

REVISITING NEHRU: POLITICS OF NON-ALIGNMENT AND SECULARISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the art and craft of policy-making. The main focus of paper is, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister of Independent India. Nehru, who led the India for seventeen years from 1947-1964, was also leader of the Indian National Congress party. Nehru also emerged as successor to Gandhi and attained a larger than life stature in Indian politics. The impact he had, has been long-lasting and far reaching. His admirers and critics alike, attribute the resilience of India's democracy to his stewardship during the crucial decades after independence. Moreover, the first decade after independence was very crucial as the India got divided into two states on religious lines. This period was also important and vital phase in modern Indian history from colony to post-colonial state with important implications for the long-run consolidation of India's modern democratic institutions. Nehru is the 'pivotal actor' given the power he gradually accumulated and thus his preferences, world view and 'vision' need to be explored in depth and detail. The core objective of the paper therefore is to turn attention towards Nehru, the political actor, to identify the challenges that he faced and the impact he had on the policies that were formulated and implemented under his leadership. In the backdrop of this, the present paper studies, two important policy choices by Jawaharlal Nehru, the secular state and a non-aligned foreign policy.

KEY WORDS: Democracy, Decision Making, Foreign Policy, Secularism and Independence

INTRODUCTION

The period prior to independence is referred to here as Jawaharlal Nehru's 'formative phase'. This was a time of great political activity in India and using Nehru as the reference point, this research work seeks to highlight some of the major events and developments leading to independence in 1947. Nehru, Born in 1889 into a wealthy, Brahmin family settled in Allahabad, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh but originally hailed from Kashmir. Having examined the structure of the Congress Party and the various contending figures and viewpoints, the paper explores the processes through which Nehru consolidated his power within the party. Invited by the Viceroy of India, Lord Wavell, to form an interim government, Jawaharlal Nehru took the helm on 2 September 1946. As a result, when independence came less than one year later, Nehru had precedence and it seemed automatic that he should become the first Prime Minister of sovereign, independent India. The leadership rivalry between Nehru and Patel, though not apparent on the outside, soon revealed itself in terms of their fundamentally opposing positions on various issues. Using the resources available to him, Nehru managed to secure his position. Two institutions provided the means through which he exert his influence and

establish a power base: the Congress Working Committee (CWC) and the parliamentary Cabinet. Jawaharlal Nehru's first cabinet after independence was sworn in on 15 August 1947 and consisted of a Deputy Prime Minister (Patel) and twelve other Ministers. By 1951 therefore Nehru was in a position to give institutional form to his vision and priorities for a modern, independent India. (Rao, 2009)

When India got independence, barely two years after the end of World War II, the entire world was still recuperating (recovering) from the most calamitous (tragic) war in its history. Six years of fierce conflict involving a majority of nations of the world had killed approximately 60 to 80 million people. The world was divided into two belligerent camps that were at odds with each other. Jawaharlal Nehru had inherited a nation of 370 million famished people. The country's economy was in disarray. India's share of the world's wealth had fallen from about 30 per cent in the mid-18th century to less than 3 per cent when the British left the country in 1947. It was against this backdrop; Nehru took over the nation with the hope of forging amicable relationship with countries of the world. Jawaharlal Nehru's effort to modernize the nation was not to westernize it, but to evolve India into a powerhouse by

assimilating the best facets of western culture. In his capacity as Prime Minister, he tried to integrate the noblest elements of the east and the west. One of his first acts as the leader of independent India was to convene The Asian Relations Conference in Delhi (1947) where the principles of foreign policy of independent India were proclaimed. The first large scale Afro-Asian Conference known as 'The Bandung Conference' was a meeting of newly independent Asian and African countries, took place in April 1955 in Indonesia. The twenty-nine (29) countries that participated in this conference represented nearly one-quarter of the Earth's land surface and a total population of 1.5 billion people. The conference was organized by Indonesia, Burma, Pakistan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India. Its aims were to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism by any nation. This conference was an important step toward Nehru's dream of the Non-Aligned Movement. Under Nehru's guidance, India became the first country to begin a policy that was new in the history of international relations - the policy of Non-Alignment, which was founded in 1961 in Belgrade and was ably supported by Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, President Sukarno of Indonesia and Joseph Broz Tito of Yugoslavia. Nehru's policy of neutrality paved the way for the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). (Pathak: 2017)

The early 1950s represented such a 'critical juncture'. While there was continuity with the colonial period, the transfer of power, as the process of handing over power to Indians came to be known, and the subsequent shape of India's political institutions were far from inevitable. Most early India observers expected Indian democracy and territorial unity to be short lived. Instead, the period and its leaders generated a set of political institutions that represented a unique blend of continuity and disjuncture with the colonial past. Jawaharlal Nehru, as a political figure, was at the Centre of this transition to and consolidation of power. This is important because the study of Indian politics has been and continues to be dominated by concepts, ideas and discussions emanating from the discourse on modernization, political development and the role of the 'post-colonial state'. Michael Brecher's political biography of Nehru, written during Nehru's lifetime, is a rigorous piece of work that draws upon a range of sources including official reports, Nehru's own writings, that of his contemporaries, newspapers and interviews with statesmen in Britain and India. Avoiding a narrow focus on Nehru's person, Brecher takes the trouble to explain the institutional framework within which Nehru functioned as a political leader. Reflecting on Nehru's role in policy-making, Brecher concludes that the Prime Minister

was a "most effective salesman of planning in the country as a whole" but that the many shortcomings of his programmes "reflect in large measure the weaknesses of Nehru's policies and his frequent reluctance to act resolutely when forcefulness is necessary". (Brecher, p.89) Similarly, on foreign policy Brecher provides an insight into the policy-making process, examining the role of parliament, the cabinet, various 'interest groups' and key individuals, in addition to the exceptionally central role that Nehru occupied.

Michael Edwardes' 'Nehru, A Political Biography' Edwardes is highly critical and cynical about the early years after independence, writing about the first elections as a 'travesty of democracy' (Edwardes, p. 248) depicting the Nehru-Congress combine as an 'alliance of weakness' where "Congress had created Nehru and Nehru could have led only a party like Congress". (ibid, p. 245)

Judith Brown examines the process of nation-building, dividing this into (a) 'the work of imagining the nation', (b) 'of structuring the nation and giving it political shape', (c) forging 'an expanded understanding and reality of shared nationhood' and finally (d) the task of installing the new nation in the international order. (Brown, p. 187) Whilst this approach aims at weaving together the main events of Nehru's prime ministership together with the travails of actually running a government ultimately, Brown ends up concentrating on Nehru, the 'political visionary', the 'cosmopolitan intellectual who could see the broad picture and expound the significance of issues facing India in sweeping historical terms.' (ibid. 242)

The technique of maintaining world peace through non-alignment was to make sure that each nation pursued its own interest without disturbing other nations. Nehru wanted to make the world an abode of peace. He believed that in the atomic age, peace had become the only guarantor of human survival.

ORIGIN OF THE POLICY OF NON ALIGNMENT MOVEMENT

The policy of non-alignment was an indigenous product for Jawaharlal Nehru, emanating from India's long struggle for freedom. So were probably the compulsions of the leaders of the Asian, African and Latin American countries who were able to assert their national identities mainly by adopting the policy of non-alignment. In India the three main strands which constituted the basic ingredients of the Congress thinking on foreign policy during the first four decades were: one, anti-colonialism and sympathy and support for the peoples fighting for their independence and

liberation; two, consciousness of an Asian identity; and three, an economic rationale behind the resurgence of imperialism, including the role of foreign capital. Jawaharlal Nehru was not unconscious of his indebtedness to Indian history and tradition as a determining factor in the formulation of his policy of non-alignment. Speaking years later in Parliament, on December 9, 1958, he significantly observed: "What I have done is to give voice to that policy (non-alignment)-I have not originated it. It is a policy inherent in the circumstances of India, inherent in the past thinking of India, inherent in the whole mental outlook of India, inherent in the conditioning of the Indian mind". (Nehru, 1985, p. 246)

As such Jawaharlal Nehru saw India's national self-interest both in the context of better world co-operation and India's long-term interests. In a debate on foreign policy on December 7, 1950, to a specific question as to the conflict between India's interest and the interest of other nations, his answer was clear and concise. "If our viewpoint is different, you cannot expect me to give up our viewpoint or the results that we have arrived at, because some other nations think differently. I just would not do that. I do not understand long and repeated arguments about this. I am on my country's side and on nobody else's." Nehru was conscious of the momentous event and summed up the shared sentiments when he said: "For too long, we of Asia have been petitioners in the Western courts of the Chancelleries. That story must now belong to the past. We propose to stand on our own feet and to co-operate with all others who are prepared to co-operate with us. We do not intend to be a plaything of others. 'Standing on our own feet' and, 'not being a plaything of others' was the essence of the policy of non-alignment." (Rao, 2009) An essential feature of the policy of non-alignment was the emphasis on peace, universal disarmament, and elimination of the element of fear. Nehru's views were full of idealism. He emerged as a philosopher of peace and freedom. To Nehru, peace was indivisible. He stated on January 12, 1951: "What we need is a passion for peace and for civilized behavior in international affairs. It is the temper of peace and not the temper of war that we want, even though peace is sometimes casually mentioned....If we desire peace, we must develop the temper of peace and try to win even those who may be suspicious of us or who think they were against us. We have to try to understand others, just as we expect them to understand us. We cannot seek peace in the language of war or threats."

In conclusion, Jawaharlal Nehru's concept of non-alignment was and continues to be affirmative and positive in content. It means breaking down prejudices, bringing people

together, making them understand one another. We cannot do better than quote Nehru himself in summing up his foreign policy. Speaking in the Rajya Sabha on September 3, 1963 he pertinently observed that his foreign policy was "a right one, a good one and successful one". The policy on non-alignment, which was formulated and articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru, was not only a means of safeguarding India's own national self-interests, but also constituted an earnest attempt to democratize international relations. Two-thirds of the countries of the world are today members of the non-aligned movement; it has rightly been described as the world's largest peace movement. That constitutes a fitting tribute to Jawaharlal Nehru's vision and wisdom.

NEHRU ON RELIGION AND SECULARISM

To quote Nehru, "Communalism, of course has to be fought ruthlessly and suppressed. But I really do not think it is such a power as it is made out to be. It may be a giant today but it has feet of clay. It is the outcome largely of anger and passion and when we regain our tempers it will fade into nothingness. It is a myth with no connection with reality and it cannot endure. It is really the creation of our educated classes in search of office and employment." (SWJN, p. 219-230) The extensive debate that has ensued on the nature of secularism in the Indian context, both in terms of written scholarship and amongst policy-makers is indicative of how complex and seriously taken, the issue is. In the 1963 classic, 'India as Secular State', Donald E. Smith had argued that the Constitution of India provided a "relatively sound basis for the building of a secular state" (Smith, p. 14) Outright critics of the state's agenda have included highly respected scholars such as T.N. Madan and Ashis Nandy who call for a more indigenous form of secularism given the all-embracing character of religion in India. Duncan Derrett put it, "In reality India is a multi-religious state.....A multi-religious conglomeration of peoples can allow great freedom of religion, since the very fact of multi-religiosity proves the seriousness with which the majority accepts the validity, for the whole, of the sincere beliefs of the minorities." (Derrett, p. 31)

As Nehru noted much later on and in some frustration, "We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular'. Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct.....It is a state which honors all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities." (Gopal, pp. 330-1) The Constitution as it was in 1950 did not contain the word 'secularism' anywhere and the word 'secular' occurred only once to denote a particular religious practice. Article 25 (2a)

under the section on Fundamental Rights states: 'Nothing in this Article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law-regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice.' The additions of 'secular' and 'socialist' to the description of India as a 'sovereign republic' came through the 42nd Amendment in 1976 (during Indira Gandhi's Emergency rule).

On the subject of religion, Nehru propounded various arguments portraying its negative effects on society and politics. The unity of India was a central concern for Nehru during this period and almost all his books deal with this theme either from a historical, cultural angle or in terms of the success of a national freedom movement. Though it is not mentioned explicitly, secularism does begin to appear within Nehru's vision as the glue for holding a state such as India together and providing the basis for a national consciousness, overcoming 'numerous superficial differences' (Nehru, 1934, p. 65). To summarize, the central concept within Nehru's assessment and understanding of religion is that of rationality. The scientifically rational person, is epistemologically speaking, someone whose relation to knowledge and reality is primarily positivist and material. Nehru could claim that the caste system, which had withstood centuries of challenges, was facing an existential threat: "That is not chiefly because of some powerful urge to reform itself which has arisen in Hindu society...nor is it because of ideas from the west...The change that is taking place before our eyes is due essentially to basic economic changes which have shaken up the whole fabric of Indian society and are likely to upset it completely." (Nehru, 1946, p. 246) However, in one of his later pieces of writing, *The Unity of India*, Nehru simply states that "There is no religious or cultural conflict in India. What is called the religious or communal problem is really a dispute among upper-class people for a division of the spoils of office or of representation in a legislature." (Nehru, 1942, p. 20)

CONCLUSION

Nehru's pledge to secularism and democracy has helped India to endure a modern-secular democracy and did not get dragged in by communal powers generated by some, who neither believed in secularism nor democracy. He created a very positive and modern image of India to the outside world. He was regarded by the world as the modern,

enlightened, idealist and charismatic leader of India. He commanded a lot of respect among other world leaders second to Gandhi and truly 'discovered' India. He made India to function as an international bridge between the developed and developing countries (through NAM), between USA and USSR, between West and East. His inscription on the India is a tall order because he is part of contemporary India's DNA. Whatever, the legacy and contribution has achieved till now, Nehru is a prime builder and achiever of that and to exclude him will mean disrespecting him. The people of India are now reaping dividends of his investment in democracy, mixed economy, secularism and science, thanks to the bold optimism and wise planning of Jawaharlal Nehru, the real architect of modern India. His vision of a secular state and his endeavors to create one through democratic means will remain an enduring legacy which is now under serious attack from the old foes of Nehru. It is this legacy of Nehru that needs to be defended and nurtured.

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