

**On the Occasion
of a Centenary:**

NEHRU - A PROFILE*

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Jawaharlal Nehru was no longer alive when the first Indian satellite was put into orbit around the Earth. From outer space India resembles a human heart crossed by the veins of rivers. When Nehru had passed away, his ashes were sprinkled from aircraft to fall onto his beloved land and mingle with the soil. The three coloured flag of saffron, white and green, which he had first raised slowly as the flag of free India, was this time at half-mast over the Red Fort in Delhi.

Jawaharlal (which means beautiful jewel) was born in Allahabad on November 14, 1889. His father Motilal was from a family of Kashmiri Brahmins. The Moghul Emperor Farrukhsiar, on a visit to the Kashmir Valley, bestowed on the family an estate on the canal bank. Ever since then, they began to add the word Nehru to the family name - Nehru meaning "canal" in Sanskrit.

Motilal Nehru was born in the north of India, where there is noticeable blending of Hindu and Moslem cultures. Mubarek Ali, a Moslem, found shelter with the Brahman Nehrus after English soldiers had hanged his father in the presence of his mother and killed other relatives. At one time, Annie Besant was also staying with the Nehru family. She was an Irishwoman, who had won for herself the name of the "philanthropic heroine" of London's East End, the realm of poverty.

Motilal was determined to give his son a European education. In 1905 the whole Nehru family set off for England. Harrow was a private boarding school, which provided the British Empire with prime ministers - Pitt, Palmerston, Baldwin and Churchill. Reading there a great deal, he chose books on the Italian freedom movement, on the war of the American colonists, on the French Revolution and on the Irish. When Nehru received the right to practice law in London, he decided to return to his native land and discover India anew for himself. In 1912 he attended for the first time an Indian National Congress session.

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The world was being drawn into one of the greatest and most sanguinary wars that mankind had ever known. Italy had already attacked Turkey in Tripoli, and the Balkan Wars had broken out. The sympathy of the Indians, especially those in the Muslim faith, was on the side of Turkey, and a medical mission was sent from India to help the Turks. When the pistol shots in Sarajevo brought in response the thunder of artillery, almost a million and a half Indians were sent to fight in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iran and Afghanistan. The Indian soldiers, who returned home by sea or on foot and who brought with them the smell of fires, powder and blood but who also knew now how to fire a rifle, found their holdings ruined or falling into decay, and land, once fruitful, dried up and barren. Nehru firmly decided to give up the practice of law and devote himself entirely to political activity.

The new Secretary of State for India, Lord Montagu, announced in 1918 that the British Government intended to broaden the participation of Indians in the government of the country. The press instantly opened a campaign presenting the reforms as gesture of self-government to the Indian people. The reforms proposed a two-chamber legislative body under the Viceroy, which Indians would enter, some nominated, some elected. But the decisions would have no legal power without the approval of the Viceroy.

Jawaharlal was on the side of those who considered the reforms unworthy. The Punjab was the last province in India to fall under the blows of the colonizers; now it was to become the first to rise against their domination. Jallinwala Bagh is a large city square in Amritsar. On April 13, 1919, about twenty-thousand inhabitants gathered here. At the very height of the meeting, about forty soldiers burst into the square leaving behind a thousand dead. The Congress Commission heard seventeen hundred witnesses, who told of the atrocity of General Dyer's troops. Dyer's troops went everywhere in Punjab. It was these very Punjabis who sent to Britain the largest number of recruits, many of whom had given their lives in the interests of the Crown.

In the last days of 1919 the National Congress held its own session in Amritsar. All the leading figures of the national liberation movement of India gathered there: Tilak, Annie Besant, the Ali brothers, C.R. Das, M.A. Jinnah, Gandhi and of course, the Nehrus, father and son. On their return from the Punjab, the Congress Commission prepared a report, published in 1920, which ran into volumes.

It was in these days that the Caliphate Committee, set up by Muhammed and Shavkat Ali, accelerated its activity in support of the Turks,

who faced the further dismemberment of their country. The world "khilaf", meaning hostile in Urdu, was understood by the masses as to be against the colonizers. Nehru wanted to become acquainted with the peasants, of whose conditions of life, he had only a hazy impression. They surrounded him in every village, hastening to pour out with a childish faith and frankness the sufferings they were going through. They told of mysterious illnesses, which carried off whole families, of droughts which burnt out once fertile fields or the tyranny of overlords, local or foreign. In his **Autobiography**, Nehru wrote: "I was filled with shame and sorrow..." He understood the need to organize the peasantry into a nation-wide movement for freedom and independence. They were "naked, hungry, oppressed and utterly miserable", but also full of dormant power.

In late 1920 the two Nehrus witnessed Gandhi's triumph at the Congress session in Nagpur. They both voted for Gandhi's program of non-cooperation and for non-violent means to attain **swaraj**. This period was also the beginning of Nehru's arrests, trials and imprisonments. The first verdict in 1921 was six months' imprisonment; he spent eighty-seven days in the Lucknow prison. After release he started a successful campaign for the development of the national industry, **swadeshi**, carried on in the United Provinces, where he persuaded the local traders in textiles to refuse to buy British-made yarn and sell clothing from homespun. For this he was given another eight months. He wrote later: "At night we slept on the floor and I would wake up with a start, full of horror, to find that a rat or a mouse had just passed over my face". The heavy prison gates once again swung wide before him. But shortly after, he was sentenced to thirty months imprisonment for taking part in "conspiracy".

In 1926, on account of his wife's deteriorating health, he sailed from Bombay to Europe, where he began to link the struggle for independence in India with the anti-imperialist movements of all the progressive forces elsewhere. In an anti-colonial congress in Brussels he met Soong Chin Ling (the widow of the outstanding Chinese democrat Sun Yat-sen), George Lansbury (the prominent figure in the British Labour Party), Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland (two of Europe's leading intellectuals) and a young Vietnamese, Nguyen-Ai-Quoc (later known as Ho Chi Minh, whom Nehru met again in 1954 when they had both become heads of state).

Nehru returned from Europe ready to plunge into the seething current of political life in India. The country was living in expectation of great events. Nehru set out for Locknow, where the Simon Commission was expected. The day before the arrival of the commission to the city, where Nehru and other Congressmen were conducting a rehearsal for

demonstration, mounted police attacked the crowd. The demonstrators offered no resistance. Weak from loss of blood, Nehru was unconscious. While the Simon Commission collapsed in disgrace, the name of Jawaharlal Nehru became more and more popular among his contrymen. Gandhi wrote to him at that time: "May God spare you and make you His chosen instrument for freeing India from the yoke". Nehru's popularity was so great that in spite of sharp differences of opinion on some important issues, he was again elected General Secretary of the Congress. Gandhi again assured his comrades: "He is pure as crystal, he is truthful beyond suspicion. The nation will be safe in his hands".

In late 1930 the Congress leadership prepared a plan for a civil disobedience campaign. For a start they decided to declare the 26th of January as Independence Day. Gandhi decided to begin the campaign by breaking the Salt Act. In Nehru's opinion, this was a minor measure; he was a maximalist on the question of independence. But events were unfolding extremely rapidly. Gandhi had set off at the head of seventy-eight of his followers who lived in the *ashram* on the Sabarmati River in Dandi, towards the shores of the Indian Ocean. The four-hundred kilometer trek took three weeks. The Mahatma, with a peaceful but fearless appearance, tapping his massive wooden staff which made a contrast with his fragile-looking figure, strode at the head of an ever growing procession. Nehru soon advised the Local Congress committees on how best to arrange the extraction and sale of salt in different parts of the country and how to conduct a boycott of foreign goods.

The Civil Obedience campaign spread. Nehru was duly arrested and was sentenced to six months at the Naini prison where he was put in an isolated block known as Kuttaghar (the Dog Kennel). Although released after ten weeks, he was again taken to the central prison in Naini, this time for two years. He wrote there about a hundred and seventy letter-essays on the history of mankind to his daughter. These letters, which also refer to the Turkish War of National Liberation and its leader Atatürk with glowing terms, formed the basis of his book **Glimpses of World History**, which his sister prepared for publication in 1934. In his essay-letters Nehru invariably shows himself a convinced opponent of all forms of enslavement and oppression of man by man. His attitude to colonialism is uncompromising. Convincingly he reveals its fatal consequences for the peoples of Asia and Africa. Speaking of the "civilizing" role of the colonial powers, he writes: "Beneath the appearance of virtue, there is greed and cruelty and unscrupulousness..."

Moreover, the world found itself in the grip of a great crisis. Mussolini was ruling in Italy, and Hitler had come to power in Germany. Nehru

wrote: "Fascism and Nazism arise in all their naked brutality and make war the end and aim of all their policy". That was exactly the diagnosis of Republican Turkey. While some reformists and liberals yielded their positions without a fight to extreme reaction, some others took refuge in Atatürk's Turkey. In a pamphlet which Nehru wrote at this time, **Whither India**, he pointed as the way out the struggle of India together with the other peoples against foreign domination.

All local governments were authorized to arrest Nehru if opportunity arose. Rabindranath Tagore received the Nehru family in Calcutta. In his white tunic, fluttering freely in the breeze, with his white hair and long beard and surprisingly lively eyes, the writer resembled a patriarch, on the side of progress and international unity of the spiritual treasures and cultures of nations. Gandhi wanted to return to India's "golden age", a Hinduism cleansed of Untouchability. The first recognized the joy of life, the second preached self-denial and asceticism. All three —Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru— lived the same spirit of India, ancient but eternally young, variable and single. They all strived to see their country free and prosperous.

On January 26, 1934, Nehru and his followers managed to organize the celebration of Independence Day. On a charge of "antigovernment activity" he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. So began his seventh term in prison. In the tiny cell in the Alipore central prison near Calcutta, he started to write his **Autobiography**, which he at first wanted to call "In and Out of Prison". His new book was not a calendar of events in Nehru's life, but an analytical work. Nowhere does he try to attract the reader's attention to himself. Neither does he turn himself into an apostle. He debates all his doubts, he frankly admits his own errors and he questions his own conclusions. He honestly seeks the truth. He does not refrain from criticisms, at times very severe, of the people closest to him, not even sparing Mahatma Gandhi.

The government "suspended" his sentence when his wife was in a critical condition. A small urn of ashes was all that remained to him of his wife. He sprinkled her remains in the waters of the Ganges, retaining a small portion until the end of his days to be mingled with his won after his death.

Before a Congress session in early 1938, an article appeared in a Calcutta newspaper called **The Modern Review**. The unknown author firmly objected to Nehru's election to the post of Congress Presidency for a third term. The article asserted that this was dangerous for the cause of democracy. It continued: "Caesarism is always at the door, and

is it not possible that Jawaharlal might fancy himself as a Caesar? By electing him a third time we shall exalt one man at the cost of the Congress... We want no Caesars." The article caused some stir in Congress circles. Who was the author? Not even the editor could answer this question. The review had received the article by post. Nehru himself was the author! Subhas Chandra Bose was elected President.

Nehru went to London in mid-1938 and met some members of the British Cabinet and Viceroy Lingithgow, who told him that a wide gap separated them. Nehru spoke indignantly of the Munich deal. In an interview he said: "Peace at any price - at the price of the blood and the suffering of others, the humiliation of democracy and the dismemberment of friendly nations. Even so, it is not peace but continuous conflict, blackmail - the rule of violence and ultimately war". This was also the diagnosis of Turkey. The Indian and the Turkish leaders saw in Fascism and Nazism a strengthening of imperialism, against which the people of both countries waged stubborn fights.

Nehru thought that if Britain was fighting for the preservation and spread of democracy, she must immediately finish with imperialism in her own possessions. A free India would gladly unite with other free nations for mutual defence against aggression. The Congress called on the British Government to declare openly what were its aims in this war. In the meantime, Britain was trying to strengthen its hold on India. The British Parliament "supplemented" the 1935 Government of India Act with a document, giving the Viceroy and the provincial governors special powers "in the interests of preserving peace and order in the country". A law was passed on the defence on India, on the strength of which the authorities could relentlessly deal with those whose activity was interpreted as "endangering defence".

The Congress started a Civil Disobedience campaign. Jawaharlal was to begin *satyagraha* in Allahabad. He could not even get there. In late 1940 he was arrested at the railway station. He was sentenced to four years; this was his eighth prison term. He was released, however, in December 1941. The war, in the meantime, reached the borders of India. In mid-1941, Churchill and F.D. Roosevelt had signed the Atlantic Charter, declaring that the United States and Britain wished to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who had been forcibly deprived of them. Did this extend to India?

The prominent English statesman, Stafford Cripps, arrived in Delhi, bringing with him proposals to be approved or rejected, without any amendments. Cripps said that there were no hopes of agreement and

returned home. The Congress leaders spent several weeks drawing up a resolution, demanding an immediate end to British rule. A journalist, preparing an outline of the activities of the Congressmen for his paper, entitled it "Quit India!", and thereafter the name stuck. This led to the arrest of all the outstanding leaders. Nehru was delivered to the Ahmednagar Fort, within whose walls he was destined to spend another 1040 days. There were mass demonstrations everywhere. The British official figures gave the number of arrests as over sixty-thousand with about a thousand killed. These official figures were no doubt understated.

This time in prison, Nehru created perhaps his most important and well-written work, completed in the unusually short period of five months, to which he gave the precise and all-embracing title **The Discovery of India**. He wrote about his country's past, to explain for himself and to show his fellow countrymen wherein lay India's strength and weaknesses, to lay bare the secrets of her vitality, her greatness and wisdom, and to find the key to the understanding of the causes for periodical stagnation. He skillfully conducted the reader through the labyrinth of India's past, captivately, recounting complicated events and recreating masterly portraits of Buddha, Mahavira, Kalidasa, Ramakrishna, Tilak, Gandhi, Tagore and others.

While the Second World War was reaching its closing stages, the British Government released the Congress leaders. The 1945 elections brought the Labour Party into office. The Attlee Government announced that it would help to give India "full self-government". The word "independence" was not mentioned. Strikes increased, the sailors of the Royal Indian Navy mutinied and the banners of the Congress and the Muslim League were hoisted. The Congress leaders acknowledged the justice of the protests but convinced the people that violent actions were liable to nullify all the efforts to gain Indian freedom by peaceful means.

On August 24, 1946, the Indians learned the composition of the Interim Government, to be headed by the Viceroy, Lord Wavell. Nehru was given the posts of Vice-Premier and Minister of Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. A fortnight later, the Indians listened with bated breath to a broadcast by Jawaharlal, which was in essence the new India's first foreign policy declaration. He called to continue to prevent war and fight colonialism and imperialism. These principles soon became the foundation of the policy of "positive neutrality", which since the mid-fifties has been known as the policy of non-alignment.

Lord Mountbatten, who had replaced Wavell, had met Nehru a year ago, during the latter's visit to Singapore. The two rode together through

the streets in an open car. When one of his staff tried to point out to Mountbatten that this might serve to enhance Nehru's prestige, he snapped: "Nonsense! It can only increase mine". The new Viceroy was charming, and his charm was dangerous. This is how he forced his preference on the Prime Minister of one of the princely states, whose people had not yet expressed a decision. He picked up a crystal paperweight from his desk, gazed into it for some time and announced that at that very moment the persons involved declared their agreements with his plan. Allan Campbell Johnson, head of the Viceroy's press section, told of this incident years later.

On August 4, 1947, Nehru sent Mountbatten the list of the first Indian National Government, approved by the Congress. Eleven days later, he slowly raised a brightly coloured flag at Red Fort. For sixteen years, annually on the 15th of August, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the national flag of India on Independence Day.

In the temporary residence of the Indian Prime Minister, at 17 York Road, he worked and occasionally went out into the garden to pluck a dark, as yet unopened rose and put in the third button-hole of his **sherwani**. There was a migration without precedent in the history of India. Over six million Muslims and four and a half million Hindus moved from one country to the other. About 700,000 of them perished.

India was the first state after the war that had freed herself from the colonial yoke. Peace was an absolute necessity for her. But also for the world. Chou En-lai agreed with Nehru that they should sign a joint declaration setting out the five principles, on which relations between the two countries should be built. They were: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; non-aggression; non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence. These five principles, Pancha Shila in Hindi, received wide recognition and support. They were embodied in the final document of the Bandung Conference (1955).

With the appearance of the liberated countries of Asia and Africa, there emerged a hope for changes for the better that would give people the chance to live peacefully and build confidently. Mankind was tired of mistrust and fear born of the cold war. Our epoch produced new political leaders like Nehru able to reflect the common aspirations of the overwhelming majority of people on this planet who are striving for progress. It was of course the great Atatürk of the 1920s and the 1930s who pioneered the same political vision that spread far beyond national horizons. Two decades later, Nehru was also much more than a national leader.

He condemned colonialism and neo-colonialism in all its forms, and he actively supported the national liberation movements of all oppressed peoples. Like Turkey's Atatürk, whom he admired, Nehru feared that an explosive situation in any part of the world could spark off a conflict and embrace the whole globe. Hence, in the alarming weeks of the Suez crisis in 1956, he put his weight against aggression. He certainly found the decisions of the Egyptians as just and lawful. When the treaty banning atomic tests in the atmosphere, cosmic space and underwater was signed in 1963, Nehru stated that this treaty had broken the ice, torn the shroud of fear enveloping mankind and opened the way to disarmament.

After the Belgrade conference of the heads of non-aligned countries (1961), Nehru, together with President Nkrumah of Ghana, was charged with informing the Soviet leaders of the results of their work. Soekarno and Keita delivered a similar note to Kennedy.

All these moves, he believed, were for the people. He was probably one of the most accessible heads of government. Every morning after breakfast, people who wanted to talk with the Prime Minister were waiting for him in his garden. He never failed to give them attention. Under the letter "N" in the telephone directory anyone could find the entry: residence 32312, office 32160. When the second five year plan provided for the building of the first atomic reactor in Bombay, Nehru being the head of the Atomic Energy Department of India, the "coolies" of yesterday were raising a "temple" of fairy tale energy which would radically change their lives.

When he reached his seventies, Nehru's heart more and more made itself felt. Prison and emotional overloads produced their effects. Sorrows had left their traces. On the morning of May 27, he felt seriously unwell. At two o'clock in the afternoon, there still lay on his bedside table an open book of Robert Frost's poetry with Nehru's favorite lines underlined:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep..."

When he was no more, industrial complexes had transformed the face of ancient India, in a historically short period placing it among the first ten industrially developed countries.