

Nehru's Conception of Socialism

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In the thirties, in the absence of Panditji, when Gandhiji had drafted a Working Committee resolution on the social and economic objectives of the Congress, purporting to contain the basic elements of socialism—this particular word, of course, Gandhiji never used—Panditji, when he saw it, reacted sharply and wrote to Gandhiji an indignant letter, in which he said:

"A strange way of dealing with the subject of socialism is to use the word, which has a clearly defined meaning in the English language, in a totally different sense. For individuals to use words in a sense peculiar to themselves is not helpful in the commerce of ideas. A person who declares himself to be an engine-driver and then adds that his engine is of wood and is drawn by bullocks is misusing the word engine-driver."

To Nehru's violent accusation that Congress leaders, and impliedly, Gandhiji himself, did not know the meaning of socialism, Gandhiji calmly replied that he had still to come across an unambiguous commonly accepted definition of it.

After Panditji became the Prime Minister, his reply to the same question by Jayaprakash was more or less similar to Gandhiji's reply to him earlier.

This may mean one of two things, that Nehru talked socialism when not in office but gave it up when he became Prime Minister, or that, with Nehru, socialism was a growing thing, and that there was nothing static or dogmatic about his conception of socialism.

The latter is the only acceptable interpretation, taking the man and his life-work as a whole.

NEHRU was above all creed and dogma and he had a profound dislike for things static and hence for ideas which ceased to grow with changing times. This idea of growth and change, that men as well as ideas should continuously grow with the changing environment which shapes them is basic to the understanding of Nehru's mind and actions; Buddha and Buddhism appealed to him because of their emphasis on the principles of change as well as for their agnosticism and reasoned plea for abstaining from violence and hatred.

I

It is not possible to understand Nehru's ideas and actions except in the light of his mental and spiritual make-up, which governed even his views on socialism. If one wants to trace his thoughts and actions to their mainspring, one would not be wrong in saying that this mainspring was his sense of pride and dignity as a man. Anything that was not consistent with his sense of pride and dignity, he instinctively abhorred. This led him to reject asceticism, accept life and make it richer and fuller; rejection of life or asceticism implied for him a negation of the dignity of man. That is why with Rabindranath he could find ecstasy "in the midst of thousands of bonds of delight" rather than in Gandhi's austerity. It was again the same sense of pride and dignity of human existence that made him rebel against ideas and institutions that tended to degrade and dehumanise man. To Nehru, it was unmanly to reconcile one's self with injustice that endangered human dignity; ideas and institutions which supported such injustice must be changed and it does not be-

have the dignity of man to submit to such wrongs. Thus Nehru became a crusader in the fight against forces which destroyed human dignity and pride. He believed with Chandidas that:

सबार उपरे मानुष सत्य
ताहार उपरे नाई

*(Man is true above all,
There is nothing higher)*

This explains the fervour with which Nehru threw himself into the independence movement and the fury with which he fought the forces of inertia and ignorance and sought to demolish communal and caste walls, which tended to diminish man by discriminating between man and man. It was to uphold the dignity of man that Nehru became a champion of freedom for the colonial peoples and of world peace, and of the peaceful coexistence of widely differing communities, both at home and abroad.

Even this fight had to be a clean fight, in keeping with the dignity of man. To humiliate or destroy man was hardly in harmony with his lofty conception of human pride and dignity. Nehru often quoted Buddha's doctrine that a real victory is one in which there are neither victors nor vanquished. Since Gandhi's was a fearless fight against wrong in an open, dignified way, his non-violent struggle attracted Nehru. Nehru, however, did not believe in Gandhi's metaphysics of non-violence nor in non-violence as a creed. What appealed to him was the courageous and fearless determination to fight wrong in a manner which ennobled man, Nehru recognised the necessity for and accepted the use of force in collective struggles, but only

when other methods failed. His use of force in Hyderabad, Kashmir or Goa was only as a last resort and his decisions were taken only after he felt that there was no other course left open.

Abhorrence of Coercion

The conviction that bad means distort the ends was strengthened in Nehru by his contact with Gandhi and prevented him from resorting to the ruthlessness of either religious fanatics or ideology-dominated individuals and parties. Hatred begets a progeny like itself. Hence he was convinced that methods of social change had to be not only peaceful but had to be devised with a peaceful and equable temper. Such an approach calls for wisdom, born of dispassionate interpretation of experience and ceaseless search: human behaviour and human relationships as well as social attitudes and beliefs are woven into a very delicate pattern and it requires wisdom to know the methods of changing them. That is why he was against upsetting abruptly the socio-cultural environment of primitive tribes in India. That is also the reason why he sympathised with several socio-religious beliefs and practices in India, though he would have liked to see them change and change quickly. That was also the rationale of his foreign policy of peaceful co-existence and Panch-sheel.

This wisdom Nehru gained from his Discovery of India. India's strength in the earlier days lay in a certain dynamic approach to socio-cultural problems, which enabled her to absorb and assimilate a wide variety of cultural forms and weave them into a certain pattern without uprooting strongly held beliefs and convictions

of any culture group. This synthetic composite culture and its basic dynamism was what appealed to him and he admired the wisdom of those that made this possible. Nehru was temperamentally not sympathetic to metaphysics or mysticism and he frankly did not understand Gandhi's motivations. But what attracted him was the wisdom, dynamism and fearless courage as well as the "tremendous inner reserves of power" of India's great seers and sages of ancient days as well as men of his generation like Vivekanand, Gandhi and Vinoba. He was convinced that even with science and modern technology, it is not possible to create integrated personalities or social orders, unless the scientific and technological forces are governed by wisdom. In his last few years Nehru often used to repeat Vinoba's saying that in the atomic age, what was needed was a synthesis of "science and spirituality".

II

Consistently with his conception of human dignity and pride, Nehru held that man is his own master and is capable of conquering the forces of

nature and mould them to suit his needs, 'Man his own prison makes, none else compels'—

अपना हि अपनो नाथो

This Buddhist conception appealed to him. Hence his dislike of religious fetishes and practices, rituals and dogmas which made man a prisoner and a slave of superstitious beliefs by weakening his will. Man through ceaseless efforts has to grow in knowledge and wisdom and shape his own destiny. Science and technology are achievements of man's mind and his attitudes, beliefs and conduct as well as social relationships, institutions and practices have to be in conformity with the knowledge gained through scientific discovery and technological development. To be modern meant to Nehru keeping abreast of the development in knowledge and fashioning society on the basis of this knowledge.

That was why Nehru did not approve of a large number of socio-religious practices and institutions, caste, communal or other such narrow social groupings: these were not in keeping with modern age, and out of harmony

with the atomic age as also with the ancient wisdom of India. He was therefore keen on resolving what he called India's 'split personality' and the basic conflict between static and out-of-date forms of social beliefs and practices and modern scientific knowledge. It was at his stubborn insistence that the Hindu Code Bill was passed. Hindu Code has already shaken, as Panikkar has shown, the whole fabric of out-of-date Hindu social beliefs and practices.

Social change and the systematic acquisition of knowledge and pursuit of science and technology are basic to India's development. Hence along with social legislation and public agitation for social reform, Nehru actively supported scientific and technological pursuits. It was largely due to him that several national scientific laboratories as also technological institutes were set up immediately after Independence. It was again because of the value and significance which he attached to scientific research for its own sake and because of its far-reaching repercussions on other aspects of life that he took in his own charge



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the Department of Atomic Energy from its inception. His large vision of a dynamic society growing in knowledge and adapting itself to the latest findings of science and technology was responsible for his and the Government's insistence on scientific pursuits. This vision and wisdom cannot be understood in narrow economic terms.

No Merit in Poverty

Nehru was appalled by India's poverty and revolted by it because such poverty was inconsistent with self-respect and dignity of man. It hurt his pride as an Indian. A social system which permits such poverty and tolerates such wide disparities of income and wealth degrades not only the poor but also the rich.

To remove this abysmal poverty and to create a just society, this was the motivation for the Indian Struggle for Independence and he was the only one perhaps along with Gandhi who attached to the problems of poverty and social justice paramount significance. But Gandhi's and Nehru's ways differed. Gandhi's emphasis on the evils of the industrial system and his insistence that these were an integral part of the system, Nehru could never accept. His mind was quite made up by the end of the 'thirties on industrialisation based on modern science and technology as the only radical cure for India's economic problems and since industrialisation had to subserve a social purpose, it had to be carried out in a socialist framework. Nehru's debate on industrialisation and socialism with Gandhi went on till Independence and they agreed to differ. In 1945 Gandhi expressed his views on these problems in a letter to Nehru and asked Nehru for his views on them as it was he who would have to bear the responsibility for the task. Nehru politely refused to discuss these issues, as he thought that it was premature to deal with them at that time.

Any way his mind was made up and immediately the situation became normal after Independence, Nehru set up the Planning Commission and by 1955 got the Congress to accept socialism as the objective. He carefully nurtured the planning apparatus and machinery and it was largely due to him that India has succeeded in her planning efforts much more than any other under-developed country. It is again because of Nehru that socialism has at least been formally accepted by the Indian people and the various policies and measures have come to be judged by this criterion. Gandhi's Saivodaya—a word coined from 'Unto This Last'

of the Bible—would probably have had a greater appeal to the masses in India; but its association with Gandhi's socio-economic philosophy was enough to make it suspect in Nehru's eyes.

Agriculture Not Neglected

It was again he who gave the impetus to big river valley projects for irrigation and power; this was a grand design and it was taken up immediately after Independence. It was also Nehru who brought the question of land reforms to the fore and pushed the policy of land to the tiller.

Because he pinned his faith in science and technology as the solvent of India's problem of poverty it does not follow that Nehru failed to realise the importance of agriculture and handicrafts in her economic life. That he did, particularly the importance of handicrafts for providing employment. But Nehru had no sympathy for the view that the handicrafts should be supported for their own sake. Khadi to him was a 'livery of freedom': it had no other implications for him as it had for Gandhi. Support to and encouragement of handicrafts as provider of employment was to him only a stop-gap policy, till production techniques could be completely modernised. Any social or economic structure that failed to take advantage of science and technology was repugnant to him. If men can produce more, earn more and lead a richer life through the application of science and technology, why should they not do so? Poverty to him was an evil and however much he might detest vulgar ostentation or excessive indulgence, Nehru never accepted Gandhi's principle of restraining wants, nor did he share Gandhi's vision of self-sufficient village republics.

III

What was then the content of Nehru's socialist planning?

At one time Marxism had appealed to him and as a tool of analysis for understanding historical processes, he had used Marxist terminology and analysis in his "Glimpses of World History". Nehru's passion for socialism originated from his desire to wipe out poverty and make the socio-economic system subserve the needs of man in a just and equitable way. This he thought was being done in Russia in 1929 when he visited Moscow and wrote a book praising Russian achievements. Later on his views on Marxism changed; he came to look upon it as too narrow a doctrine, which ignored powerful non-economic factors. And

the ruthlessness and violence associated with Marxist revolutions were hardly in harmony with the deep current of humanity which motivated his thought and action. No creed or dogma appealed to him and he did not like even the Marxist dogma, which he considered imperfect and incompatible with the atomic age. Socialism meant to him a just society which respected human dignity. Hence even the complex of socialism, he felt, has to grow and change with the changing circumstances,

Karachi Congress

In the 1931 Karachi Congress resolution on socialism, which Nehru piloted, the Congress "took a step, a very short step, in a socialistic direction by advocating the nationalisation of key industries and services and also other measures to lessen the burden on the poor and to increase it on the rich" ("Autobiography"). But "this was not socialism at all, Nehru adds, "a capitalistic state could easily accept almost everything contained in that resolution". It was Subhas Bose, however, who gave a concrete content to socialism in terms of economic development in his presidential speech at the Hari-pura session of the Congress. It was Subhas again who appointed the National Planning Committee to work out the implications of planning. Nehru even till Independence had not given much thought to problems of development, excepting that he favoured planning in the framework of a socialist society.

This was in a sense a handicap. When the Planning Commission was set up in 1950 no strategy of planning was given to it. As a result, the First Plan became merely a summary statement of all the projects that had already been taken on hand. There was no clear statement even of the broad philosophy of planned development. True, consistent with socialism, the social overheads and some basic industries like steel, etc. were to be developed by the State; but in the Indian situation this task even in a capitalist economy would have devolved on the State in practice. Missing in the Plan was the vital statement of the actual measures to be taken for economic development and for attaining the socialist objective.

What is, indeed, the socialist content of the Plans? Excepting progressive income taxation (which in practice is evaded), the much-publicised but relatively ineffective taxes on wealth, inheritance and gifts, the ineffective and irrationally designed subsidy pro-

gramme for handicrafts and an ineffective employment policy, there is in fact nothing socialistic about the Plans.

What the Plans Lacked

If education had been made free up to the university level, if concerted measures were taken to employ fully the available labour force, if active and energetic steps were taken to provide credit, marketing facilities and materials to small farmers and viable handicrafts on a really big scale, if land reforms were not sabotaged, if free and adequate medical facilities were rationally organised within the available resources to meet the demands of the poor, if essential goods were distributed equitably at reasonable prices to the poorer sections of the population and if conspicuous consumption of the rich, resulting in misdirection of investment and consequent wastage of some resources, had been suppressed drastically—if all these had been attempted and pursued with energy, the Plans would have begun to acquire some socialist content.

Socialism, unfortunately, has been a mere slogan and it is being explained

away by politicians and civil servants, while still being exploited, as a political slogan, without any policy content.

This state of affairs is partly due to the fact that Nehru did not have enough time to work out the implications of a planned socialist society and therefore he could not give concrete directives to the Planning Commission. Partly, and more importantly, this is due to the fact that Congress politicians and the service personnel of the Government do not seriously believe in this programme and while paying lip service to it, they sabotaged what little socialist content there was in policy measures.

In this situation, what could Nehru have done? If his comrades and the administration did not wholeheartedly support the programme, how could he force them? This was his dilemma. Probably, it was his sensitive temperament which held him back from forcing the pace, and pressing things to the breaking point. Ruthlessness and violence went against his democratic convictions and unlike the Mahatma, he would not march ahead of

his comrades; in trying to keep pace with them, his vision was blurred. The Mahatma could be ruthless when the situation needed it, and drop those who could not stand the test; but then he had learnt to walk alone. Nehru wanted to move forward with others, and could not force their pace beyond a point.

IV

It is given to very very few to attain so much in a life-time as Nehru did, and yet, how many of his dreams did he realise? He had a tryst with destiny and he became a man of destiny. But as with Gandhi, so with him, the results did not satisfy him. But more than for his attainments, Nehru will be remembered and his memory cherished for what Tagore called the "deep current of humanity" in his make-up, which made the person "greater than his deeds and truer than his surroundings". His name will be enshrined along with the galaxy of those great seers and sages, who since the days of the Vedas have tried to shape the destiny of this ancient land.

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