

Jawaharlal Nehru

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Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.... Those opening words of Nehru on August 14, 1947, proclaiming the independence of India, in appropriately flowery language, may seem to have been Nehru's finest hour, never mind that the long-awaited moment was barred by partition and unprecedented mayhem.

Gopal has written a long and detailed biography on Nehru, of which this edition is a mere condensation¹. The work is not exactly an undiluted hagiography, as the author does occasionally venture to criticise his subject, be it in the most respectful tones; but it is nevertheless an official enterprise in spirit intended to set the record straight and present the case of India from Nehru's point of view, claiming him to be one of the greatest statesmen of the 20th century.

The work is carefully not to say meticulously written, well documented, giving an impression of solidity and fairness. Needless to say the biographer has had full access to Nehru's papers. Still it simply does not come to life. Nehru remains a shadowy figure. Idealized and efficient, never sullied by base thoughts and motives, carrying on and completing the project to which Gandhi set in motion giving it a clear purpose. Nehru was not destined for greatness originally. A rather spoilt high-caste boy sent to the best schools, going to Harrows and doing a stint at Oxford, showing no exceptional talents nor displaying any fixed purpose of life, but he nevertheless matured on his return to India taking on a mission. Admittedly he was born into the ranks of the freedom fighters as his father played a very prominent role in the burgeoning Congress party. As with many people, the turning point for Nehru was the British massacre at Amritsar in 1919. His mission was clear and not to be compromised, namely full independence for India, no half-measures like Dominion status were to be accepted. A great politician needs hard core principles and a clear view of what should be attained, compromises are means to a principled end, not just for survival. The struggle was long, provoking acts of defiance and stints in prison, the most serious and extended coming at the end during the second world war. The stints in prison were relatively comfortable. Although isolated he was nevertheless able to read and work, writing among other things his autobiography and later on a history of the world for his daughter Indira based on his own fonts of knowledge. His relations with Gandhi were not always without friction. While Gandhi had a sentimental view of the Indian peasant, Nehru wanted to usher him into the modern world and to abolish poverty not to exult it. To achieve this end Nehru had become a convinced socialist initially looking for the Russian revolution as a model, but although he remained true to socialist principles

¹ Oxford India paperback 1993. The preface written in May 1989 refers to an original three volume work, out of which the author has just fashioned a compact version in just one volume

throughout his life, those were confined to the economic sphere and not the political. But in spite of his modernist leanings he was also a traditionalist, very conscious of his high cast status, adhering to its rituals. (In other sources one learns that Nehru travelled with a train of cooks preparing his food always using their own utensiles.) He also was fascinated with Indian history and its old myths, and wrote later in life a will, in which he exalted the Ganga, and wished that part of his ashes would be strewn into that river, as to enable him to make that ancient journey to be finally dispersed into the ocean². There is in every man a conflict between loyalty to the past and a commitment to the future. No man can ever reconcile the two, and thus there is no reason to not assume that also Nehru was torn between contradictory impulses.

As the leader of the second most populous country in the world he was beset with urgent and almost insurmountable problems. The first of which was the partition, which was seen as a victory of so called communal ambitions, in other words a recognition of separate Hindi and Muslim destinies, something Nehru and the Congress party had been fighting. Thus the secular nature of India was very much emphasized. Muslims as well as Hindus should feel to be full citizens of India, in contrast to the idea of Pakistan based on the creation of a pure Muslim state. The legacy of this split is still with us. Riots between Muslims and Hindus still take place in India, many of them involving thousands of casualties, yet almost being totally ignored by the foreign press. And above all in terms of the continued conflict over Kashmir, as unresolved today as it was over fifty years ago. Gopal is not very clear as to why Kashmir developed into such a bone of contention. True it is a state with a majority Muslim population although its ruler was a Hindu and opted for joining the Indian federation. Gopal claims that Nehru was willing to give it up would he through a plebiscite be convinced of the true will of its population, but for various reasons, some of them attributed to Pakistani belligerency and intransigence by Gopal, the time was never ready for it. The Kashmir question was brought up in the UN and to Nehru's dismay a sympathetic hearing for the Indian point of view was never had, and especially the Western powers tended to take a pro-Pakistani view, which led to the close military assistance of the US to Pakistan and the inclusion of that country in its military orbit.

Nehru had a clear principle of foreign policy, namely non-alignment. During the fifties he became a major international figure opposing the military blocks that had formed after the Second World War and instead preaching the blessings of independence. Thus Nehru tried to play a role in the aftermath of the Korean war, during the Suez crisis and the almost concomitant Hungarian revolution. Also during the Congo crisis he kept up a pronounced profile urging for support of the new republic in a general crusade against colonialism. To some extent his good-will as an apostle of peace suffered a setback as he almost immediately after a peace congress returned to India and expelled the Portuguese out of Goa. Gopal predictably plays down this as an insignificant incidence. After all colonialism on the Indian subcontinent had run its course. The English had left, the French had abandoned their enclave at Pondicherry, and the Portuguese presence was clearly an anachronism recognised by any sane party and its termination was only a matter of time having germinating for at least a decade. The actual military take over of Goa was done in

² The main part was to be strewn in the soil to join in the cycle of regrowth.

less than 24 hours involved almost no casualties and spawned no opposition or insurgence after the *fait a complit*. More serious were internal rebellions in the Assam state (the question of the Nagaland) and earlier in his tenure the vacillation of the Hyderabad Raj, crises which did not attract much attention outside India. But what really made Nehrus foreign policy to flounder was the relation with China.

Communist China and Independant India were almost born at the same time. Inittially their relations were guardedly friendly and it was Nehrus fervent hope that they should remain so. There were however problems, Tibet being a primary one. India chose to keep a low profile and apart from offering political asylum to the Dalai Lama, much to the irritation of the Chinese leaders, they recognised the problem of Tibetan autonomy as an internal Chinese one. Harder to accomodate were the claims on Indian territories the Chinese made. The Indian had a clear case buttressed by documents, while the Chinese made vague and contradictory claims, much to the consternation and puzzlement of Nehru, based on crude small-scale maps. As when they made facts on the ground, building a highway on Indian territory, thinsg were going too far, but India had not the military resources to oppose effectively. Eventually this lead to a veritable Chinese invasion across the Himalayas. However, the invasion was not carried through, the Chinese realising that they were losing on the international scene, clearly being seen as the aggressor. But the prospects of a Chinese invasion threw Nehru into a dilemma of which he had a hard time to extricate himself, being forced to relay on American military assistance to an extent that would compromise the non-aligned status of the country irrevocably. Luckily things never came to a head, but the crisis marked the end of Nehrus international influence and his status as an undisputable leader although no one was impolite to state so openly. A year later Nehru suffered a stroke and a few month later his abdominal aourta burst and he died.

If one wants to sum up the legacy of Nehru his international one has to take second place to his domestic. His main concern was to lift up India from its primitivity and misery. To do so he needed to invest in science and education, reorganizing the agricultural sector and effect a rapid industrialization. He was clearly committed to socialist ideas claiming that the core industries should be state owned and believing in a planned economy. Thus Five year plans were formulated and actually three of them were instigated during his leadership. A rapidly expanding population was a problem, although Nehru initially did not view India as a whole as overpopulated. He was however reluctant to resort to draconian measures to stem it, even when it became clear that increases in food production could not keep up with the growth of the population. Gopal faults Nehru with his reluctance to put top-priority on landreform and instead focusing on the technology of agriculture, the effect being that an elite of landowners consolidated their holdings. As a leader Nehru did not always chose the best collaborators and even when he became aware of their shortcomings he was reluctant to act upon his insights.

But the great triumph of India after its independance has always been its democratic institutions, unlike so many Third World countries it has not succumbed to dictatorships and unbridled corruption. However, Nehru was not immune to the allure of being a dictator. In a letter, causing much bewildement among his staff, he warned of his temperamental affinity for dictatorship, citing his energy and his willpower. One may be forgiven if one

does not entirely disregard it as playfully ironic, and in that case his overcoming of the temptation must be thought of as his transcendental ethical decision that steered India onto the right course when it so easily could have foundered. Still democracy in India is far from perfect as Gopal notes. Its blessings were not universally distributed but were to a large extent exploited by the middle class to gain power and influence and encourage corruption. Yet the giant of a country has limped along never abandoning fully democratic principles and showing the resilience to overcome strong assaults on them, like the period of suspension during the reign of his daughter.

The biography of Nehru gives many facts but fails to endow them with any life or drama. An outsider has little to gain from it, only if you are well acquainted with the modern history of India able to put things into context are you bound to profit from it.

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