

CHAPTER TWO

NEHRU AND THE CONGRESS.

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Nehru did not join the communist party nor the Congress socialist party. The questions that arise here are, what kind of socialist Nehru himself was ? What tasks had he set before himself to spread the cause of socialism in India ? Did he do anything to organize an effective socialist movement in the country ?

To understand Nehru's concept of socialism it is essential to note that Nehru's political education started quite late. And the other fact clearly connected with this is that he was exposed to different kinds of influences i.e. Marxism, Russian Revolution and Gandhi simultaneously. The impact of these two facts was that Nehru tried throughout to reconcile the scientific aspects of socialism with the Gandhian beliefs of importance of means etc. He had to adjust his beliefs in scientific socialism with Gandhian ideas which he himself thought were not ' socialist',¹ but at the same time ' Gandhiji knew India better than we did',² and Gandhiji ' has done a great

service to us by stressing the importance of means.³ The result of this peculiar situation in which Nehru was placed was that his socialism got diluted. Any attempt to reconcile the essentials of Marxism with that of Gandhism was bound to be a failure, in spite of Nehru's sincere efforts to do so.

Nehru's dilemmas as a socialist do not end here whatever may be the kind of his socialist beliefs and at an intellectual level he was quite near to scientific socialism did he build any movement to larger ones also. Its leaders were terribly afraid of doing anything which might raise this class issue or irritate the zimindar elements... Congress being what it was could not then patronize class conflict.⁴

Where was the silver lining in this situation ? Why had he pinned his hop in the Congress ? Nehru saw in the growth of the mass base of the Congress a sign of change and hope of his success in transforming the Congress into his way of thinking, " gradually the lower middle class began to dominate the Congress and later the peasantry made their influence felt.⁵ Nehru felt that gradually the Congress would be brought round. He regarded the Congress as the only political party having a mass base which had a tremendous capacity to mobilize the people in favour of socialism in the country and against imperialism and colonial

exploitation. Nehru had reason to believe that he had been quite successful in getting resolutions with radical contents adopted by the Congress under his persuasive influence. He therefore, thought and perhaps, rightly,⁶ to rely more on a well-knit mass organization to educate the people about socialism than on splinter groups and factions such as the CSP. He, in his presidential addresses at Lahore session of the Congress (1929) or Lucknow session (April 1939) or Faizpur session (1936) reiterated his belief in socialism and asked the Congress to pass an important resolution on Swaraj, indicating fundamental rights and its economic programme in the following words :

The ' State shall own or control heavy industries and services, mineral resources, railways, waterways, shipping and other means of transport.

Nehru was not fully satisfied with Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights and economic policy. He wrote :

In the Karachi resolution, it (Congress) took a step, very short step, in a socialist direction by advocating nationalization of heavy industries and services and various other measures to lessen the burden on the poor and increase it on the rich. This was not socialism at all and a capitalist state could easily accept almost everything contained in that resolution.⁷

He drew the attention of the Congress to adopt an agrarian policy to improve the conditions of the poor peasantry. He pleaded for " a great changes in the land laws and the basis of the present system of land tenure." He argued that " this semifeudal system is out of date and is great hindrance to production and general progress. He demanded the creation of a new system of " peasant proprietorship " and said that the " demands for radical reforms in rent and revenue and the abolition of feudal levies have been made from most of the provinces", further, " vast gatherings of peasants testify to their inability to carry their present burdens " ? That this issue was important has also been pointed out by Sitaramayya. He says :

Throughout India there was great commotion amongst the tenantry against the rack renting both under government and under the zimindars, and against in particular in respect of the latter their super arrogation of rights regarding tanks and tank bunds, water sources and irrigation channels, pastures and forests. And too, the number of intermediaries between the cultivators and government, rose to as many as thirteen in Bengal and various figures in different provinces.⁸

In spite of his presidential addresses, and speech making. Nehru, however achieved little in converting " Multiclass

National Movement " to the cause of socialism. Opposition to his to the open when important right wing members of the Congress Working Committee resigned in 1936 in protest against the pronouncement of the Congress President Nehru. In their collective letter of resignation. Rajendra Prasad and six other wrote to Nehru on June 29, 1936.

We feel that the preaching and emphasizing of socialism particularly at this stage by the President and other socialist members of the working committee, while the Congress has not adopted, it is prejudicial to the best interests of the country and to the success of the national struggle for freedom which we all hold to be the first and paramount concern of the country. We are of opinion that through your speeches and those of the other socialist colleagues and the acts of other socialists who have been emboldened by the speeches ... the Congress organization has been weakened throughout the country.⁹

The resignations were later withdrawn and the rapprochement was arrived at. But the moral of the episode is that Nehru was a leader of an organization, which was not interested in socialism, and was motivated only by a sole purpose of winning country's freedom. Not only the Right-wing in the Congress, but vested interested outside also wanted the Congress leadership to check Nehru. After all the Congress was

always under the influence of property owners whether landed or industrial. The industrialists supported Gandhian leadership of the Congress which was based on class harmony, capitalists, trusteeship of property and according to which the "capitalists are fathers and workers are children". To them this philosophy was a defence against the threat of class struggle posed by the working class. Hence for the industrialists, Congress was a safety valve, and Nehru seemed to them a great threat.

As A. R. Desai states :

Wealthy industrialists like Birla, Ambalal Sarabhai, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, and others supported the Congress under Gandhi's absolute leadership and financed its programmes. They also subsidized such schemes as the revival of pre-capitalist handicrafts. In fact, it was mainly due to the financial aid of these industrial magnates who subsidized the All India Spinner's Association and such other organizations that the relics of steadily declining old modes of production in India were artificially buttressed and kept alive?¹⁰

No doubt the Karachi programme of the Congress had laid down that "In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions" but this remained only a sentiment with the Congress leadership.

In the light of the above facts it is clear that the Congress was not developing any consciousness for socialism on the contrary if it took one step forward at Karachi, it retraced many steps later on and nullified even the mild resolutions of Fundamental Rights approved at the Karachi Session. The Congress could not push any scheme of agrarian reforms because of the domination of the zimindars. In spite of being a peasant organization, it failed to do anything for the peasantry.

When Nehru's utterances disturbed the Congress leadership and the vested intvreste he was pained. In fact it were wealthy industrialist, who had engineered the revolt of the working committee against him when he was the president (1936). The intention was to control Nehru from within the Congress organization. Nehru knew all this. The question, therefore, arises as to why did he not leave the Congress when he found that its class characters was a hindrance in the way of any socialist programme ? Why did he not join hands with others to organize a socialist movement in the country when Subhash Bose took up cudgles against the old guard, why did he (Nehru) not join the forces of opposition to the established leadership of the Congress. At the time of Bose's revolt(1938-39) the country's mood was quite different. There was a great ferment in the peasantry and the working class. In the country

besides Trade Union organizations Kisan (Peasant) organizations with a programme of the abolition of landlordism and demands for the reduction of land tax rent and debts had been organized in the thirties under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand, Professor Ranga and Indulal Yainik. Only the proper leadership was needed perhaps the Nehru Subhash combination could have provided this perhaps a Nehru - Subhash walk out from the Congress would have started the process of polarization in Indian politics. But Nehru did not part company with the Congress and Gandhi because of two reasons. He was convinced that splits and factions would weaken the national movement (i.e. Congress) and this situation would be fully exploited by the foreign rulers. He never entertained the idea of leaving the Congress, in spite of the fact that he had basic differences with the majority of the Congress leadership including Gandhi. In a communication to his friends and critics. Jawaharlal referred to his difficulties after the Lucknow Session of the Congress but clearly stated that.

Even the socialists realised that the primary issue was political that of independence and on that they concentrated. To talk of splits and the like is an absurdity. There can be no division in our ranks when the call of independence came to all of us.¹²

When differences between Subhash and Gandhi were deepening after Tripura Congress, Nehru wrote to Subhash.

I felt it would be injurious in the interests of India and our cause for me or you to create this definite split.¹³

It is clear that for Nehru, national freedom was a greater cause than providing leadership to the socialist and building a socialist movement in the country as an alternative to the Congress. The Second reason why Nehru did not quite the Congress was his belief that while other left parties in the country were weak, the Congress was the main organization with a strong peasant base. To change and reform the Congress was a better task than to leave it, he thought. Further, the dominating personality of Gandhi, in whom. Nehru found his father image was a very important factor in all important decisions of Nehru. Nehru differed with Gandhi on fundamentals, and described him an extraordinary paradox.¹⁴ But accepted his lead on any crucial occasion. His loyalty and devotion to Gandhi led Nehru to surrender his intellectual convictions many times. Thus, the person who wrote that " In order to combat an unjust system the false premises on which it is based must be exposed and the reality laid bare"¹⁵ could not understand (or refused understand) the reality of the built in Congress resistance to socialism.

Thus, when Trade Unions and Kisan Sabhas were working actively among the masses, he seemed reluctant to face the situation boldly.

Nehru was essentially a democrat of the Western liberal tradition. This was due to the impact of his early education in England. He accepted the essentials of Marxism and appreciated Soviet Russia and its system of economic planning but under Gandhian impact did not accept communist methods, and even gave secondary position to the concept of class struggle. Nehru was concerned with evolving a set of principles and ideas to achieve a socialist reconstruction of society with democratic means rather than through a violent revolution. His conviction was that socialism without democracy would mean tyranny in India further, his assesment of the existing Indian situation was that any radical transformation was not easilly. Possible because of the compulsions of the objective situation. The masses were deep rorded in superstition, religious fanaticism and ignorance . The class idstinction had not yet crystallized industrial labour or the proletariat was confined to a few industrial centres of India. The peasantry the largest section of the Indian society was conservative and lacked social consciousness. In the absence of the revolutionary worker and the peasant class ready to fight against the entrenched vested interests the journey to socialism had to be slow. In February 1938, he declared,

I have been and am a convinced socialist and a believer in democracy, and have at the same time accepted whole heartedly the speceful technique of non-violent action which Gandhiji has practised os successfully during the past twenty years. I am convinced that strenght can only come to us from the masses, but that strenght, either for struggle or for the great work of building a new world must be a disciplined and orderly strenth. It is not out of chao's or the encouragement of chaotic forces that we can fashion the India of our dreams.¹⁶

Thus in the prevailing condition and due to the infrastructural compulsions the first step to spread the cause of socialism was to spread itsmessage to the common man through public meetings, election campaings, (1937 Elections) and other media of mass contact.

The contribution outlined above seems to be Nehru's only contribution to the cause of socialism in India of the pre indepece period. During World War II, the political movement to win freedom assumed greater importance and Nehru's attention, time and energey were devoted to this cause and after the war, to negotiation for independence. During the crucial period of thirties and forties, Nehru's response to the ferment among the workers and the peasants was merely to spread the idea of socialism with a belief that if this idea caught the imagination of the ~~of~~ ~~the~~ people the socialist movement would gain monentum in the country.

To recapitulate the whole discussion it can be summarized
her that

- 1) Nehru did not do much to build socialist movement in India.
- 2) Nehru always kept in the cause of national independence superior to the cause of socialist movement.
- 3) Nehru's loyalty to Gandhi was supreme, and he diluted his socialism under the impact of Gandhis ideas of class collaboration and peaceful methods for social change.
- 4) Nehru's reading of the Congress that " it did represent the only effective revolutionary force in the country "¹⁷ because it had reached the peasant and the village in India prevented him to build socialist movement as an alternative to the multi-class congress platform.
- 5) Nehru essentially remained a socialist at the intellectual level but could not reconcile his liberal out-look belief in democracy and faith in non-violence with the total philosophy of socialism. All these ideas remained different streams of thought with him. He could not merge them with his socialist beliefs.

- 6) Nehru as a historian of the modern world knew it well enough that socialism had not come to any country without organized struggle and movements. Perhaps his social background precluded him from organizing mass struggles in the country though he struggled hard for the country's freedom from foreign domination.

The end result of all this was that Nehru disappointed socialists in India and himself remained out of place everywhere at home or where. Nevertheless he had expressed his convictions on Economic Development. A speech delivered at the Industries Conference, New Delhi - Dec. 18th, 1947; he thus spoke.

It is obvious that in these very vital matters there are differences of opinion - Vital differences of opinion and approach. There are what are called ideologies, there is what is called the practical approach which, I have often found, is far removed from anything that might really be called practical or that can be practical. A practical approach need not necessarily be just looking one yard ahead of you, it requires looking further ahead also. Well there are these differences and it would be a little absurd to think that you can charm away those differences and find complete unanimity by just pure good will

and good advice. Nevertheless, I think without doing away with those differences of approach if we do appreciate that in a certain context of events it is necessary and highly desirable to function together, well we create an atmosphere which helps in coming to some conclusions.

Now, why are these approaches different? I suppose partly because of some difference in one's outlook on life itself, on the objectives of life, on the social set-up and the rest, but to put it very crudely leaving out these wider objectives the differences arise because various groups aim at getting some prize or other some benefit or other. Capital may want a certain prize labour may want a certain prize, the consumer, the producer, every body naturally wants to benefit himself or his group.

But a time comes when it may well happen that while the conflicting groups are fighting against each other, the prize vanishes and there is no prize left for anybody. So it becomes important at that time to moderate one's own ardour or one's own particular desire to win the prize, and save the prize itself. It is not necessary to give up the hope of getting the prize, but rather to put first things first, that is to preserve the prize and then either in a friendly way come to future decision or, if you like have a conflict, but when the conflict

endangers the prize itself then obviously this is an exceedingly unfortunate and foolish way of approaching a thing.

You all know that India for the last few months has passed through all manner of tremendous crisis and we have had to face colossal problems ; we have survived all manner of surgical operations of a major kind, and we are not likely to have another operation of that type, but the consequences of that operation have been so tremendous that few of us realized

previously that they would be so bad, we knew they would be bad; therefore, we resisted the operation and resisted what might be called quack remedies. But unfortunately sometimes quacks succeed, even in the best regulated house holds. And the result is that we have had operations and you have seen what a tremendously upsetting consequence followed them. We have not yet overcome that consequence followed them. We have not yet overcome that consequence and we have to face problems of colossal magnitude still.

Now, you can analyze the past few months or few years as you like there are so many factors. There are the consequences of the war - a certain feeling of tiredness after hard work. There are the consequences of political upsets, of the partition, of communal troubles and the like. But I should say, perhaps, one of the major things we have to face in industrial relations

is this psychological background, which makes labour feel that it does not get a square deal, that some how it is over eached all the time, which makes the employer class feel that they are threatened with all manner of dangers, and that labour, is not pulling its weight and is only threatening strikes and slowing up work and so on and so forth, so they approach each other not only with a complete lack of confidence but in a spirit of extreme hostility.

How are we to get over this ? On the one hand, I think it is perfectly true to say that there has been a tendency on the part of labour or certain labour groups to take advantage of certain difficulties which the nation has had to face to organize strikes and stoppages of work and slowing down of work at a time when it meant hitting the nation rather hard. If that kind of thing continues with labour - which undoubtedly has the sympathy of vast numbers people in this country - a certain barrier begins to grow up between the large labour element and the rest of the country. And it is not good to have that kind of barrier grow up. This was an approach of Nehru for economic development.

These are some considerations for us to ponder over. But for the present I do hope that you, who represent great forces in the country - industrial, labour and govtal will come

to an agreement on the period of peace and reconstruction and building up and meanwhile we shall think of the larger policies for industrial and economic development and give effect to them fairly rapidly. For my part I attach probably more importance to the development of our big schemes - river valley schemes than to anything else. I think it is out of these that new wealth is going to flow into this country. When I see the map of India and I look at the Himalayan range - I like the Himalayas myself ; I like mountains and all that I think of the vast power concentrated there which is not being used and which could be used, and which really could transform the whole of India with exceeding rapidity if it were properly utilized. It is an amazing source of power probably the biggest source any where in the world . this Himalayan range, with its rivers, minerals and other resources. Therefore, I attach more importance to the development of these big river valley schemes, dams, reservairs, hydro-electric and thermal power and so forth, which once released will simply drive you forward. But before we release power we have to know how to control it and use it in the proper way. Thus he has laid down the foundations for the Congress.

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: NOTES & REFERENCES :

1. Nehru wrote, " Sometimes he (Gandhi) calls himself a socialist but he uses the word in a sense peculiar to himself which has little or nothing to do with the economic framework of society which usually goes by the name of socialism Autobiography. p. 616.
2. Ibid., p. 255.
3. Ibid., p. 549.
4. Ibid., p. 416.
5. Ibid., p. 232.
6. It may be noted here that while Nehru continued to adhere broadly to the ideals socialims. Many erstwhile leaders of the CSP " revisited " socialism and finally gave it up altogether.
7. Autobiography . p. 266.
8. Sitaramayya., Op., Cit., pp. 11-12.
9. A Bunch, p. 191.
10. A. R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 4th Edition, 1966, pp. 204-205.
11. Tripuri Congress, 1939.
12. Pattabhi Sitramayya, Op., Cit., Vol. II, p. 26.
13. A Bunch., p. 351.
14. Autobiography, p.p. 515,- 536.
15. Ibid., p. 551.
16. Jawaharlal Nehru, India and the World (Essays) George Allen and Unwin London, 1936, pp. 184-185.
17. Autobiography , p. 198.