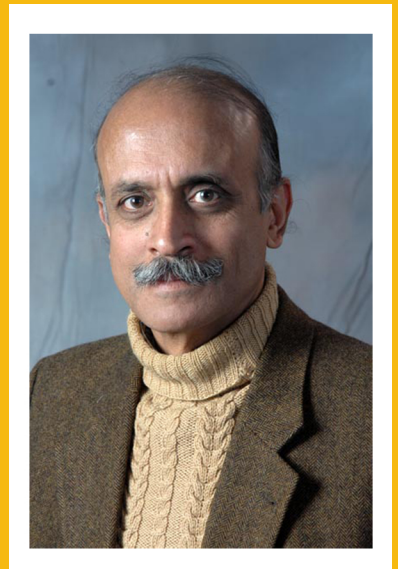


# The Nehru Memorial Lecture 2023

*'Nehru's Democratic Dilemmas'*

by Professor Madhavan K Palat



## Introduction

Nehru presented himself virtually throughout his political journey as a liberal, social democrat, and socialist, advocating the civil liberties of the freedoms of speech, assembly, and conscience, the political rights to universal suffrage and participation in governance, and the social rights to welfare and life with dignity. This vision would be realized by a democratic politics that combined mass movements for sundry good causes and the institutions of parliamentary democracy, independent judiciary, free press, and a comprehensive range of autonomous bodies. But he always feared for his idealized vision of democracy with its core of liberal values and socialist egalitarianism and justice. The democratic process had often threatened to erect a dictatorship through democratic means, beginning with the plebiscitary dictatorship crafted in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, called Bonapartism by Marxists and Caesarism by others, its mutation into various forms of fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and its culmination in its extreme variant, National Socialism in Europe. The equivalent on the left was the brooding presence of the Soviet dictatorship, followed by the Chinese species from the 1950s and many lesser ones throughout the world. India, he argued, was well placed to erect a democracy, but he cautioned that it had little reason to expect immunity from degeneration.

He did not treat the necessity for democracy as self-evident. As with all his other commitments, be it secularism, nationalism, internationalism, or socialism, he sought to justify the choice of liberal and social democracy over all other forms of politics and constitutions. He scattered his arguments throughout his published works, speeches, interviews and correspondence without a systematic exposition. His principal thesis was that Indian politics had been democratic over the thirty years under Gandhian leadership until the late 1940s. It had engaged in mass mobilization in as peaceful a manner as was possible, openly and without conspiracy to the extent of Gandhi informing the colonial government in good time about impending satyagrahas and other forms of protest action. Parliamentary politics was effectively blocked by the despotism of the colonial regime in spite of the anaemic forms of electoral politics and legislative debate permitted by the Acts of 1919 and 1935. Before this phase Indians had engaged in vigorous debate since the 1860s and 1870s to shape the politics of the future nation, a politics that was to be liberal, constitutional, and progressive; and they had even engaged in popular mobilization in Bengal during the Swadeshi agitation. Democracy had become an unshakable Indian political tradition in the

course of half a century or more, and it was more firmly grounded than in most of the world, including much of Europe which had, during those three decades before 1947, reeled under Soviet socialism, National Socialism and Fascism, and various forms of Bonapartism, Caesarism, and conservative dictatorship, besides civil wars and the most hideous of world wars. Indian democracy was, he claimed further, thoroughly and profoundly Indian in that it had been fashioned by Indian political movements in opposition to the despotism of the Raj and to shake free of its clutches. It was not borrowed or alien of inspiration even as educated Indians examined western democratic theories and practices just as they did western forms of dictatorship and totalitarianism, or racism, eugenics, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and genocide, and took note of these phenomena when preparing the Constitution. Lastly, India enjoyed a peculiar advantage of backwardness and weakness: it did not possess an empire, nor could it entertain any aspirations to empire. Consequently, its democratic impulses seemed untainted, unlike the European that combined democracy at home with imperialisms abroad, and the American which added slavery and legalized racism to this cauldron.

Nehru buttressed his thesis with a further argument drawn from Indian antiquity. The panchayats or councils of village India, with a history lost in the most ancient past, provided a foundation that was utterly secure; and, in case they had atrophied in colonial times, they could be rejuvenated. This claim may be suspect or of limited validity in that village assemblies were severely restricted in their reach and did not pretend to concern themselves with what lay beyond the village, be it of empire, state or nation. Moreover, as Nehru himself suspected or admitted, they may not have been particularly democratic since the upper castes and the village elite would have effortlessly dominated. But it served his historical argument well: modern Indian politics beyond the colonial state over nearly half a century was undoubtedly democratic and it was blessed with a foundation in ancient tradition.

After the Republic was inaugurated in 1950, his claims became ever more convincing as India went through regular general elections on the basis of adult suffrage with multi-party politics that permitted even a communist government to take office in Kerala in 1957. This, it has been well noted, would have been inconceivable in the American democracy of the time.<sup>1</sup> The institutions of parliamentary democracy had given a good account of themselves, and panchayat democracy in its modern form had been launched into a vibrant career. Looking

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<sup>1</sup> Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution. Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 102

back on this record, Nehru was able to assert that democracy had evolved in India out of its own ancient past, the movement against colonialism, and its sustained electoral and parliamentary practice, and that it was a firmly established Indian tradition. It had become the yugadharma, one of his favourite expressions with respect to revolutionary change and modernization, and it was equally applicable to the democracy over which he presided.

But he refused to be lulled into complacency through historical arguments on the democratic tradition in India. He never failed to stress that a democracy must be willed into being. It consisted in the people acting of their own volition, collectively and deliberately, to determine their lives. Democracy could not be a gift, an imposition, an inheritance, or a serendipitous consequence of other action. It was the result of daily decision by the people, the complement to the daily plebiscite that Ernest Renan had decreed about nationalism. It was not a ritual, a mere exercise of voting periodically, of becoming active on that one occasion and being passive the rest of the time. Nehru imagined it as a perpetual movement; but he also saw the need for it to be structured through the institutions of parliamentary democracy with a written constitution.

But sooner than most others he discerned the contradiction between movement and institution. In the simplest terms, he saw movements as dynamic and institutions as static; he understood the importance of both, but for the present he valued change over stability. With Independence as the objective, the movement he led was headed in a clear direction; after Independence one of his greatest tasks was to endow it with a purpose. Nothing as clear cut and exhilarating as Independence was ever again available, and he periodically wondered how much of democracy as a movement could be sustained without that inspiring goal. Socialism and economic growth were poor substitutes; and he restlessly sought to make them more inspiring than they were to the Indian public. The Constitution on the other hand tended to be static even if regularly amended; and the institutions of democracy inclined to stability and self-reproduction. He pursued the dual objective of sustaining democratic movements and of devising institutions that would be compatible with them, in the ultimate hope that they would reinforce each other in spite of their divergent trajectories. While they would and did fuse into one operating system, they were driven in different directions. After Independence his deepest reflections were directed toward combining the dynamism of movements with the permanence of institutions, and with them, seeking to ensure that the



movement he led did not institutionalize itself and become bureaucratic, arthritic, and devoted to self-preservation.

It must logically begin, in his view, with the people assembling in order to give themselves a constitution by which they would govern their actions. This is the constituent assembly, the dream of so many revolutionary movements since the American and French Revolutions. He would have decided on it in the late 1920s, but he first set down his thoughts on the subject in 1930 in Naini prison while reflecting on the agrarian programme of the Congress.

His leading ideas were as follows: 1) The Constitution would be framed by a constituent assembly without the British having a hand in it; 2) the assembly would be elected by adult suffrage; 3) with the entire population represented, communal differences would be sorted out; 4) adult suffrage would dissolve the problem of the princes by the same logic; and 5) the constituent assembly would contain within itself and radiate throughout India both the romanticism of movements and the rationalism of constitutions. Until his incarceration in 1942, he campaigned with great intensity for a constituent assembly on these premises; thereafter, he did so with diminished vigour and apparently with muted conviction. This seems a strange paradox, but there is perhaps a sound explanation for such unlikely action.

## **Adult suffrage**

Along with the elected constituent assembly, adult suffrage was his next article of faith. His experience of Indian politics had imbued him with an absolute faith in the good sense of the masses, or the people in a French revolutionary sense, as Jules Michelet had conceived and admired them. It seemed as obviously necessary to him as it appeared dangerous to conservatives and absurd to the colonial bureaucracy. Radical democrats like him sensed a surge of power in mass mobilization; conservatives feared that their days were numbered and warned against letting loose forces that could not be controlled; and the colonial bureaucracy, accustomed to imposing themselves through military force, felt impotent in the face of the masses and dismissed the possibility of the illiterate millions guiding the destinies of the nation. Throughout the 1930s he campaigned for the constituent assembly with adult suffrage, not merely on principle but also as a challenge to all his opponents. The colonial government was most comfortable with the limited franchise of the

Act of 1935 which allowed it greater freedom to manipulate small groups of notables, as is typical of imperial states which cannot afford to mobilize masses. The Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha likewise preferred the restricted franchise. Nehru always accused them of being run by the “vested interests” of landowners, businessmen, clerics, and other such who could seek and distribute favours and manipulate small groups more easily. Spotting their Achilles’ heel and realizing his own strength, he pressed his advantage relentlessly by presenting every argument for adult suffrage.

The Gandhian mobilizations powerfully fortified these preferences. As he saw it, nationalists before Gandhi were not able to do anything more than remonstrate, negotiate, and suffer the consequences in frustration or in the Cellular Jail. The Swadeshi movement in Bengal however provided a glimmer of hope. But with Gandhi’s advent the country came alive, or he assumed it did, in vast movements leading to major concessions from the colonial regime and ultimately Independence. The movements were popular and democratic, and if India hoped to realize its democracy, it must redeem the promise inherent in such arousal. The [Motilal] Nehru Report of 1928 to which he had materially contributed, and the Karachi Congress resolution of 1931 on fundamental rights, which he had drafted with alterations by Gandhi, both had committed the Congress firmly to adult suffrage. Whatever kind of constitution would be framed for the Republic, it would have to rest on adult suffrage.

More than his experience of Gandhian mass mobilization drew him to adult suffrage. One of his passions was the “peaceful revolution” of modernity, the daily transformation of life; and with it, he hoped to usher in socialism. He argued that in Marx’s day the franchise denied most of the population any political agency; violent revolution seemed therefore the only means to effect changes. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with an extended franchise, it was neither meaningful nor necessary to pursue a violent revolution. He was well aware that power is not conceded easily and that right wing dictatorships would seek to nullify unfavourable election results; but the possibility now existed for a peaceful transition and an evolutionary socialism. Fabian and Bernsteinian theories of evolutionary socialism of course provided the most convincing argument in this matter.

These masses had been mobilized through what was in effect universal franchise through Gandhian politics from the end of the First World War. Such politics had entailed Gandhi’s uncompromising adherence to non-violence, which had accustomed the masses to

orderly politics as opposed to the lawlessness of the colonial “rule of law”. If bureaucracy had training in the law and rule-governed functioning behind it, the masses also had been through a rigorous schooling in a moral law and its own rule-governed action, both of which were independent of positive law. While Lenin made a fetish of bureaucratic discipline in his revolutionary party, Gandhi pursued moral discipline with equal vigour in his party, and Nehru inherited that mantle and those precepts.

To these general arguments he added specific ones related to the tussle and negotiations of the thirties and forties. Only an assembly elected by universal suffrage could possess the authority to act independently: smaller bodies or those with a more restricted franchise may be subject to manipulation by varied interests. He ceaselessly argued that both Hindu and Muslim communalism was sustained and driven by elite or “vested” interests among them who curried favour with colonial authorities and opposed universal suffrage. Elections based on adult suffrage would sweep these problems away as the masses would assert their material interests and these notables would be despatched to the margins. From the campaign against the 1935 Act until his incarceration in 1942, this was a running theme.

He was more than enthusiastic when he saw the mass responses to the satyagrahas. He ecstatically noted the “wonderful awakening” as a result of the Civil Disobedience movement of 1931. From the election campaign and results in 1937, he drew the conclusion that not only were the masses with the Congress, but that even the Muslim masses were. In a state of exaltation he informed both Stafford Cripps and an all-India convention of Congress legislators in 1937 that the 30 million electorate had absorbed the Congress message in spite of obstruction by the government. The franchise was limited to just 10 percent of the population; but had the rest of the 90 percent been included, the triumph would have been so much greater. He described the peasants trudging to vote as a “pilgrimage”, and he noted their commitment to the Congress in a style that recalled Omar Khayyam: “his sunken eyes glistened and his shrunken starved body rose up in enthusiasm and the wine of hope filled his veins.”<sup>2</sup> He regretted that the party had not been quite so successful among the Muslim masses as he might have wished and as should have been possible; the reason, he explained, was that it had not invested as much effort among them as it had done with others, and worse still, it had dealt more with the leaders than with the masses: “We have too long thought in

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<sup>2</sup> Presidential Address to the All India Convention of Congress Legislators, Delhi, 19 Mar. 1937. SWJN/FS/8/p. 64.

terms of pacts and compromises between communal leaders and neglected the people behind them.” However, it was more successful among rural than urban Muslims.

In spite of such claims to ancient and modern democratic traditions, his periodic recourse to theories of politics and class, and his sound tactical sense of the advantages of mass democracy, he refused to insert the word “democratic” in the definition of the future Republic when he moved the Resolution on Aims and Objects in the Constituent Assembly on 13 December 1946. He preferred to describe it as an “Independent, Sovereign Republic”, avoiding even the word “socialist”, otherwise so dear to his heart and politics. He explained these omissions by protesting that he did not want to use divisive terms. Socialism was certainly a divisive term since the majority of the Assembly and even of the Congress party was not socialist. He described himself socialist, but found himself in a minority. He then added that democracy was contained in the meaning of the word “Republic”, which he was perfectly well aware was not remotely true, whether applied to the Roman or the Soviet Republics. He had noted the fact in his own histories.

## Constituent assembly and Constitution

His inhibition was due to something else. By 1946 he had retreated or had been compelled to retreat from every one of the positions he had taken on the constituent assembly as a sovereign, democratic body. It had long been a firm commitment, indeed a promise, to Indians, that the constituent assembly shall be an Indian body set up by Indians and not by the grace of the British. Instead, he was obliged to accept it as a product of a decision by the British government. Mahatma Gandhi’s comment was cutting: “it is no use declaring somebody else’s creation a sovereign body”.<sup>3</sup> The Socialists, the Communists, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Muslim League, all stayed away, and only the Congress from among the major parties was present. It seemed a caricature of what should have been, a bathetic descent from the exalted 1930s. Nehru, like the Congress since the 1920s, had throughout stood for a constituent assembly elected by adult suffrage; but in 1946 it was elected by the restricted franchise of the Act of 1935. More than 70 percent of the country had been excluded from choosing the Assembly that would frame the Constitution for the future Republic. When the elections to the Central and Provincial Legislative Assemblies were

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<sup>3</sup> Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, p. 7.

conducted in 1945-1946, he campaigned for the Congress party on the plank of independence, the welfare state, social justice, and communal harmony. The forthcoming Constituent Assembly seemed to come lower in order of priority as he listed its election as one of the tasks of the newly elected assemblies. He did not speak with the same fervour and inspiration on the subject as in the 1930s. It was, by his own reckoning, an Assembly that was both undemocratic and unrepresentative, a mere “constitution-making body” as colonial officials condescendingly described it. The incoming democracy would be flawed from the outset, for it would be set up by a constituent assembly summoned by the British and representing at best only 28.5 percent of the people of India, and elected indirectly and with communal representation.<sup>4</sup> Nehru’s discomfort with such incomplete representation periodically emerged during the debates in the Constituent Assembly, and his response to this predicament was to downgrade the Assembly to the level of a body that did little more than register the results of implicit and informal referenda and plebiscites.

The Constituent Assembly was not democratic of origin or composition, and, however democratic the content, its Constitution could not be presented as the product of the democratic will of the people of India. If democratic politics was to continue to flourish in India, it would be independent of the labours of the Constituent Assembly and of the Constitution. Both of them would contribute to democratic politics without however being its foundation as had been assumed until then and has been claimed since 1950. But he could ill afford to say so, and with a clarity of theoretical understanding that eluded most of his contemporaries, he excluded the word democracy when he moved the resolution on Aims and Objects in the Assembly. Democratic politics, not the Constitution, would be the guarantor of democracy. History validated his judgment as democracy settled into a stable system that adhered to constitutional proprieties. Democratic politics legitimized the Constitution by cultivating a popular awareness or legend of it as the source of rights and citizenship; it was not the Constitution that ensured democracy.

But he could also see the flaw in that reasoning and the danger implied by his own democratic instinct. He understood well enough that the Constitution was not merely a revolutionary document signifying the supersession of a previous regime: its purpose was after all to provide some sort of permanence to the structures of power. This has come to

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<sup>4</sup> Austin, *The Indian Constitution*, p. 10.

be sanctified as the “basic structure” in Indian jurisprudence. Nehru did not have any objection in principle to such a concept since it was inherent in the idea of a constitution, and he himself had been the most enthusiastic campaigner for fundamental rights which, as the word “fundamental” denotes, should belong to the basic structure. But he discovered that these fundamental rights were used to frustrate the social revolution in land tenures, which he saw as essential to the meaning of both Independence and democracy. The battle had been joined with the colonial power not merely to evict the British but as much to transform the structures of power that sustained colonialism. He therefore worked to undo in part his own cherished creation, the fundamental rights, through the First Amendment in 1951, and banishing the question of compensation for requisitioned property to the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution where it could not be touched by the courts. Other problems like preventive detention dogged him and his successors.

The basic structure was never defined by Nehru, the Constituent Assembly, or the Constitution. Subsequently, the Supreme Court has both denied and declared that there is one without however identifying it in unambiguous terms. In effect, while the doctrine of basic structure was enunciated long after Nehru’s death, it has remained obscure, elastic, and subject to variable interpretation. It is a kind of ambiguity that Nehru, in spite of himself and his sound democratic instincts, would have preferred, as he indicated during his lifetime. However, he did not evade the question of basic structure in concept, although he did not use that specific expression. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the idea of a constitution because it was to have a basic structure.

If we are to identify what Nehru had in mind as a basic structure, it would be the “Independent Sovereign Republic”, the three words he used as he moved the resolution on Aims and Objects in December 1946, and *not* the fundamental rights, important as they were to him. He never stated it in so many words and it has to be read from his various pronouncements on the nature of the Constitution, parliamentary sovereignty and amending procedure, and fundamental rights. He did however point out how and why the fundamental rights might not be as fundamental as imagined. When moving the First Amendment in 1951, he warned, “I say nothing, not a single Fundamental Right, can survive great danger to the

State.” He then reminded landed magnates that these fundamental rights could not protect them from agrarian revolution against the injustice of land tenures.<sup>5</sup>

The “Independent Sovereign Republic” alone in the Constitution was to be immutable, everlasting, and never to be compromised. The rest of the Constitution consisted of what are known as constitutional laws, which may be altered endlessly through amendment. Both the fundamental rights and all that was understood by democracy could be abridged or suspended wholly or in part as and when required; but they could also be restored by the same process. It also explains why he did not want to insert the word democracy in that definition. Democracy as both concept and practice was malleable; but the Independent Sovereign Republic, once surrendered in any fashion, could not be regained, and the purpose of the Independence movement would be defeated. It alone therefore was eternal, abiding, and sacrosanct, coming into existence with the Constitution and extinguishable only with it, but not by it.

## Panchayats

But representation would be incomplete without local self-government in every hamlet and municipal ward, and Nehru pursued the ideal of Panchayati Raj with customary enthusiasm. Here he was found himself promoting the theoretically opposed processes of democracy and bureaucracy while declaring his undying faith in democracy. He harangued the public on the subject of panchayats and Panchayati Raj more than on any other form of representation. He often spoke as if he imagined the panchayats playing a role as consequential within its territory as parliament did for the Union and the legislative assemblies for the states; and he wanted that the bureaucracy should stand in the same relation to the panchayats as it did to the superior legislative bodies. He demanded that the panchayat double as a local planning committee, the analogue of the planning committees in the states and of the planning commission in Delhi since it was the best informed on local conditions and priorities and presumably therefore more effective than experts sent down from the capitals. He also placed his faith in village democracy rather than civil servants and political parties to pursue the frustratingly slow land reforms to their intended conclusion

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<sup>5</sup> Speech on moving the Constitution amendment bill, 29 May 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 1, pp. 202, 210.



and to perform the miracle of the green revolution, albeit with technocratic and bureaucratic assistance.

He presented them as democratic for being elected. In the early days after Independence, he did appear to have thought of panchayats as political entities. He looked forward to their playing a political role with their members representing the nation in the manner that members of parliament did, rather than being immersed in the petty concerns of their immediate neighbourhood. The sixth schedule of the Constitution did provide for the formation of autonomous districts and regions which he considered “a very wise provision”. Such councils had been formed in the north-east and he expected them to do well when they could raise finances through taxation.<sup>6</sup> The largest instance of this kind elsewhere and well known to Nehru was the Soviet arrangement of Union Republics (the equivalent of the states of the Indian Union) containing within themselves Autonomous Republics and other such units further down the hierarchy of power (not merely of administration); but panchayats were clearly not of that type.

He also imagined the panchayat as a space for non-party democracy. Party politics entailed demagoguery, populism, corruption, sleaze, oligarchies, and debilitating competition. He hoped to create a clearing in the jungle or an oasis in the desert with such Rousseauvian direct democracy to recover the pristine world of pre-political village India. In 1950 he complained to his sister that 2000 Congress party members had been purged on account of local or panchayat elections and that “In any event, there is no doubt that most Congress Committees are controlled by strong cliques.” Subsequently, U. N. Dhebar, the Congress president, warned against introducing party politics into panchayat elections. In 1960 Nehru instructed the Congress to participate in the panchayats but not as party members, which was more than a contradiction and must have bewildered his followers. Not only did he want a non-party panchayat system, but he even looked forward to unanimity, at worst, consensus, within the panchayat. As if to round it all off in the course of celebrating the panchayat achievement in 1963, he warned of the dangers inherent in democracy and of the tendency of power to corrupt.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Character and Culture of the Tribal People”, Note, 27-29 Oct. 1952, paragraphs 22-26, later circulated to Chief Ministers, SWJN/SS/20/pp. 165-167.

<sup>7</sup> Speech inaugurating the Panchayat Bhavan, Chandigarh, 7 July 1963 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/82/pp. 347-348.

But Nehru was not a little ambivalent about the manner in which panchayats represented the popular will. Panchayats possessed no legislative powers, they were not in the same league as parliament and the legislative assemblies, and they were granted constitutional status only in 1992. At times he imagined them as an extension of the representational system, from parliament, through state legislative assemblies, down to the panchayat; at other times he thought of them as administrative bodies, an elected extension of the civil services; and at yet other times he conflated the concepts of government and administration. He implied that they were powerless as political bodies when he clarified that he was delegating authority to them, that he was decentralizing power, that they were to discharge administrative functions, that because the government “cannot do everything”, the people were to help, and that they would be “trained” for the job. He informed them that the powers of the bureaucracy in certain domains were to be transferred to the panchayats, that is, they were to discharge bureaucratic duties. In effect he imagined both panchayat and local Congress cadres as elected civil servants rather than as political leaders like himself. Like centralizing states since the 16<sup>th</sup> century elsewhere in the world, he was providing for an elected village and municipal bureaucracy to complement the bureaucracy of state which found itself otherwise unable or unwilling to deal with the minutiae of local life; and, as in the Soviet Union, he inserted the party bureaucracy as a parallel structure to the state bureaucracy to further the purposes of the state.

One of his favourite themes throughout his tenure as prime minister was that the state was empowering the people by extending democracy with panchayats and co-operatives. He always spoke of “granting” panchayats and co-operatives financial powers and associating them in the process of planning to “strengthen the development programme”. But it always read as a generous patron distributing gifts to the people, of Panchayati Raj as an imperial boon from Delhi. He would typically berate them for seeking favours from government, for their “habit of looking to the government for every little thing, of regarding the collector as the *mai-baap*, begging and pleading and presenting petitions.”<sup>8</sup> He urged them to take matters into their own hands and get their jobs done. Like a colonial propagandist he claimed to be teaching and even driving the benighted Indian population onward toward self-reliance.

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<sup>8</sup> Speech in Gurgaon, 28 Feb. 1957 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/37/p. 76.

He was distributing democracy, as it were, like financial subsidies. He fretted over the compulsive administrative centralization taking place and demanded self-governing institutions like the panchayat which would draw the people into all spheres of community life, social, economic, and even judicial, through “judicial panchayats” for petty matters; but he excluded the political, not explicitly, but by not mentioning that domain.<sup>9</sup> He was however uncertain or inconsistent about judicial panchayats, for his study of history and political theory inclined him toward the separation of powers, with justice insulated from the frenzy of democracy. Alongside the panchayats would stand the co-operative bodies acting in the same spirit but with functionally distinct responsibilities in the spheres of production, distribution, and exchange: “While panchayats will take over administrative control of village life, cooperatives will regulate the economic side”.<sup>10</sup> He was eloquent about the role of panchayats in planning at the local level, but he regarded them as sources of information rather than as planners in any meaningful sense of the term, even at a subordinate level.<sup>11</sup> He acknowledged that planning proceeded vertically from above, and he regretted that as a result planners knew little of local and everyday needs, about wells, tanks, roads, bridges, schools, dispensaries and much else of that kind. The remedy lay in involving the panchayats at this humble level and urging them even to organize voluntary labour for development; he assigned them administrative tasks like conducting crop competitions to raise productivity; and he described these initiatives as democratic and revolutionary. He informed them that they were “participants in administration” “shareholders in the task of administration” and much more of that order. The Press echoed him by reporting it as a “panchayat system of administration” and the beneficiaries, speaking typically through Chaudhri Maharaj Singh, the chairman of the Ambala Zila Parishad in 1963, proudly declared that they were “capable of discharging the duties entrusted to them”.<sup>12</sup>

It was democracy constructed downward, like the bureaucracy; and it may appear wholly opposed to the democratic logic of assertion from below. That would be generally valid, although as usual there are exceptions: America imposed democracy on Germany, Austria, Italy, and Japan after their defeat in the Second World War, and it has endured.

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<sup>9</sup> Resolution, drafted by Nehru and adopted by the CWC, New Delhi, 23 May 1954, SWJN/SS/25/p. 292.

<sup>10</sup> *The Philosophy of Mr Nehru: As revealed in a series of intimate talks with R. K. Karanjia* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 28 or SWJN/SS/85/p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> To Chief Ministers, 10 Sept. 1952, SWJN/SS/19/ paragraph 22, p. 715; To Chief Ministers, 27 Sept. 1953, SWJN/SS/23/paragraph 19, p. 604.

<sup>12</sup> Reports of speeches at the Post-Graduate Institute and at the Panchayat Bhavan, Chandigarh, *The Tribune*, 7 July 1963, SWJN/SS/82/pp. 347-348.

Revolutions from above have been more frequent, with Stalin and Mao providing the most recent examples. Nehru's attempts to pursue both democracy and revolution from above were not necessarily whimsical or doomed to be futile, contrary though both might have been to many theories of both democracy and revolution.

## Electoral politics

The electoral process, the core of democracy, dismayed rather than enthused him. He had an exalted notion of democratic procedure consisting of potential leaders and parties placing choices before the people and the issues being discussed threadbare in public. But he was appalled to discover that nothing of the kind happened. In 1951 he accused political parties of peddling lies and deceit, and he warned the faithful "my working days are almost over."<sup>13</sup> Nehru was not mendacious like the party bosses; but he certainly had mastered the art of threatening an unintended resignation. He returned to the same complaint for the second general election in 1957: "During election time, there is a great deal of activity and noise with people demanding votes for this party or that. But the fundamental issues are seldom mentioned."<sup>14</sup> Nothing had changed by the third general election in 1962: "Elections are necessary, but I may tell you that I am not happy about them because people seem to go mad the moment elections are announced. They run hither and thither in search of tickets and what not, which is painful. The real issues are submerged."<sup>15</sup>

He was dismayed to find that elections seemed to bring out the worst rather than the best in people. When his sister Vijayalakshmi Pandit was proposed as a candidate in Uttar Pradesh in 1951, he advised her against it: "I am fed up with the kind of things that are going on and the kind of persons that are selected. I do not like you to be mixed up with this business."<sup>16</sup> He wrote in despair to Govind Ballabh Pant: "This elections business is making me lose my faith in Indian humanity or, at any rate, in a large part of it. I could never have imagined that many of our people could have sunk quite so low as they have done. I fear I am getting a little indifferent and am only longing for the time when all this is over. Bihar, of course, is the supreme example." He grumbled and protested in world-weary fashion to

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<sup>13</sup> Speech on Gandhi's birthday, 2 Oct. 1951 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/16/part 2/pp. 102, 105-106.

<sup>14</sup> Speech in Jabalpur, 26 Feb. 1957 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/37/pp. 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> Speech at the AICC, Patna, 4 Jan. 1962 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/74/p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> To Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 13 Oct. 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 2/p. 45.

confidantes like Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Govind Ballabh Pant, Krishna Menon, Louis Mountbatten, Bidhan Roy, or Rajagopalachari, that “This elections business is making me lose my faith in Indian humanity”.<sup>17</sup> In 1957, he found the Congress wanting in performance behaviour, the PSP and Lohiaite Socialists despicable, but “the Communists have not behaved badly.”<sup>18</sup> As the third general election approached, he reverted to his old grievance about “mobs asking for tickets and blaming each other and putting forward their own claims.”<sup>19</sup> He reproduced this theme in virtually every speech during the campaign for the third general election, denouncing elections on one occasion as “madness”.<sup>20</sup>

He commented on the electoral ritual as a waste of time, that it consumed far too much energy and resources, and that it had become an activity in itself occupying many leaders full time.<sup>21</sup> He increasingly faced the unpleasant question of money swishing about during elections, and he was compelled to spend much time denying that he or the Congress or the Central government were busy collecting funds for this purpose. He found it altogether distasteful to touch upon such subjects.<sup>22</sup> He sought to rise above the electoral scrimmage by calling upon his followers to serve the country in so many useful ways other than getting elected; he reminded them that large issues like Goa and China were quite as important as elections; and he even asserted that engineers and doctors were sometimes more important.<sup>23</sup> But he was left with the despairing feeling that such advice was falling on deaf ears.

## Oligarchy

Nehru’s next fear was about democracy breeding an “elective aristocracy”. This critique of electoral politics argued that oligarchies organized through political parties ceaselessly competed for the vote, and the people did no more than vote at regular intervals without being engaged in governance, decision-making, or any form of participation, and

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<sup>17</sup> To G. B. Pant, 25 Oct. 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 2/p. 53; his letters to the others in SWJN/SS/17/pp. 9, 13-14, 15, 20.

<sup>18</sup> To Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 17 Mar. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> Speech at the CPP, 9 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> Speech in Hyderabad, 4 Feb. 1962 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/74/p. 405, and other election speeches in this volume.

<sup>21</sup> To Chief Ministers, 16 Mar. 1952, SWJN/SS/17/p. 617, paragraph 2.

<sup>22</sup> Speech at the CPP, 9 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/p. 297.

<sup>23</sup> Speech at the CPP, 9 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/p. 292; report of speech in Ghaziabad, 3 Dec. 1961, *National Herald*, 4 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/pp. 287-288.

without even being able or bothered to consider the specific issues at stake. The people decided by acclamation, by “acceptance rather than by initiative”.<sup>24</sup> These charges had been brought against parliamentary democracy in Europe from the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when an extended suffrage, vast parties, universal literacy, newspapers read by all, and much else of that order had melted the populace into an undifferentiated mass sufficiently for theories of mass society to be formulated. Public opinion was regarded as the locus of rational and informed critique in the liberal ideal before the eruption of mass politics; but by the First World War public opinion itself had been transformed into “the modern type of acclamation”, especially when it was manipulated and moulded by the mass circulation dailies, in due course by the cinema, the radio, and the forerunners of what we today call the social media.<sup>25</sup> A self-serving stratum, variously called an elite, rulers or ruling class, political class, nomenklatura, or something equivalent, congealed into a closed caste through electoral legitimation, and the process degenerated into a competition among professional politicians for the vote. The result was a democracy with the disempowered citizen. They elected parliamentary leaders whom they did not know, with whom did not and could not communicate, and over whom they had no control after the elections. Such leaders represented the people by virtue of election, but they solidified into a crust of professional politicians who dealt in votes in the manner of businessmen dealing in oil, as a cynical member of the tribe famously observed. They were permanently engaged in the activity of getting elected, retaining office when they had secured it, buying support, desperately fighting off those who sought to unseat them, and were unable to focus for the long-term on any other programme of action. Elected assemblies no longer decided the course of the future through public debate; instead, cabals and cliques, invisible to the public, regularly met off stage and in private, struck deals between different interest groups as reflected in the election results, and presented such decisions to the public through the ritual of voting in parliament.<sup>26</sup> A socialist system also was not immune from such failings. Trotsky described the emergence of such a bureaucratic ruling class under Stalin and Schumpeter followed on that neither the parliamentary nor the socialist forms could escape the phenomenon. Whichever way the

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1943), p. 277; see also Robert Michels, *Political Parties. A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, translated in 1915 from the Italian edition by Eden and Cedar Paul (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1949), p. 25; Max Weber, *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 1 (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978), p. 258.

<sup>25</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, translated from the German and edited by Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008; orig. German edn 1928), pp. 275, 302, and generally chapters 8, 18, and 20.

<sup>26</sup> Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, p. 242.

rulers were chosen, a yawning gulf stretched between them and the electorate, and there seemed to be no reliable institutional means of closing that gap.

## **One-party dictatorship and the consensual model of democracy**

He likewise feared that a one-party dictatorship could arise from the parliamentary system. He always regretted that there was no Opposition in Parliament. He was of course standing on the theoretical ground that a democracy requires not merely competitive politics but also the two-party system as in the Anglo-American model. This assumption followed from the global reach of Anglo-American power, reinforced by the ideological dissemination of the British model in colonial India. This was universally held as an ideal in India, with perhaps only the Marxists dissenting in theory although in practice they were comfortable with a system that allowed them to compete. The tenacity of this dogma is perplexing since nobody in the Indian political leadership until 1967 had experience of the two-party system. Kerala provided the exception with the Communists coming to power in 1957; but their government was summarily ousted in 1959, as if to invalidate that option for India. Otherwise, the only major political figure with direct experience of it was V. K. Krishna Menon who had participated in British politics in the inter-war years; but he was not only an exception, he was also relatively isolated in Indian politics.

Nehru himself, for all his Englishness, had never functioned in that system. As with all others, Nehru's experience was of Indian politics. It consisted on the one side of a movement or coalition of movements dominated by the Congress and Gandhi, and on the other of the dictatorship of the colonial state. The Congress and associated movements did not collectively amount to an Opposition as in the two-party model since the colonial government was not formed by an elected party and the Congress and others were not parties in an elected assembly. The British did not attempt to compete with the nationalists through an ideologically defined party: they relied for support on interest groups like princes, landed magnates, and the colonial institutions of the army and civil service. Germany was disparaged in Britain before and during the First World War as undemocratic for not having a responsible ministry; but Germany could boast a full-fledged parliamentary system with ideological parties from the conservative to the socialist. Even that most obdurately conservative or reactionary regime of Europe, the Imperial Russian one, which was as much of a dictatorship as the one in India, had brought into being a multi-party system after 1905, with at least two



ideologically conservative parties to challenge liberals and revolutionaries at elections; and from 1864 it had set in place an electoral system in the zemstvo, the equivalent of the Panchayati Raj under Nehru. The colonial state in India was too archaic or too insecure to contemplate going as far as even the Imperial Russian regime: for even the most conservative interests in India would have had to become nationalist in an electoral system and promise the electorate that they would expel the alien regime.

Nehru hoped to construct a new democratic and liberal state and politics. It was a daunting task for it could not draw upon any tradition as practice in India; to that extent it was a revolutionary politics, as Nehru never failed to point out. Thus Nehru began his career in the construction of a parliamentary democracy in India with the benefit of a vast amount of experience in democratic mobilization, effectively none at all in parliamentary politics in spite of the Congress running ministries in 1937-1939, and likewise without any direct knowledge of the party system, whether of one, two, or more parties. His experience had prepared him at best for only a one-party system. That one party had been a movement also before 1947; thereafter, although it became more of a party, it retained many of the features of a movement. His one-party domination was in many senses a continuation of the national movement; it had been a vast coalition then and it remained one thereafter, as he confessed several times. In 1960, he accepted Karanjia's explicit contrast between party and movement, that his "failure or refusal to build anything like an ideologically homogeneous party, group or even cadres is made up for by his almost epic endeavour to transform the whole nation into a land of Nehrus."<sup>27</sup> In Ernakulam that year his statement that the Congress was more of a movement than a party left no room for doubt: "But remember this, that the Congress itself is a peculiar organisation. It is a party running elections but it has always been something more than a party. In the days of our struggle for Independence it was more than a party, it was a national movement, and, even afterwards, it has not ceased to be a national movement only, although inevitably it has to function also as a party."<sup>28</sup> The party was, apparently, merely a concession to electoral reality. Nehru then reinforced his preference for the movement over the party by declaring that party cadres were of less significance than the thousands of new cadres being trained at the level of the village in developmental schemes in panchayats, co-operatives, village schools, in health, agriculture, stockbreeding, engineering and much else of that order. He regarded them almost as substitutes for

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<sup>27</sup> *The Mind of Mr Nehru*, SWJN/SS/56/p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> Election speech, Ernakulam, 18 Jan. 1960, SWJN/SS/56/p. 278.

Congress cadres, as persons being trained to realize Congress developmental programmes.<sup>29</sup> At the same time he instructed or exhorted party members to replicate the village improvement activity of the panchayats by engaging in “constructive” work.<sup>30</sup> In his mind the panchayats and the lower echelons of the Congress flowed into a single stream of activists transforming rural India. The instruments of the party and the institutions of the state fused into one at their respective lower extremities, and the party and the state became indistinguishable from each other.

By the end of the third general election in 1962 he was more convinced that the movement prevailed over the party. He found the party suffering from internal dissension, he inveighed against members sabotaging official candidates’ campaigns, and was dismayed to learn that many were working hand in glove with the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra. Throughout his election tours he demanded that the vote be cast on principle and programme and not for an individual. In his summing up to the Congress Party in Parliament he claimed that the Congress had won handsomely as a movement but fared poorly as a party. He yearned for the movement as he stood despairing witness to the degeneration of the party. His periodic talk about retiring was an effort to jolt the party into reviving its ideals. He clarified that his job as prime minister was but a small part of his work. Were he to retire from that post, he would continue with redoubled energy to lead a movement of the people, in which he would help the government, criticize it, and even “embarrass my successor”.<sup>31</sup> This was the closest he came to thinking in the manner of Lenin and Stalin, as they prepared to attack or actually attacked their own creation for its rigidities and deterioration.

However, so committed was he to the necessity of an Opposition, that he imagined he saw what did not exist. Until the second general election he would claim that a “strong” Opposition flourished, even if the numbers were miniscule;<sup>32</sup> and to Jayaprakash’s grievance that there was no Opposition, he replied that there were 150 Opposition members in the Lok Sabha of nearly 500, and that “That opposition was a virile and active opposition, as it should have been.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps by a “strong Opposition” he implied the Opposition within the

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<sup>29</sup> *The Mind of Mr Nehru*, 1960, p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> Speech to an Assam Youth Congress meeting, 15 Apr. 1960, SWJN/SS/60/pp. 370-371.

<sup>31</sup> Interview to the Columbia Broadcasting System, Washington D.C., in the “Face the Nation Programme”, recorded in New Delhi on 15 Dec. and broadcast on 20 Dec. 1959, and Interview to the *U.S. News and World Report*, recorded on 16 Dec. and published 28 Dec. 1959, SWJN/SS/55/pp. 50, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Speech in Bangalore, 23 Feb. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 27; speech in Jabalpur, 26 Feb. 1957 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/37/p. 63; speech in Kanpur, 4 Mar. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> To Jayaprakash Narayan, 3 Apr. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 370.

Congress. As early as April 1947, N. G. Ranga had commented without irony that Indian democracy was secure since the Congress contained diametrically opposed views within itself.<sup>34</sup> Non-Congress parties had their factional collaborators within the Congress, and Congress factions mobilized their supporters from the non-Congress parties.<sup>35</sup> Nehru admitted that reality in a furious outburst to the Congress Party in Parliament in 1960: “You might almost think that the Lok Sabha is dominated by half a dozen members of the Opposition.”<sup>36</sup> He played the role of the builder of consensus and compromise among these myriad groupings within the party, which might explain in part Jayaprakash’s strange demand that Nehru should himself foster an Opposition. Much as he favoured consensus, he did not permit it to become a theoretical preference over party politics. Parties existed on the basis of difference and they could not be ignored however anxious some people were to have a “national government”.<sup>37</sup> By the third general election he ceased referring to a “virile and active” Opposition and proclaimed the need for a strong government which only the Congress could provide. The tendency of Congress and other party members to collaborate against the official position had become more pronounced, much to Nehru’s chagrin. He analysed the results of the three general elections, noting the overwhelming majority of the Congress in each case and the miserable performance of the Opposition. He claimed that the stability of India was due to the single powerful party at the Centre and he warned of the disasters that would follow with multiple parties, coalition governments, and a government unable to speak in a unified voice. He drove the point home with a telling comparison with the instability in the neighbourhood, especially in Pakistan.<sup>38</sup>

Nehru conducted his game of power through the dominant single party-movement, the Congress, while in theory adhering almost dogmatically to the two-party doctrine. On the other hand, he increasingly followed an inchoate theory of a single party as a coalition of diverse groups and parties, in the manner that the national movement had been. As the national movement had assembled the multiple mobilizations in the country and provided unity to the nation, eventually fractured by the Partition, so also only the Congress could preserve and fortify that unity after Independence and ensure social harmony. Nehru could not see the Congress in any other role: it would combine within itself the roles of government

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<sup>34</sup> CAD, 29 Apr. 1947, 3/18/52.

<sup>35</sup> Rajni Kothari, *Politics in India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970), chapter 5.

<sup>36</sup> Speech to the CPP, 28 Apr. 1960, SWJN/SS/60/p. 323.

<sup>37</sup> Interview to Ramnarayan Chaudhary – II, 15 June 1960 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/61/pp. 146-151.

<sup>38</sup> Speech to the CPP, 11 Mar. 1962, SWJN/SS/75/pp. 424-426, 430-431.

and Opposition, the creator and preserver of the unity of the country and of its state, while the baleful role of destroyer was assigned to the multiple communalisms.

This imagined structure came close to the idea of the Party-State, of which the formal instance was the Soviet one. This does not imply Soviet influence: external influences, such as they were in the domain of political theory and constitutional practice, were almost wholly British, and otherwise European and American. Interestingly, he himself made the comparison. He explained that in the communist system, implying the Soviet, there was no difference between the state administration and the Party organization. On the other hand, in the British system, the government was primary and took all decisions, with the two parties merely organizing elections. They had little to do with government thereafter. India was different from both and stood somewhere in between. The Congress had a major role to play besides getting elected; it had to push for implementation of policy, especially of the Plans; but only the government, or administration as he called it, could execute it.

In 1960 he returned to this question of the party being parallel to the bureaucracy in carrying out the Plans, reminding party cadres that one of their duties was to nudge the excruciatingly slow bureaucracy into action.<sup>39</sup> Nehru held forth the ideals of both the single Party-Movement transformed into the Party-State and of the two-party system. In principle, these were neither congruent nor complementary; but he never sought to impose either model, and the two patterns were interwoven. Life was fuzzy and shot through with contradiction as Nehru ceaselessly clarified to those obsessed with theory. But if there was a theory to his party politics, it consisted of both these non-merging doctrines and practices hitched together, with that of the Party-Movement becoming Party-State on the one hand and of the Movement-as-Coalition on the other hand together prevailing over that of the two-party system. He adhered to the two-party model in theory, functioned in a one-party system in practice, tentatively admitted to operating in part a Party-State, but throughout clung to the ideal of a movement. He refused to become a partocrat, preferring instead to be a leader of the masses and a statesman of the world.

A parliamentary Opposition did not disturb Nehru's peace of mind during his life, but a spectre did haunt him. The ideology that he regarded as his true Opposition was exclusive

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<sup>39</sup> Report of speech to Congress workers, Bombay, 3 Jan. 1960, *National Herald*, 4 Jan. 1960, SWJN/SS/55/p. 316.

nationalism in its communal form, chiefly Hindutva, with Islamic and Sikh nationalism trailing; but the political party of Hindutva, the Jana Sangh, was singularly ineffective at the polls throughout his life. In his mind, the political space was divided primarily between the communal and exclusive nationalism of Hindutva on the one hand and the secular and liberal nationalism of Congress on the other.<sup>40</sup> The Communists were an important presence for their intellectual vitality and parliamentary ability but without prospect of being an effective Opposition. The Socialists were, as far as he was concerned, in his camp, although too obsessed with ideological chastity to cohabit with the promiscuous Congress. They imagined that same space as divided between communist totalitarianism and Congress conservatism with the Socialists in between as the only alternative to Congress.<sup>41</sup> Nehru's judgment turned out to be more accurate than that of the Socialists. It took until the late sixties with the decline of Congress hegemony for Hindutva to begin its ascent; even so, it did not become a major parliamentary presence until the 1990s. Consequently, Nehru never did face Hindutva as a parliamentary opposition in spite of his considering it in particular and communalism in general as the true Opposition. He functioned in effect in a system with two ideologies but without two parties.

He campaigned during the three elections, not as the leader of one party against another, but as that of one movement against another, of secularism versus communalism. He reminded the Congress faithful that it had always been "more than a party", and that "We have to retain something of that wider aspect of the Congress".<sup>42</sup> He boasted that the Congress was not a mere election machine, for "it has its roots in the hearts of millions of people..."<sup>43</sup> But after the election he regretted that the Congress was not enough of an election machine, for it was top heavy and lacked leadership at lower levels.<sup>44</sup> It became one of his constant refrains thereafter that the Congress organization "hardly exists".<sup>45</sup> After the second general election he warned against the Congress relying more on mass "enthusiasm" than organization, and that the very forces that the Congress had unleashed may outrun it,

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<sup>40</sup> To Chief Ministers, 7 Feb. 1951, SWJN/SS/15/part 2/pp. 126-127.

<sup>41</sup> See Narendra Deva, "Congress and Social Change", *Janata*, 30 Aug. 1953, Address to PSP Workers, 26 Dec. 1954, from *Janata*, 2 Jan. 1955, "Give top priority to the membership campaign", *Janata*, 9 Jan. 1955, SWAND, vol. 4, pp. 44-50, 87, 88-89 respectively.

<sup>42</sup> Presidential Address to the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the INC, New Delhi, 18 Oct. 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 2/p. 222; the same earlier, see CWC Resolution, Bangalore, 10 July 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 2/p. 131.

<sup>43</sup> Speech in Madras, 27 Nov. 1951, SWJN/SS/17/pp. 49-50.

<sup>44</sup> See letters to U. S. Malliah, Congress general secretary, 21 Jan. 1952, Louis Mountbatten, 22 Jan. 1952, and his general appraisal of the results, note to the CWC, 31 Jan. 1952, SWJN/SS/17/pp. 93, 95, 103.

<sup>45</sup> To U. N. Dhebar, 7 Apr. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 374.

leaving the party full of jaded and aged leaders bereft of a following.<sup>46</sup> He demanded that the Congress should become more of a party than a movement, “It cannot continue to be, as Dr Ambedkar once called it, a dharmashala for all and sundry.”<sup>47</sup>

In effect he complained on both grounds, that the Congress was being run by a party bureaucracy leaving no room for the ardent and inspired activist, and that it was so much of a movement of enthusiasts that it was not organizationally effective for elections. He wanted both a movement run by ideals and a party machine to win elections. Given his instinct, he veered toward the movement. The movement until 1947 was of nationalism against colonialism; now it was of secular versus Hindutva nationalism.

He welcomed the prospect of an Opposition as required by theory and to keep the Congress on its toes.<sup>48</sup> The Swatantra Party was that long-awaited Opposition when it was formed by Rajagopalachari and others in 1959. He despised its ideology and many of its supporters as insufferably reactionary and antiquated; and he predicted doom should the party come to power. His disdain bordered on levity as he announced that they had “made God a senior partner of the Party”<sup>49</sup>, and he had to protest that he treated the party seriously in spite of his sarcasm.<sup>50</sup> He argued that its coming introduced a required dose of political and ideological differentiation which had been obscured earlier by the singular focus on colonialism. He preferred the more “appropriate” name of Conservative Party as first proposed by Rajagopalachari. Its presence would sharpen the debate and help the Congress to define its position on various matters more clearly;<sup>51</sup> and vested interests would drift towards Swatantra, “which will be a good thing because that will clarify political issues”, expose “extreme differences of opinion”, or otherwise rid the Congress of excess baggage.<sup>52</sup> He found the Swatantra preferable to the communal Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh parties on the

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<sup>46</sup> Speech to conference of presidents and secretaries of PCCs, 31 Mar. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/pp. 136-138.

<sup>47</sup> Note to the CWC, 31 Jan. 1952, SWJN/SS/17/p. 103 paragraph 15.

<sup>48</sup> See his election speeches in Madras, 27 Nov. 1951, and Allahabad, 12 Dec. 1951, SWJN/SS/17/pp. 50-51 and 57-58.

<sup>49</sup> Rajagopalachari had invoked God’s blessings at the inauguration, see Nehru’s press conference, Delhi, 7 Aug. 1959, SWJN/SS/51/p. 31 and n. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Speech at the CPP, 2 Aug. 1959, SWJN/SS/51/p. 149

<sup>51</sup> To Chief Ministers, 2 July 1959, SWJN/SS/50/p. 4, paragraph 10; press conference, 7 July 1959, SWJN/SS/50/pp. 32-36; see also speeches in Bombay, 4 Oct. 1959 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/53/pp. 77-78, 81, 84-85, and in Poona, 5 Oct. 1959 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/53/p. 146.

<sup>52</sup> See speech in Vijayawada, 12 Oct. 1959 and letter to Darbara Singh, the president of the Punjab PCC, 26 Oct. 1959, SWJN/SS/53/pp. 256, 364; speech at the CPP, 9 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/pp. 294-295; speech in Ahmedabad, 10 Feb. 1962 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/75/153; speech in Poona, 11 Feb. 1962 (original in Hindi), p. 211.

ground that it was not parochial and did not undermine national unity as they did.<sup>53</sup> While he ridiculed the party and even branded it fascist,<sup>54</sup> he repeatedly “welcomed” the new party. Swatantra was absurd while communalism was destructive; but in his self-confidence, or perhaps to steer Indian politics away from its communal obsession, he focused on absurdity more than catastrophe. Such welcome or special notice was an honour he did not accord to the Jana Sangh, his principal ideological opponent, to the Socialists who had briefly dreamt of being the true Opposition, and still less to the Communists, who were to him but failed revolutionaries taking instructions from Moscow.

While he claimed that the Swatantra party was ludicrous, he greeted its advent possibly for another good reason. He may have hoped that a secular conservatism would subsume the communalism that raged unchecked on the right, and that a conservative party might eventually suppress the virulence of that disease. The Congress right included many who were distinctly communal in attitude without however engaging directly in communal politics of the kind that Hindutva represented. The Congress as a party was able to temper them, just as they effectively restrained the radicalism of the Congress left and of Nehru himself. If the Swatantra could perform the same function on the right wing of the spectrum, it would have made itself useful. Nehru’s unlikely warmth, if it could be so considered, on the emergence of Swatantra, was based perhaps on the hope that communalism could be neutralized or at least softened through the central divide in Indian politics shifting from secularism / communalism to socialism / conservatism. In spite of the legacy of the national movement and of the drift toward the Party-State, Nehru tended at times to see the glimmerings of a two-party system, and with it the means to contain communalism. But it was a mirage, as the weary traveller realized during the two years that were left to him.

## Communities

Nehru’s greatest concern was the nature of rights. Indian political discourse sanctified both individual and community rights or group differentiated rights; the Constitution privileged individual rights but also provided for preferential rights for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC and ST); various minorities were guaranteed

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<sup>53</sup> Speech in Allahabad, 1 Dec. 1961 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/61/p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Speech at the CPP, 9 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/p. 295.



their cultural and educational rights; and Nehru endorsed this structure. However, to Nehru the rights of the individual and citizen took precedence over all other forms of right, and community rights were placed hierarchically below those of the individual citizen. The only community that was superior to the individual was the nation which was constituted of citizens. Thus, his discourse on rights, as with all liberals, was premised on conjoining the rights of the individual with those of the community of the nation. Unlike liberals in most of the rest of the world, he, along with other Indian nationalists, inserted the multiple rights of other communities also. These communities were specifically four: the sub-national community of the state of the Union, caste, tribe, and religion. The existence, vibrancy, and necessity or inevitability of all these communities were universally acknowledged. The problem for Nehru and others like him was to make their rights claims compatible with each other and with individual rights even as they freely accepted as self-evident the marriage of the citizen and the nation, that is, the compatibility of the rights of the individual and of the nation, with the nation being the superior in the relationship. The seemingly insoluble problem of communalism occupied one corner of this vast complex of relationships of individuals and communities and their common membership of the overarching community of the nation. To sum it up, he imagined a hierarchy stretching from the national community at the top, through the individual citizen below, down to the other communities further down; and, to anticipate, among these communities, the sub-national community of the state of the Union stood first, with caste, tribe, and religion placed in no particular hierarchy further down. This was a structure of rights discourse for which there was neither precedent nor analogue in the rest of the world, although elements of it were scattered in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, Canadian federal practice, Soviet nationalities policies, and even “pillarization” or *Verzuiling* in Holland and Belgium for vertically structuring relations between religions or confessions and between them and their respective nations and states.

This hierarchy of rights followed a rigorous logic in his view. The Indian nation took precedence over individual rights because the nation was the necessary condition for the possibility of individual rights. Unless the nation were independent and united, the “Independent Sovereign Republic” of his resolution in the Constituent Assembly, there was no guarantee that individual rights could be either asserted or enforced: it was possible only within the structure of such a nation and its state. Of course, the existence of such a nation and state did not necessarily ensure that such rights could flourish since the state could well

become a dictatorship that paid no heed to such rights. But if such a nation did not grow and prosper, such rights were impossible and unthinkable; and in case there was any doubt in this matter, he invited attention to the condition of the nation under colonial despotism, and to the various forms of neo-colonial dictatorship in so much of the world. To the end of his life, he inveighed against any ideology or practice that could compromise the unity and independence of the nation: out of these he always specified at least those of provincialism (“linguism” in his polemic), casteism, and communalism. He could have added tribalism to complete the picture, but tribes in some sense fused all three and he did not make specific mention of them to the same extent. But these were the communities with their group differentiated rights which flourished below those of the individual citizen, and he had to reconcile their rights assertions with those of the citizen as well as membership of the nation.

His problem of democracy lay not merely in ensuring rights to the individual citizen but as much to individuals as members of their respective communities. The route to such fulfilment did not necessarily stop at cultural rights. Individual rights did not provide for self-fulfilment of the individual as a member of a community other than that of the nation. A community was not the equivalent of an association or a pressure group. It was more than the sum of its individual members, and they were concerned with more than protecting their culture. The community was possessed of a life of its own through which individual members found fulfilment, and in this respect, it was akin to the nation. Not surprisingly, the national minority has enjoyed the greatest salience in the discourse on minorities since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, be it among Austro-Marxists and the Bolsheviks, in the League of Nations and even in Britain among thinkers like T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse.

Given that individual rights took precedence over the rights of all communities except those of the nation itself, Nehru was firmly committed to the principle that within each community the fundamental rights laid down in the Constitution shall not be abridged in any manner by the community, however ancient, traditional, or sacred its claim to do so. No community could demand of any of its members anything that might be in conflict with the fundamental rights. This restriction applied uniformly across religions, castes and tribes and other such groups. It was the rights of the individual that were sacrosanct, not those of the community, whichever it be. Applying this principle in practice was more difficult than stating it; and it required legislation, challenges in the Supreme Court, and political and administrative will to overcome objections and obstacles. The greatest problems arose on

the laws of marriage, divorce, and inheritance among different communities, and the laws on these matters were not uniform. Nehru merely set the direction and began the process; and since as a democrat he was also anxious to secure the consent of the various parties concerned, he was reconciled to a gradual process. But he had no doubt about the direction in which to go and he ceaselessly harangued small and large audiences in this matter; and he was buoyed by the fact that fundamental rights were generally accepted in spite of their conflict with community practices often. Only the detail remained, but it was a vast amount.

Nehru however did not merely accept the reality of communities in India and fit them into a hierarchy below that of the nation and individual rights. He sought to discern the direction in which these communities were evolving and could be made to evolve. Since they were not about to disintegrate and be replaced by individuals, as in the ideal that most liberals nursed, he strove hard to integrate them to the nation rather than preserve their uniqueness and let them drift away from the nation. All communities worked to preserve and cultivate their unique identities and it was not always clear to them or others in the nation in what manner that process was compatible with membership of the nation. It was usually discussed in terms of federal and unitary structures, centralization and decentralization, homogeneity and uniqueness, and similar oppositions. Nehru's own message was to cultivate unity in diversity. But the slogan needed a content; and he provided it by seeking ways to make members of these communities more effective citizens through the rights assertions of their communities. The more community rights they claimed within the Constitution and the hierarchy of rights described above, the better they could participate in all the processes that made the nation. The right to equality as individuals was a powerful instrument for asserting rights as a community. They would be less excluded and feel less excluded or pushed to the margin. Diversity could be cultivated with preferential and other constitutional rights, especially through affirmative action; but the one form of diversity that was to be eschewed was the nurturing of uniqueness for its own sake, as that led down the road to greater isolation, marginality, and possibly, secession. While he campaigned as always for the nation while cautioning against community loyalties that could impair national unity, he discovered in the course of the 1950s that supporting such claims to community rights, especially those of the linguistic states and of the Schedules Castes and Schedules Tribes, made for better citizenship through greater inclusiveness. It was an unexpected cohabitation of individual and community rights which theory had not provided for adequately, at least not until then.

The first of the communities that must now be considered here is the sub-national one of the states of the Union. The linguistic community was of the greatest political and constitutional significance since first the Congress party and then Union of India was constructed to a large extent on that basis. The party was reorganized on the linguistic principle from 1920, prefiguring the reconstruction of the Union substantially on that principle from 1953 when Andhra Pradesh was created. It was followed by the States Reorganization Commission's recommendations in 1956, the bifurcation of the Bombay in 1960, the creation of Nagaland in 1963, the trifurcation of Punjab in 1966, with many more thereafter. This process established linguistic communities on a constitutional basis as constituent states of the Union. But not all are linguistic communities. The Hindi-speaking states could be said to belong to one linguistic universe divided into a number of states. Both before and after becoming states they acquired community identities, although less firmly etched than those of the linguistic states, and with them, a politics akin to those of the linguistic states. These states evolved into sub-communities of the overarching national community of India. They were not mere administrative divisions nor federal units; they were akin more to full-fledged states and nations without sovereignty and within the Indian nation-state. In such a situation, the problem of the compatibility between the Indian nation and its constituent nations did not arise. All the states reproduced the structure of Indian democratic politics, nearly always with national parties competing locally or in conjunction with regional parties. Constitutionally, and during Nehru's lifetime even politically, each state was a microcosm of the Indian state, and the process of democratization continued and deepened with the multiplication of states. Although Nehru had been famously hesitant about endorsing such a process when it was considered in the Constituent Assembly and began with the agitation in Andhra Pradesh in 1953, he grew ever more confident of its democratic possibilities. He saw that it did not threaten another partition as so many had feared; on the contrary, it consolidated the Union through more of democracy. Both individual and community rights fused, culturally and politically.

But it is significant that this range of issues did not belong in minority discourse. Most of the states were nations or national communities, but they were not and have not been considered minorities. India is fortunate in not having a majority nationality although the states are unequal in demography, economic and social development, and political weight. It is sometimes imagined that the Hindi-speaking bloc of states are a majority which might and

do dominate. Statistically, they are at best a plurality or relative majority but not an absolute majority. More importantly, they have not conquered, dominated, and created the Indian Union, unlike England in Britain or Russia in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. While they are numerically the largest, they have not been able to impose themselves as a majority in spite of dreams and attempts in limited contexts like the language question. Any attempt at imposing Hindi as a national language or even the language of the state has been so firmly rebuffed by the other states, but especially by Tamil Nadu, that the issue is considered settled. If and when Hindi does evolve as a national language, it will not be by majority imposition but owing to convenience, in the manner that English gains ascendancy in Europe. India is host to a large number of nations within the larger nation, yet there is no question of national minorities of the kind that plagued the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman empire, or Canada. India is blessed for not having a national majority; but democratic politics has immensely eased the process of fusing so many nations and languages into a single nation and state. It is a process that Nehru was fully in tune with in spite of an initial understandable reluctance after the trauma of the partition.

One of the reasons Nehru could contemplate this development with equanimity was that he considered every nation, sub-nation, or national community a step toward a larger one culminating in all of humanity. He throughout entertained a global vision, and his Indian nation was to him a constituent of the global one. This was the only community to which he was unequivocally and fully committed. The national community was subordinate to it and he periodically commented on the limitations, narrowness, and even dangers of nationalism even as he ceaselessly sought to forge a nation to overthrow the British Empire in India and as the first step to global unity.

The next community was that of caste, and once again he had to reconcile individual and group rights within a democratic theory and practice. As with the linguistic and regional communities, the problem could not be captured in terms of majority and minority, for there were innumerable castes scattered over the country. In the tradition of progressive social reformers of previous decades, his starting point was that caste was a moral, intellectual, and aesthetic abomination. As with religion, Nehru looked forward to the constitutional provision of equality under the law and the process of individuation to transcend caste. However, he was realist enough to know that this was not going to happen in the immediate or even the foreseeable future. With the full support of the Constituent Assembly and

Ambedkar's passionate advocacy, he opted for affirmative action. This would not erase caste consciousness and the innumerable forms of segregation, exclusion, exploitation, and prejudice that the caste system threw on, and Nehru harboured no illusions on that score. Along with all others, he focused his attention on the worst forms of caste exploitation and discrimination, and placed his wager on affirmative action for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC and ST). As with the linguistic and other states, another combination of individual with community rights was established as a principle. However, this principle was accepted only for one aspect of the caste structure and not for all of it. Nehru expected that by virtue of the action of both principles, of individual and community rights, discrimination and exclusion would be corrected in the short span of ten years. He could not have been more wrong. But he soothed himself with that belief perhaps because he foresaw the danger further downstream. He was fearful that such affirmative action or reservations might evolve into a vested interest and permanent right rather than be a correction of a historical wrong en route to full blown citizenship with individual rights. His fears were well-founded. Reservations have become a permanent feature of Indian politics and castes have been asserting and securing reservations. Instead of the caste community heading toward erasure and extinction through equality under the law, they have been consolidated politically and constitutionally and a new hierarchy has emerged, the beginning of which process he noted with bemusement.

But he also saw that caste was acquiring a new and political form. Castes were not vanishing with modernization; they were not attempting to dissolve themselves in order to become undifferentiated citizens of India in the manner favoured by some of the liberal intelligentsia; they were defining themselves emphatically and projecting themselves very publicly. They were mobilizing themselves politically, asserting themselves and inserting themselves into a democratic discourse of equal rights to overcome historical deprivation and exclusion. This was the basis of the constitutional reservations for SCs and STs. But such movements and claims extended far beyond the Dalits although all admitted that the Dalits had suffered the most extreme forms of discrimination and exclusion. The Dravidian movement was mobilized to correct such a historical wrong; but it fused with such a powerful Tamil nationalist movement also that, seen from Delhi, it seemed more nationalist than caste. This was reinforced by the fact that it was also secessionist during the 1950s, albeit without insurgency, riots, and other forms of militancy. However, caste politics through reservations had already become a major force in Madras by the early 1950s and Nehru acknowledged its

democratic credentials. When moving the bill for the First Amendment in 1951 he noted that the Madras government had extended reservations to a large number of communities and that the High Court had declared such orders unconstitutional for they created unequal rights. Nehru seized this particular nettle bravely. He reasoned that inequalities were the historical legacy of caste hierarchies and that it was incumbent on his generation to restore equality in the form of equality of opportunity, although real equality was impossible. In providing such groups a certain range of economic and educational opportunities so that they could be on what is often called a “level playing field”, he came up against provisions of the Constitution which prohibited discrimination! He presented the dilemma in this fashion:

“We cannot have equality because we cannot have non-discrimination, because if you think in terms of giving a lift up to those who are down, you are somehow affecting the present *status quo* undoubtedly. Therefore, you are said to be discriminating because you are affecting the present *status quo*.”<sup>55</sup>

But in other states caste assertions gathered momentum, and the states one by one were legislating reservations. Nehru deplored these processes as irrational and messy and as undermining individual rights and citizenship and a politics based on it; but he also noted the democratic foundations of these movements, for they all claimed a legitimation in equal rights. He did not arrive at a coherent position on this subject. In 1960 he protested against both the caste system and caste reservations. He complained that reservations created a vested interest and that it affected quality; but he also declared in democratic fashion that historical injustices and inequality had to be righted, and that the proper route to it was education rather than reservations in jobs. He did not elaborate how education could be made available to all and of equal quality in conditions of such inequality. He tied himself in knots in his own arguments for and against reservations.<sup>56</sup> He also noted, but without further comment, that caste had become a political force in itself, implying that it had gone well beyond the traditional hierarchy that had long been deplored and denounced.<sup>57</sup> He did not quite come to grips with this form of politics; he neither championed nor suppressed it; and

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<sup>55</sup> Speech on moving the Constitution amendment bill, 29 May 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 1/p. 197.

<sup>56</sup> Speech to the Vimukta Jati Parishad, inaugurating an All India Conference of Denotified Tribes, Umedpur, Sholapur, 11 Apr. 1960 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/59/pp. 127-133.

<sup>57</sup> Report of special convocation address, Patna University, 14 Apr. 1960, *The Searchlight*, 15 Apr. 1960, SWJN/SS/59/p. 187.



he preferred to campaign against casteism in the traditional manner of the Indian social reformer of earlier days and in the cause of national unity.

When he turned to religious communities, he faced another range of problems. He reduced them to two: 1) the nature of the conflict between religious groups; and 2) the question of a majority dominating a minority. The two overlapped but they were not congruent; and while in typical fashion he did not make the distinction explicit, he distinguished between them in effect in his discussion of the “communal question”.

Although there were many religious communities in the country, it was assumed across the political spectrum and by Nehru himself that the core of the problem lay in the relation between Hindus and Muslims. The first step of his analysis was historical. Hindus and Muslims had lived together in the subcontinent in mixed communities for about 1200 years. The quotidian experience of living together over so many centuries had created both a culture of coexistence and beyond it, a syncretic culture. It was not possible for them to have been in a state of permanent conflict, and the history of warfare had to be distinguished from daily life. Warfare is conducted for political supremacy, and religion is one element of it, as any ideology must be. In all the wars, even those conducted by Mahmud of Ghazni, that fiercest of warriors and arch villain in the Hindutva demonology, the armies had mixed contingents, Hindu, Muslim, and possibly others. Further, wars of equal intensity took place between Hindu dynasties as also between Muslim ones. He firmly repudiated therefore both colonial and Hindutva accounts of a state of permanent conflict between the two communities, assuming even that Hindus had been a single community in the remote past in the manner that it is imagined today. If Hindus and Muslims had lived together for more than a millennium in the subcontinent, it was eminently possible for them to continue to do so. Those who denied that possibility were the colonial power and Hindu and Muslim communal movements; and, following from that denial, all of them worked to prevent it. The problem originated in the ideologies and strategies of power of colonialism and of Hindu and Muslim communalism. His response was therefore anti-colonial and anti-communal mobilizations that would be inclusive and democratic against such a history and strategy of segregation. He provided a millennial history of coexistence and syncretic culture, a theory of its continued possibility and necessity, and a programme of action through democratic mobilization.

His next step was to argue that genuinely democratic movements would solve the problem and dissolve the tensions. By genuine democracy he understood not only popular mobilizations but also the election of popular representatives on the basis of adult suffrage. He claimed throughout the fraught thirties and forties that the colonial establishment and the Muslim League and Hindu nationalists worked among themselves as unelected elites or as elected by a severely limited franchise as in the Councils and the Legislative Assemblies formed by the Act of 1935. One of his strongest arguments in favour of adult suffrage was that by including the entire population in the political process, the machinations of these elites would be exposed and be displaced in favour of those who had larger questions of development and independence at heart. He always complained that most of these spokesmen of the communities were unrepresentative, unelectable, concerned only with protecting the institutional and inherited interests of sundry cliques within these communities, and that they were egged on by the colonial state to divide Indian nationalism. He virtually challenged all of them to a joust on the basis of universal suffrage, and he derided them for failing to meet him in the lists. The partition was ultimately based upon such manipulation and the façade of democratic elections through limited suffrage. He never wavered in his faith in the popular mandate.

However, after Independence he spoke less of manipulative elites and directed his fire against communal ideologies within a mass democratic system. His reasoning was straightforward. If there were conflicts between communities, they were not due to the fact of being distinct communities but to their being inflamed and sustained by an ideology that accorded primacy to community. He objected to the demand for a Punjabi Suba on the ground that it was a communal demand and not a linguistic one. After Goa became part of India in 1961, he worried about the communal division between Roman Catholics and Hindus; and his worst fears came true when the election of 1963 was fought on that communal basis. There was no question of elite manipulation since adult suffrage was now the law. The Roman Catholics were a substantial presence with 40 percent of the electorate; the problem was wholly one of communal ideology and less of majority and minority; and Nehru was deeply chagrined that the Congress with its secular ideology was routed.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Report of speech of 14 Dec. 1963, *National Herald*, 15 Dec. 1963, SWJN/SS/84/pp. 267-268.

In Independent India his framework for integrating the different religious communities into a single nation and dealing with their cultural and political competitions was secularism. The first aspect of it was individual rights as usual to which every individual was entitled, whatever the community of birth. While this was to take precedence over all else, and especially over group rights and traditions, however hallowed, as usual, it was not enough. The second was a component or a corollary of the first through the fundamental right to the freedom of conscience. Accordingly, citizens enjoyed the freedom to profess and to propagate any religion subject to the usual safeguard that there should be no offence against the equivalent freedoms of another individual or religion. This guarantee encompassed cultural rights to each community, through rights to education and cultural institutions, with special exemptions and funding where appropriate. The third aspect was what was called equality between religions, that is, no religion was to enjoy rights superior to any other. The fourth was that the state would be neutral between religions. Religious communities were not territorial sub-sets of the national one, and they could not be considered microcosms of the national; hence they would not enjoy political rights in the manner of linguistic communities, while being politically utterly secure.

Beyond all these processes, he was buoyed by a sociological conviction that the process of secularization would finally overcome this particular problem of religious conflict and all that flowed from it. By this he understood that religions would cease to be imperative structures and instead become free choices; consequently, they would differ little from ideology and association. They would then admit of free entry and exit and compete in the manner of other social groups. Religion would not vanish; they would have an honoured place in society and their freedom would be constitutionally upheld; but they could no longer dominate or dictate. All the traditional religions would recede as they lost the power to structure social relations; they would be subordinated to the Constitution and its provisions for fundamental rights; and the Constitution and all that modernity implied would become the new civic religion. Modernity would solve the problem, along with all the democratic processes that he advocated. Democracy always entailed modernity to him, and their combination would ensure the ideal result, not automatically, but by active leadership, education, mobilization, and institutionalization.

The second was the minority problem, and none of these attempted solutions dealt with it. Democracies implied rule by majority; and if a majority and minority were permanent,

there was no solution through the democratic process. This was inevitable in democracies where the majority always carries the day. If the majority and minority were fluid in membership and the majority in one situation or election were to become a minority in another, and majority and minority were to exchange places through successive elections, there would be no “minority question”. The electorate is sufficiently homogeneous or unified for choices to shift and for differences to be nothing more ephemeral than those of “opinion”. The range of issues on which there is difference is limited and there would not be a permanent minority. The permanent minority arises in situations where the electorate’s position is not chosen but given. This is due to membership of a community by birth, and nothing can change that circumstance. These are typically ethnic, racial, linguistic, national, religious and similar communities which cannot change themselves whereas individuals and sometimes even communities could shift ideologically.

Unlike linguistic, regional and caste communities, religions had a majority community among them. Hindus were statistically preponderant to an overwhelming degree, and various Muslim groups claimed that Muslims would become a permanently insecure minority in a united India. While smaller religious communities like the Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and the tribal religions flourished, a comparable tension between them and Hindus did not exist. They consistently demanded and secured guarantees of cultural autonomy, although Sikhs demanded a state also and eventually got it in 1966 in the form of Punjab as a Punjabi speaking but not Sikh state. Whatever the constitutional guarantees, however independent the judiciary and neutral the state and its bureaucracy, the balance of advantage would tilt in favour of Hindus. In such circumstances, what were the conditions for democratic equality and the assertion of rights and especially the subjective feeling that the voice of the minorities was being heard and heeded?

The liberal answer to that problem had long been their stress on individual rights. It was expected that so long as the freedom of the individual was guaranteed, they would be secure even as members of a minority community. Nehru accepted that reasoning and took great pains to ensure that such rights were indeed protected in the fundamental rights in the Constitution. The rights of the individual were supplemented by the rights of minority communities to protect and nurture their culture. This followed also the well-worn path of allowing for education and cultural institutions to be maintained by the minority and granting them special protections or exemptions.

But he also discerned the obvious problem. Such individual rights could not protect the rights of the individual member of a minority community except in a minimalist sense through administrative action and judicial intervention. Every act of prejudice, exclusion, neglect or hostility could not be opposed and compensated for always through administrative protection and legal remedy. But Nehru ensured a foundation as he saw it with the fundamental rights and minority cultural rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

Besides this obvious liberal constitutionalist and not a little inadequate solution to the problem, Nehru's pursued other strategies. He sought out ways in which the majority may become or was in fact more fluid than its adherents and missionaries claimed it was. This was possible through secularization and through the mobilization of caste. Of these he preferred secularization. Caste may divide the Hindu majority but it was an abomination he could not contemplate as an ideal future. He focused his attention therefore on promoting secularization rather than caste politics. His ceaseless exhortations to sustain free artistic creativity, to cultivate the scientific temper, to nurture the diversity in the country, were all geared more to this end of secularization than any other. He never failed to remind his audiences that institutions and laws are only as good as the people who make and run or enforce them, and therefore the education of the mind should take precedence over all else. He regretted that he had been able only to preach but not do as much in this domain as he would have wanted to; but he did not consider any task final, that there was always more to be done, and that striving for a goal meant more than achievement. The burden of majorities in a democracy could be borne best by sustained movements and mobilizations in favour of reminding the populace of T. H. Huxley's dictum regarding evolutionary theory, that the stronger is not necessarily the better. In sum, he saw the problem lay more in communal ideology than in the fact of majority and minority, and that the solution lay in a mobilization against communalism, a process that he called nationalism in the tradition of the independence movement.

He stressed the ideology more than majority and minority because in his experience the religious communities did not seem to act as single blocs in spite of the strenuous efforts of both Hindutva and the Muslim League to ensure that they should do so. The Hindus were statistically in a vast majority; but Hindutva fared poorly in elections both before and after Independence, whether the franchise was restricted or universal. Hindutva was an

ideological presence but neither an electoral nor parliamentary one of significance. If Hindus supported the secular parties in majority, it suggested that Hindus did not constitute a single political community as argued by colonial, Muslim League, and Hindutva ideologues. The problem therefore lay not in the fact of a majority but in the nature of the ideology propagated as that of a majority.

But Nehru realized that he could not be complacent. If Hindutva was ineffective as an electoral and parliamentary opposition, it was potent on the ground and in localized situations, and much of the right wing of the Congress was more than sympathetic towards it. He saw the insidious nature of majoritarian politics even if the electoral majority was with the secular parties. While he depended on all the instruments that have been described above, he turned nonetheless to what would normally be described as undemocratic, or at best, non-democratic politics. It had the imprimatur of Gandhi himself. When the question arose about elections to the Congress Working Committee, he declared that electoral majorities portended danger to minorities. It is best explained in his own remarkably revealing words:

“We had sent Mr Hanumanthaiya’s proposals as well as others to a subcommittee presided over by Mr Dhebar. That Dhebar Sub-Committee sent their own reactions. In those reactions, they said that they did not approve of the elective principle coming into the Working Committee, for a variety of reasons which were logically very good reasons. For instance, it is possible that in an elective committee, people who come in may largely represent one part of India, and another part of India may be left out; they may ignore minorities, or at least minorities may not come in; women may not come in; they are not a minority, but anyhow, that may happen. It will be fair, therefore, for the old system to continue, where all these factors were balanced, and this had been the custom throughout. Even when we were supposed to elect a Working Committee in the past, it was hardly ever elected. In Gandhiji’s time, a list was put forward, in consultation with Gandhiji, and it was adopted in toto. So, really there has never been an elected Working Committee, there may have been once or twice, and I am not sure.

So, when this matter came up in this form for the Working Committee—there was no resolution of the Working Committee on it—but, broadly speaking, we agreed with Mr Dhebar’s comment on it, and I agreed too. That was the logical position.”<sup>59</sup>

Nehru was always keen on a democratic resolution; but like Ambedkar he discerned a looming menace in the majoritarian logic of democracy. Ambedkar worried about it in the context of caste domination in local milieux like panchayats; but Nehru swept his gaze across the entire social spectrum. While he placed his faith in democracy generally, he also saw its limits; but he could not offer a theory on how to balance democratic and bureaucratic procedures and to draw the line between them. His supple pragmatism degenerated into autocratic whim at the hands of others not blessed with his vision and integrity.

Nehru’s fusion of these forms of individual and community rights showed him at his democratic and pragmatic best. No theory had provided for such an exotic combination of diverse principles, sometimes flatly contradictory to each other. Liberal theory had argued the rights of the individual against oppression by the state, majorities, and public opinion by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stuart Mill respectively. All were concerned with protecting the individual’s negative liberty, and Nehru’s commitment to the fundamental rights drew its inspiration from such sources. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal and socialist theory also engaged with the rights of minority communities, chiefly national and religious, as both nationalism and democratic processes gathered momentum and majorities bore down on minorities. They advocated the rights of such minorities to cultural autonomy within multinational and multireligious states and empires, and the League of Nations had stood forth as champion during the inter-War years. Such rights ranged from cultural autonomy to political self-governing institutions; but the stress was more on the cultural, for their concern was how both to preserve the unity of a mixed state and to ensure autonomy to its cultural units.

Nehru’s discourse on minority rights drew on these debates and policies complemented by his experiences in the movement for independence. However, he discerned that these issues went far beyond the competition and conflict between majorities and minorities, especially as they were discussed overwhelmingly in terms of Hindus as a

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<sup>59</sup> Press Conference, 24 June 1960, SWJN/SS/61/p. 84.

majority and Muslims as a minority without being preoccupied with the rights of much smaller minorities like Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists, sundry sects, and the religions of different tribes. Most of all, the Hindus themselves were deeply divided into castes, and the Scheduled Castes among them chose to both include themselves within the Hindu fold and demand equal treatment and to exclude themselves from it to forge an independent identity, as with Ambedkar's Buddhism. Nehru's reflections on the subject of secularism, religious tolerance, and of the rights of religious minorities all betrayed his anxiety about the pressures of the majority over the minority combined with the awareness that both individual citizenship and vigorous community life could co-exist in spite of their apparent incompatibility in principle. In the years before Independence, he was happy to argue that communalism was the product of middle class aspirations to leadership and privilege and that the genuine democracy of adult suffrage would eliminate such aspirants to power. He suspected that he was playing a weak hand there, but it was useful as polemic against his Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha opponents. But universal suffrage after Independence revealed that such communal polarization had deeper foundations. He then fell back on his long-term view of modernization, of which secularization was a major component, and looked forward to such community consciousness subsiding with industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, mobility, mass literacy and education, and of course the scientific temper. Again, he could see that it was not happening quite as he had hoped and expected. But he argued throughout that the only solution lay in liberal and social democracy as he saw it. This fused secular individualism with protection to communities pursued through democratic mobilizations, constitutional theory and jurisprudence, administrative action, and the cultural practice of secularism. It was the largest marriage of individual and group rights in the world, and Nehru pursued it without a theory to guide him, relying solely on experience as he went along. Successful practice generates its own theory, and Nehru's practice has provided the basis for a theory of the simultaneous cultivation of individual and group rights on a scale that has not been attempted in the world so far.

## **The moral ideal**

Beyond constitutions, laws, and institutions, Nehru felt the need for a surprising range of non-democratic values to sustain his democracy. The national movement provided the required moral glow of a movement that was democratic, oriented to a high purpose, and nearly successful; but that exalted objective was Independence, Swaraj, and Ram Rajya, not



democracy. As an ideal, democracy was not so stirring. It valorizes the average and the mean and suspects or erases aspiration to the extreme. It ennobles the “common man”, the “man in the street”, and more generally the “people” or the “masses”; it prefers the humdrum and routine to inspiration and tortured self-transformation; it devalues superiority and especially hierarchy; and in religious terms it disparages claims to spiritual enlightenment, the grace of God, or direct communion with the divine. Measured against the ideals that could capture the imagination, be it the Enlightenment dream of the perfectibility of the species, the Romantic pursuit of self-realization, the revolutionary erasure of the iniquities of capitalism, the scientific search for the truths of the universe, or the many religious visions of salvation and bliss, democracy seemed bourgeois, philistine, pedestrian, and prosaic. Many writers, artists, and thinkers have expressed their horror at the prospect of the triumph of bourgeois mediocrity, and Nehru substantially concurred with this contrast between poetry and prose. He had the unenviable task of propagating a heroic ideal from beyond the mundane world of democratic theory and practice and ensuring that it would be compatible with all that was understood by democracy. It was not impossible since great democratic leaders were usually autocratic in psychology and behaviour.

Not surprisingly, Nehru’s first choice was Gandhi the Mahatma. In speech after speech, with inexhaustible passion and exhausting monotony, he extolled the Mahatma’s moral virtues. It was always the same message of a man of utter simplicity unattached to property and things of this world; of commitment in a cause that could never be compromised; of unexampled courage and readiness to lay down his life; of devotion to non-violence as an ideal, not as a cowardly means of avoiding conflict; of an incomparable leader who could draw out the best in each person and rouse in each one a clear-eyed conviction in his or her own abilities; of one who appears on earth but seldom, and when he does so it is to cleanse it of evil and corruption, in short, of an avatar of divinity.

However, such uninhibited devotion to Gandhian charisma and virtue contained a profound ambiguity. The grandeur of Gandhi’s personality elevated him far above the common herd. Gandhi was autocratic and imposed his will both on the Congress and beyond it on the movement. He himself was non-violent and forever ready to find common ground with opponents through persuasion and conversion. But he was a dictator and did not hesitate to claim such powers, and Nehru had no illusions as to what he was submitting

himself to, as revealed in this account of one of Gandhi's meetings with Shaukat Ali and Khilafat leaders in 1920:

“Gandhiji addressed them and after hearing him they looked even more frightened than before. He spoke well in his best dictatorial vein. He was humble but also clear-cut and hard as a diamond, pleasant and softspoken but inflexible and terribly earnest. His eyes were mild and deep, yet out of them blazed out a fierce energy and determination. This is going to be a great struggle, he said, with a very powerful adversary. If you want to take it up, you must be prepared to lose everything, and you must subject yourself to the strictest non-violence and discipline. When war is declared martial law prevails, and in our non-violent struggle there will also have to be dictatorship and martial law on our side, if we are to win. You have every right to kick me out, to demand my head, or to punish me whenever and howsoever you choose. But so long as you choose to keep me as your leader you must accept my conditions, you must accept dictatorship and the discipline of martial law. But that dictatorship will always be subject to your goodwill and to your acceptance and to your co-operation. The moment you have had enough of me, throw me out, trample upon me, and I shall not complain.”<sup>60</sup>

Gandhi reinforced his claims with such devices as the “inner voice” which freed him from democratic controls. The “inner voice” may not have been entirely undemocratic, for it was Gandhi's method of discerning the aspirations of the people, the limits of possibility to any course of action, and ensuring the morality of the means employed, all without his having to submit to tawdry democratic procedures like opinion polls and elections. He wanted to be free to feel, to think, and to act, and the inner voice permitted him to do so without democratic accountability. His followers were allowed to reject him but not to question him, and he did not hesitate to resort to military analogies, including martial law. When he was challenged in a typical political factional struggle by Subhas Chandra Bose, he eliminated his rival in an operation that would have elicited the admiration of a de Gaulle or Lenin.

Like the rishis of antiquity, Gandhi could compel the gods to bend to his will; otherwise, his image approximated to that of the Nietzschean overman. He was a heroic example of

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<sup>60</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (Oxford University Press: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1980, orig. edn, 1936), p. 46.

Zarathustra's self-transcendence, of overcoming his human self in a tension-filled process of recreating himself as a being that was more than merely human. In the manner of Zarathustra Gandhi sought to assert his will over himself; and as he pursued the ideal of self-mastery, he refrained from claiming a special understanding, inspiration, or powers derived from the gods; and in more mundane fashion, he did not discourse on the nature of the power of the state or depict an ideal structure. He did no more than present the moral ideal of the Ram Rajya. His refusal to devise a structure of state, and his commitment to rural self-sufficiency with its decentralized modes of community living, satisfied democratic and anarchistic urges. In the event, the non-democratic image of the rishi and overman was conflated with that of the anarchistically inclined democrat, together bequeathing a fertile source of inspiration in different registers.

But it is not Gandhi's personal traits that were so consequential as his apotheosis in Nehru's democracy. Gandhi's movement was democratic even if Gandhi was not; but Nehru's veneration of Gandhi and his urging the masses to idolize him in like manner was distinctly non-democratic if not anti-democratic. Nehru was alert to the danger and he refused to permit a cult or tempered the general enthusiasm for a cult of Gandhi; but for the rest he raised Gandhi as close to divinity as was possible for a secular, rational agnostic like himself. Nehru was not alone in genuflecting at this altar. Jayaprakash keenly felt the absence of a Mahatma and pressed Nehru to occupy that vacant throne of supreme moral authority. Nehru declined the honour and preferred democratic competition, pedestrian and grubby as it seemed to him. But the exaltation of Gandhi suggests that the autocratic ideal lurked in unexpected corners, and that unalloyed democrats nursed and disseminated visions of the overman despite themselves.

Nehru had serious differences with Gandhi and he made them known, as indeed did Gandhi himself; but that did not inhibit him in his fulsome adoration of his moral personality; more importantly, the difference was not over Gandhi's autocratic style of leadership. This is usually seen as an expression of personal loyalty, of a disciple worshipping his mentor, as Gopal has portrayed him.<sup>61</sup> It was, but there was more to it, for it was political strategy also. In a corrupt world that was threatening to become ever more corrupt through success, he needed an ideal of human perfection, and he projected Gandhi in that role. It reminded his

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<sup>61</sup> Sarvepalli Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography*, vol. 1, 1889-1947 (Delhi: Oxford University Press), vol. 1, p. 197.

audiences that it was vital to aspire to such exalted heights even if it were virtually impossible to attain them.

Nehru's next choice was the Buddha, who vied, not a little unusually, for primacy with Gandhi in Nehru's cosmos. However, Buddha had not emerged from the democratic universe, and such concepts would have been meaningless to one in his time and place. But Nehru widely advertised the precepts of Buddha as he understood them, the importance of compassion and of seeking the golden mean. Buddha preached compassion in a manner that was downright Gandhian and Nehruvian: " 'Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred; hatred ceases by love' ", and more pointedly " 'Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy.' " <sup>62</sup> He never tired of reiterating this particular doctrine for it captured so perfectly not only the spirit of Gandhian non-violence but also the need for compromise in sectarian conflict. The ideal of the golden mean seemed especially appropriate to a Nehru who sought to assemble into a coherent whole the maddening diversity of India and to consolidate the centre in the ideological and political spectrum. He did not hesitate to ascribe to Buddha a commitment to empirical investigation and declare "how eminently scientific and rationalistic he was"; <sup>63</sup> and as he preached the necessity of the scientific temper, he was also disseminating the teachings of Buddha. Consistently enough, Buddhist symbols proliferated in Independent Indian iconography, beginning with Ashoka's lion headed capital and the Dharmachakra on the national tricolour. Buddhist stupas were restored, and Buddhist relics were recovered from London, and the Parinirvana was celebrated with due aplomb in 1956. Buddha was a living presence of exceptional moral and psychological power: "Personality counts today as ever, and a person who has impressed himself on the thought of mankind as Buddha has, so that even today there is something living and vibrant about the thought of him, must have been a wonderful man ... " <sup>64</sup>

## Military discipline

Along with the non-democratic aspects of the teachings of Gandhi and Buddha, Nehru routinely proclaimed the distinctly undemocratic virtues of military discipline and described

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<sup>62</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1981, 1<sup>st</sup> edn 1946), p. 127, hereafter *Discovery*; repeated in the Lok Sabha, 17 Dec. 1957, SWJN/SS/40/p. 582.

<sup>63</sup> Speech to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, 1 Oct. 1958, SWJN/SS/44/p. 475. Reiterated in his interview to Ramnarayan Chaudhury, 21 Oct. 1958, SWJN/SS/44/p. 165.

<sup>64</sup> *Discovery*, ch. 4, pp. 131-132.

himself a soldier in a cause. In his argument, democracy required discipline, and the model of discipline and order was the soldier. However, the discipline he had in mind was that of the engaged, critical, rational, and constructive intelligence of the individual citizen. But, by an elision that is far from exceptional, he conflated the images of the citizen and soldier for this purpose. Those in positions of power value the critical mind of the ideal citizen chiefly in retrospect; at the moment of the exercise of power, and especially in a crisis, they far prefer the robotic behaviour of the soldier. When the idea of discipline is to be conveyed, it is through the image of the soldier, not through the ideal of rational critique, however much it may otherwise be prized. Nehru's model was the citizen, but he represented one of the most important virtues of the citizen through one of the commonest understandings of the soldier as an automaton. This is not a little ironic since the military establishment has never refrained from accusing Nehru of neglecting the defence of the country, demoting the importance of the armed forces, and demoralizing the army. He was no lover of military life, its rituals and its spirit; he detested militarism; and he despised and deplored the role the colonial Indian army had played in British imperial adventures. While he assigned blame to British policy, he was always warm to the soldier and emphatically to the national army after Independence. His attraction to military discipline could be traced to his English school experience, but it was more likely derived from what he saw of the general European practice of forming the citizen in part through universal military service. As early as 1928 he considered including compulsory military training in the forthcoming constitution.<sup>65</sup> He welcomed the prospect of universal conscription because "the most important thing is that it teaches them discipline and unity which make a nation extremely strong."<sup>66</sup> His further reason was, not so quixotically perhaps, that it was democratic and egalitarian, since everybody was equally subjected to it.<sup>67</sup> He lauded the Europeans for conscripting the entire youth of the nation and he regretted that he lacked the resources to carry out such a policy in India. He could comfortably affirm that "as a soldier of the Congress, I accept the decisions made on behalf of the Congress" or that "among the many lessons taught by Gandhiji the most important one was to behave like a soldier in the cause of freedom".<sup>68</sup> Logically enough, he described himself as a soldier of the party on several occasions;<sup>69</sup> and he exhorted the people to work with "martial

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<sup>65</sup> To J.N. Gupta, 9 May 1928, SWJN/FS/3/p. 40.

<sup>66</sup> Speech on the Territorial Army and Auxiliary Air Force Day, 26 Nov. 1960, SWJN/SS/64/p. 291.

<sup>67</sup> Speech inaugurating the Azad Medical College, New Delhi, 26 Feb. 1961 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/67/p. 299; speech to the Annual Training Camp of the NCC, 13 Jan. 1962 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/74/p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Statement to the press, 30 Jan. 1957, SWJN/SS/36/p. 319; election speech in Baripada, 26 May 1961, SWJN/SS/69/p. 296; see also election speech in Bhubaneswar, 22 May 1961, SWJN/SS/69/p. 221.

<sup>69</sup> Speech at the D. A. V. College, Sholapur, 11 Apr. 1960 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/59/p. 161; speech in Warangal, 4 Feb. 1962, SWJB/SS/74/p. 387.

discipline” and to “acquire some of the martial spirit of the soldiers” as the Congress itself had done.<sup>70</sup> He urged the Bharat Scouts and Guides to become good citizens, which he equated with soldiers; but he did clarify that “A soldier does not mean merely a soldier in the armed forces though we have those soldiers too.”<sup>71</sup> Perhaps only citizens were the true soldiers possessed of all the virtues, while the professional ones were in some sense auxiliaries. Against the possible objection that pursuing the military ideal might be at the cost of freedom, he roundly declared with dubious logic: “A soldier leads a life of rigorous discipline. Nobody suggests that he has lost his freedom. Society benefits by discipline.”<sup>72</sup> The only concession he made was that such discipline should be self-imposed; he did not enter into a discussion whether this might be contrary to a soldier’s discipline. Again, he regarded the self-discipline of the citizen to be superior to the externally imposed discipline of the soldier; yet he preferred to present the image of the soldier rather than of the ideal citizen to convey discipline. Speaking of the Gandhian movement, he recalled, “We were common soldiers engaged in a mighty task”,<sup>73</sup> and he went so far as to describe his mentor as “our Commander-in-Chief Mahatma Gandhi”.<sup>74</sup> Saintry soldiers are a common phenomenon in human history; but the military identity did not sit comfortably with ahimsa. It began to appear gradually as building the state took precedence over all else; and at such moments he sounded more like Lenin than Gandhi.

If it was not conscription into the armed forces, he flailed about with threats of labour conscription, bizarre as it might seem in a country like India with its vast labour pool. But his inspiration was not economic, it was disciplinary with a hint of the penal about it, as if all Indians were languid and indolent, steeped in the “babu mentality”<sup>75</sup> and luxuriating in Macaulay’s “vapour bath”.<sup>76</sup> He was often severely critical of workers as lazy and slovenly which would have delighted any colonial ideologue. He classified discipline into the externally imposed and internally generated, the external being foreign while the internal was “the one

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<sup>70</sup> Speech at the D. A. V. College, Sholapur, 11 Apr. 1960 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/59/p. 161; election speech in Bhadrak, 26 May 1961, SWJN/SS/69/p. 234.

<sup>71</sup> Speech to Scouts and Guides, 22 Dec. 1961, SWJN/SS/73/p. 121.

<sup>72</sup> Report of special convocation address, Patna University, 14 Apr. 1960, *The Hindu*, SWJN/SS/59/p. 192.

<sup>73</sup> Speech in Jaipur, 2 Nov. 1963 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/84/p. 68.

<sup>74</sup> Speech in Poona, 5 Oct. 1959 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/53/p. 142.

<sup>75</sup> “Saving the Congress”, reply to debate on the Unity Resolution, AICC, Ahmedabad, 30 Jan. 1951, as reported in the *National Herald* and the *Bombay Chronicle*, 31 Jan 1951, SWJN/SS/15/part 2/p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> T. B. Macaulay, “Warren Hastings (1841), *The Complete Works of Lord Macaulay in Twelve Volumes* (London: Longmans, 1898) vol. 9, p. 425.

which an individual or society imposes upon itself ... this is the discipline of a free people.”<sup>77</sup> It was a distinction that may not have been self-evident to his audience.

Like political bosses the world over, he found students tiresome. Bundles of explosive talent, exploratory and idealistic, he found their unfocused energies disorienting, quite forgetting or discarding his own militant self of the 1920s when he had loudly called upon students to be Dantesque revolutionaries, to be “ ‘daring and daring and still more daring’ ”. Already in 1950 he declared in Lucknow: “Our students sitting on student committees, pass resolutions on world affairs and about what the Government should do. I have hardly seen any resolutions about what the students themselves ought to do”.<sup>78</sup> It became a standard theme thereafter. He would lecture students on getting on with their studies, do manual labour, “build a hostel for Delhi University or something else”, and generally do anything but go on processions.<sup>79</sup> In Allahabad in 1961, he drew the distinction between politics in colonial and Independent India. Then, he explained, it was their duty to enter the movement, but now their responsibility lay in study, study, and more study, quoting Lenin for good measure. He could be intemperate: “I am amazed and often wonder whether there is some disorder in my brain or theirs”, even threatening to close down colleges and universities. He accused them of spending “all their time in misbehaving and hooliganism” forgetting that they had been privileged to enjoy an education.<sup>80</sup> The problem was the universal one, of degeneration after achievement, but also an anxiety that he and his peers now belonged to or were being relegated to an *ancien régime*: “The youth of today live in a world in which they have no idea of what happened during the freedom struggle. They may have read a little about it in books. But they have had no first hand experience of it. It would be a good thing if they tried to understand the great men who lived in those years what they stood for and what they achieved.”<sup>81</sup>

## Democratic dictatorship

Beyond the moral personae of Gandhi and Buddha, and a not wholly unexpected admiration for military discipline, Nehru projected himself as the model of democratic

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<sup>77</sup> Speech in Bombay, 4 Oct. 1959 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/53/p. 91.

<sup>78</sup> Speech in Lucknow, 4 Oct. 1950 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/15/part 1/p. 24.

<sup>79</sup> Speech in Ahmedabad, 28 Nov. 1962 (original in Hindi) SWJN/SS/54/p. 210.

<sup>80</sup> Speech in Ranchi, 15 Nov. 1963 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/84/p. 237.

<sup>81</sup> Speech in Allahabad, 29 Dec. 1961 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/73/p. 173.

leadership. He was a perfect parliamentarian, attended parliament regularly, took criticism sportingly, was never offensive in repartee, and did not hesitate to face his critics after the defeat in 1962. He was respectful of the independence of the judiciary and the press as also of other autonomous institutions, gave any number of interviews, and addressed press conferences regularly. In his election campaigns he dealt with issues rather than personalities, and he was unfailingly courteous to followers and opponents. He had outbursts of temper, but took care to apologize, never allowing bitterness to grow or to linger, and was always controlled in writing. But he was endowed with charm and charisma to an exceptional degree, and his effort to be ordinary and egalitarian made him extraordinary and superior.

There was good reason to fear that the expulsion of the colonial regime could have been followed by a plebiscitary dictatorship by an Indian. Ironically, Nehru himself was the most eligible candidate for that role. This possibility was not ruled out by contemporary observers, nor, as it happened, by Nehru himself. In 1937 he was troubled or playful enough to warn against his own megalomania through an anonymous article;<sup>82</sup> after Independence he was so idolized by the masses that he could have turned it to his advantage in this manner. The subject could arise almost apropos of nothing, and he was obliged to deny that he had “the makings of a dictator”.<sup>83</sup> But his style could be plebiscitary as it had been in the Constituent Assembly. In late January 1952 after election tours of ten weeks, he calculated that he had addressed about 35 million people directly, addressing vast multitudes of several hundred thousand at a time. He spoke to them less about specific issues than about concepts, history, culture, and the nature of human society, and he was astonished that the masses could listen to him so often in pin drop silence. He described his exhilaration and state of exaltation after these encounters with the masses, his “feeling of adventure and excitement”, an inexhaustible energy flowing through his system, and the heightened “emotional awareness” on both sides. He admitted to “a special bond between the people and me which I cannot describe or write about”, and “...when I speak it is not as Jawaharlal, but I speak in the voice of the millions of Indians.” In continued in the same vein over the years. Had he not been so rational, agnostic, and austere of temperament, he would probably have succumbed to a belief in a mystical communion between himself and the people of India.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “The Rashtrapati,” signed Chanakya, written 5 Oct. 1937, published in the *Modern Review*, Nov. 1937, reproduced in SWJN/FS/8/pp. 520-523, along with other documents identifying him as the author. See also Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 1, p. 232.

<sup>83</sup> To B. C. Roy, New Delhi, 13 May 1951, SWJN/SS/16/part 1/ p. 357.

<sup>84</sup> See his letters to Edwina Mountbatten, Jaipur, 3 Dec. 1951, Stafford Cripps, 6 Jan. 1952, and V. K. Krishna Menon, 27 Jan. 1952, and his speech in Hyderabad, 15 Dec. 1951, SWJN/SS/17/pp. 21, 32, 39, 65-66.



So great was the distance between himself and other leaders and so immense his popularity, that he addressed them so often as a teacher and mentor. He did so not only in his sermons and discourses to the untutored masses, but as much or more to his chief ministers, his party members, and members of other parties when it was possible to speak to them in such terms. He would assume that style even with captains of industry when discussing socialism, planning, and the public sector set against their complaints about the neglect of the private sector.

He had great faith in the people as Gandhi's disciples, and he had no doubt about universal suffrage. But just as Gandhi had trained and disciplined them, and made them overcome their passivity to face the brutality of the colonial police fearlessly, so also, he now imagined himself educating them through electoral democracy. Democracy, he sermonized, entailed accepting the results of elections with good grace, to criticize without abusing, to debate without giving or taking offence, to stand for principle rather than indulge prejudice, whim, and personality, and much else of that order. He did not seem quite convinced that people were aware of such essentials of democratic procedure and found himself called to be professor to the masses. Even by the second general election in 1957 he felt they may not have quite imbibed the lesson, and he developed the new theme that elections were not merely expressions of the will but also educational: "I would like to call this general election some kind of a university for 37 crores of people in India."<sup>85</sup> He addressed his public, especially during election time, as a schoolmaster explaining a problem in the classroom. He was less concerned about speaking to them on the bread and butter issues that touched them directly. Such matters he left to "other ranks" like the candidates while he himself assumed the lofty stage and held forth on weightier and global concerns. But those who came to listen to him in their hundreds of thousands did not comprehend such matters, or he assumed that they did not. Hence his tone of the teacher, and his telling them typically, "I am interested in other bigger issues and want that you should try to understand them." The people had been summoned to the task of nation-building, "so they must understand the issues and be prepared to shoulder the burdens."<sup>86</sup> The tone was not too different from his

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<sup>85</sup> Speech in Bangalore, 23 Feb. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 15; see also speech in Mangalore, 25 Feb. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 54.

<sup>86</sup> Speech in Gurgaon, 28 Feb. 1957 (original in Hindi), SWJN/SS/37/p. 76.

periodic letters to chief ministers. He was conscious of himself wearing the two hats of teacher and comrade.

If he was not the professor, he was certainly vice-chancellor to this vast university organizing education of such outstanding quality to the masses. But he did not make clear by what right he did so. Democratic theory had not assigned the role of teacher to elected leaders; but he had arrogated that right to himself. The feeling is more paternalistic than democratic, and there is about it a touch of the civilizing mission upgraded to a democratizing or nationalizing mission. When recording the achievements of a decade of Congress rule to Jayaprakash, he contended that learning and establishing the conventions of parliamentary behaviour were vitally important, that firmly grounded parties were preferable to a gaggle of Independents, and that “it is far more important from the point of view of public education and development of democratic work”.<sup>87</sup> The issue came up again in his interviews to R. K. Karanjia from 1960 onward. He then both denied and admitted he was educating the masses. In a single paragraph he commenced with “I don’t teach them or convert them”, went on to assert that he spoke to them about their concerns, but concluded with “All this educates people and makes them think and act in a broadly progressive direction.”<sup>88</sup>

The distance between himself and not merely the masses but even the leaders after him was vast, and he might have felt that it fell to him to provide guidance rather than merely win elections and rule the country. He would circulate politically relevant academic articles to his council of ministers to widen their horizons. His letters to his chief ministers were designed to educate them on national and international affairs in order to extricate them from their provincial rut; but he often also digressed into his favourite lecture topics of ancient and medieval history, Marxian and socialist theory, art and creativity, and of course the scientific temper. His interactions with the Congress Party in Parliament resembled that of a popular teacher bringing a rowdy bunch of students abreast on the world outside; and like a favourite teacher he could throw tantrums to silence his wards into discipline. In typical fashion he lectured to them on Somalia:

“Somalia, as you know, is among those countries which have become independent recently and perhaps many of you may not even know where Somalia is. On the map

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<sup>87</sup> To Jayaprakash Narayan, 3 Apr. 1957, SWJN/SS/37/p. 370.

<sup>88</sup>*The Mind of Mr Nehru*, SWJN/SS/56/p. 113.

it is slightly below Aden. Many difficult problems confront it. Years ago, Somaliland had been split into three—the British Somaliland, the French and the Italian Somaliland. Now they have come together again, not wholly, some patches remain outside.”<sup>89</sup>

He was so far above the fray that he could advise them that even an occasional defeat would help to insulate them against complacency.<sup>90</sup>

There was more to it however, for he was teaching parliamentarism and its difference from satyagraha: he was establishing the difference between debate and agitation. He did so most often by example, but frequently also through exhortation and scolding. Like Narendra Deva and others, he saw that the independence movement had nurtured the spirit and tradition of agitation, not of debate. Nationalism had progressively delegitimized the colonial state, and almost wholly so after the advent of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhian satyagrahis were steered into opposition and resistance to that state and they refused to validate it through debate. Negotiations between the national and colonial leaderships were conceivable, and Gandhi always stressed the need to convert an opponent; but debate amounted to perfidy. Negotiations were designed to arrive at a settlement for the extinction of colonialism; parliamentary debate on the other hand was premised on the permanence of the two or more parties and their moral and constitutional right to form governments. The parliamentary system of Independent India replaced Gandhian satyagraha and fasts with elections and debate, and Nehru never tired of clarifying that such Gandhian forms of direct action were now unconscionable as India was blessed with her own rightful state and democracy. But he had his doubts whether the message was getting across. He suspected that the Indian public was still wedded to agitation on the premise that even constitutionally elected governments were illegitimate. Ironically, he himself had not learnt the lesson well enough, and he was party, however reluctantly, to the overthrow of the elected Communist government of Kerala in 1959 by an alliance of opposition parties and groups. He had hoped to nudge the people toward parliamentary procedure by undoing what Gandhi had habituated them to, and while Indian politics has remained perversely faithful to Gandhi but without his self-control, he himself did not quite manage to live up to the standard he had set.

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<sup>89</sup> Speech to the CPP, 12 Aug. 1963, SWJN/SS/83/p.155.

<sup>90</sup> Speech to the CPP, 29 Dec. 1956, SWJN/SS/36/p. 277.

While Nehru periodically revealed his doubts about democratic processes and institutions, he never wavered in his expressions of faith in democracy and the people even as he expected them to transform themselves into his idealized version of them. He always regarded them as the people, not as the crowd, the masses, and still less the mob. After their Gandhian apprenticeship, the people were thinking, discerning, and discriminating, aware of the issues that confronted them, and capable of making rational choices; and, unlike the crowd, the mass, and the mob, they could not be swayed and driven or become fickle. Above all, they were disciplined. But for their lack of education, he might have ascribed to them the wisdom and judgment that public opinion and civil society attribute to themselves. He nursed an exalted image of the people; and by ascribing such virtues to them, he not only expected them to live up to his expectations of them but was also convinced that they were indeed doing so. When they engaged in riots and violence, he accused the bureaucracy and the political parties, his own included, of inadequacy, venality, and irresponsibility, but not the people. He never lost an opportunity to address gatherings, large or small, in part to teach and to communicate his policies and concepts, but as much to discover their understanding of what was happening in the world. This might appear to be difficult or impossible since he was addressing them and not the other way about. But he claimed that they spoke to him, with their eyes, their facial expressions, and their body language; and he imagined he saw their hopes, dreams, anxieties, despair, anger, courage, resolution, and fortitude, at various moments during his encounters. He seldom spoke from a prepared text, even as prime minister; he developed his thoughts as he went along, his ideas were simple and his expression often simplistic, and he rambled and repeated himself with many rhetorical flourishes as perhaps required for large audiences; and as he held forth with joy illimited as the poet might say, he felt that they were telling him something which he could not have heard from any other source. Facial expressions opened out into multiple worlds of meaning for him as they did for Dostoevskian characters, especially the Silent Christ answering the Grand Inquisitor with his eyes; and he would be despondent when he had not addressed a meeting for a time longer than he considered appropriate. As he wrote to Edwina Mountbatten, they roused each other into states of heightened emotion:

“Wherever I have been, vast multitudes gather at my meetings and I love to compare them, their faces, their dress, their reactions to me and what I say. Scenes from past history of that very part of India rise up before me and my mind becomes a picture

gallery of past events. But, more than the past, the present fills my mind and I try to probe into the minds and hearts of these multitudes.”<sup>91</sup>

This was routine, and he frequently described his feelings after such addresses in this manner. He approached the people as others would consult oracles, search for omens, or pray to the gods for a sign, and he always came away satisfied that he had been provided direction.

In the event Nehru provided the benefit of dictatorship while promoting a democratic politics. His immense popularity and Congress domination of Indian politics throughout his tenure clothed India in that armour. He managed to survive without having to resort to a dictatorship, much to the chagrin of so many foreign observers nurtured on the colonial story of India having been united by the British and due to fall apart with their departure; logically enough, they were loudest in proclaiming him a form of democratic dictator imposing one party rule. Indian analysts on the other hand were complacent that Indian democracy was secure; yet they ascribed it more to his leadership than to the nature of Indian institutions. By placing the emphasis on Nehru himself, they were in fact not too far removed from foreign observers. Otherwise, they took Indian unity, independence and democracy so much for granted that they accused him of attempting to homogenize the country through planning, secularism, and nationalism. Nehru was committed to democracy, unity, and independence, but, if he had to sacrifice any one of these in part in order to preserve the other two, he might have surrendered democracy. He would have reasoned perhaps that democracy may be abridged and restored, whereas unity and independence could be lost but not regained. Thanks to Congress domination and his personal charisma, he did not have to face that painful choice. It should be said however that he did not theorise his options in this manner or even hint that he might have to compromise democracy. But democratically elected leaders are not wont to do so, for in their eyes they never undermine either democracy or the constitution, and even military dictators often speak in terms of restoring democracy when overthrowing it. However, he did carry out amendments to the Constitution to curtail fundamental rights, and he did retain the powers of arrest without trial, especially for sedition. As for his dealings with the states, he did invade Hyderabad, dismiss and arrest Sheikh Abdullah without a case against him, and dismiss the communist government of

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<sup>91</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi* (London: Macmillan, Picador, 2007), pp. 142-143.

Kerala. Faced with more opposition and more danger, he could have continued down that slippery slope, however much it might have been against his instinct. Nehru ultimately needed democracy to preserve the unity and independence of the country; but he also needed and in fact deployed for the same purpose many of the instruments that dictatorships have to offer. The colonial state had bequeathed a bagful of them and the fact that his successors have so often succumbed to the temptation of using them suggests that democracy in India needs or is comfortable with a limited range of non-democratic procedures.

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