low, and to put down with a strong hand the forces of disruption whenever they raise their ugly head. (It should be remembered that the communal problem has only been partially tackled in the past and it still remains largely unsolved. It can again be triggered off by either an internal or an external event.) This also brings out the critical importance of our external relations. More thought needs to be given to this than was done under Prime Minister Nehru.

**Crucial Tasks**

Secondly, there are what may be called the developmental tasks. Having achieved a degree of consolidation and integration, and having brought about an element of consensus in the nation, the leadership should look beyond, towards the productive functions of nation-building. The critical areas which require a determined approach are the reorganisation of the administrative structure and personnel in the country (the real blind spot in the national), the building up of a military infra-structure of Indian democracy (necessarily a part of the developmental effort), and the pushing ahead with the programme of economic development through a greater concern for encouraging and mobilising voluntary effort and people's willing participation, with or without the help of the bureaucracy. These are tasks that may require substantial rethinking on some of our per theories and models. Knowing or unknowingly, Prime Minister Nehru had often permitted a simplistic view of things to prevail in his government. Himself, however, he had always shown a readiness to change outdated ideas and theories that had become dysfunction­al to the tasks in hand. Preoccupied with his integrative role, he did not have enough time to implement this outlook in the realm of policy. There can be no better memorial to him than a continuous search for building further on the foundations he left behind and, wherever necessary, improving upon them.

**Notes**

1 Sister Gupta has expressed the view that Nehru provided the only symbol of unification in India. See his "Some aspects of the Problem of National Integration in India, Pakistan and Ceylon". Parliamentary Studies. New Delhi, Vol 8, Nos 1 and 2.


3 For another view on the reasons for India's stability, see Sisir Gupta, "Indian Democracy: What gives it Stability?", The Economic Weekly, Special Number, June 1960.


4 A large number of western observers take such a position. See, especially. S H Rudolph, "Consensus and Conflict in Indian Politics", World Politics, April 1961. See also, Myron Weiner, "The Politics of Scarcity" (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1962 and Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1962),
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