

NEHRU AND THE CONGRESS PARTY : THE NURTURING OF A NASCENT DEMOCRACY

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Independent India's democratic traditions have been shaped by a wide range of forces and factors. The socio-economic milieu in which these democratic traditions have had to be assiduously nurtured, the leadership that was entrusted with the task of political management and a stream of influences (both internal and external) - at times complimentary, at other times contradictory have all been critical inputs in the arduous task of nation - building. Any discussion on the dynamics of Indian democracy would remain hopelessly incomplete, if it does not include an objective assessment of Jawaharlal Nehru's role in the evolution and fostering of the nation's democratic traditions and values.

In a nascent democracy, if democratic norms and ideals are to gain a firm foundation, the responsibility, to a large extent, rests with those entrusted with the task of ensuring that the political system functions in conformity with the aims and aspirations of the people. As the first Prime Minister of India and a leading figure in the Congress Party, the role that Jawaharlal Nehru played in this regard, assumes added significance. A glimpse of Nehru's vision of the nature of the course that India was to chart, was most vividly portrayed in that eloquent oration in the Constituent Assembly on the midnight of freedom: "the future is not one of ease of resting but of **incessant striving** so that we may **fulfil the pledges** we have so often taken . . . we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams **This is no time for petty or destructive criticism, no time for ill-will or blaming others.** We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell."¹

This paper attempts at undertaking a study of the nature of relationship that evolved in the formative years after independence between Nehru as Prime Minister and the Congress Party. The delicate balancing of power that was witnessed when Sardar Patel was alive and the shape that the relationship was to take after Patel's death forms the main focus of this analysis. Nehru's differences with the Congress President, more so in the post-Patel phase, culminating in his accepting the position of party President too, is considered as part of the study. The nature of influence that was exercised by Nehru, during this period is considered vital for analysis for it throws considerable light on the question of the dynamics of the relationship between government and the party on the one hand and

the nature that evolved in these critical areas, especially during the infancy of our democratic polity played a leading role in shaping the democratic traditions that the system came to adopt and abide by.

The qualities and personal attributes of a leader, in most cases, is the key to understanding his leadership style. It provides the necessary framework and perspective for analysis. Commentaries on Nehru's leadership style and his personal qualities are legion. A few alone are taken as examples. Commenting on the leadership potential of Nehru as early as in 1929, Gandhiji had stated that: "Who can excel him in the love of the country?.... If he has the dash and rashness of the warrior, he has also the prudence of a statesman The nation is safe in his hands."²

In his autobiography, Morarji Desai while highlighting the apparent rashness of Nehru's approach hastens to add that he made more than adequate amends for the same. Commenting on an incident that occurred at the 1936 session of the A.I.C.C. at Bombay, Desai states that Nehru asked an A.I.C.C. member from Gujarat to abruptly cut short his speech on a particular resolution. Nehru was pulled up by the veteran Congress leader Jyotirmoy Sen for the manner in which he had curtailed a member's right to speak. Nehru was only too willing to apologize for the lapse on his part. He, without hesitation, accepted that it was his fault: "I have got into such habits as I have had the affection of everybody and have been pampered. My parents fondled me. Mahatma Gandhi did the same, and the people . . . were also giving me very great affection. This has given me this bad habit of weakness . . ."³

Many of Nehru's admirers considered him "too generous to think of not tolerating opposition,"⁴ or those who openly opposed or differed with him. His magnanimous nature, his accommodation of dissent were considered by many to be his basic nature.⁵

However, attention also needs to be focussed on the views of his critics, some of whom believed that there was a distinct, at times subtle yet detectable change in Nehru's attitude in the post-Independence era. Minoo Masani asserted that the democrat in Nehru vanished after 1947. Masani believed that, within "a couple of years of his taking office, I found it was no longer possible to disagree without irking him".⁶ Masani terms such a change as being natural because of the sycophants who surrounded Nehru and presented him with a distorted view of his own importance.

It could be argued that the authoritarian streak in Nehru was something that he himself was aware of. When the move to make Nehru the President of the Congress Party for a third term was gaining momentum, Nehru

himself wrote an article in the *Modern Review* (1938) under the pseudonym 'Chanakya', wherein he subjected himself to scathing criticism. He cautioned that a third term for Nehru, would convince him that he alone could lead the party and bear the responsibility of handling the nation's problems.⁷ In a mood of self-introspection, he wrote: . . . he (Nehru) has all the makings of a dictator in him, vast popularity, a strong will directed to a well defined purpose . . . pride . . . an intolerance of others His overmastering desire to get things done, to sweep away what he dislikes. . . will hardly brook for long the slow process of democracy".⁸

In his masterly analysis of Nehru's personality and leadership, S. Gopal, opines that, he (Nehru) 'was a subtle aesthete of power'.⁹ The nature of Indian politics in the late 1940's and early 1950's bears ample testimony to this fact. With the dawn of independence, Nehru and Patel, played a pioneering role in directing the affairs of the Government. In the Congress Party, it was a shared responsibility. Patel, by virtue of his position in the government and as a result of the wide-ranging contacts he had and influence he exercised, both at the national and at the provincial level, in most cases, controlled and monitored organisational matters of the Congress Party.¹⁰ In spite of their (Nehru and Patel) differences - which arose on a number of occasions and were rooted in a wide range of causes - the bridge of cooperation between them never totally collapsed though painstaking and major repairs had to be resorted to frequently. Gopal, opines that the differences between Nehru and Patel were derived from "an impersonal conflict between two different systems of thinking and feeling; and what enabled an avoidance of open rupture was mutual regard and Patel's stoic decency".¹¹

Gandhi, invariably was required to play the role of a mediator between the two, if their differences strayed beyond the critical range of manageability. A few weeks before Gandhi's assassination, Patel had requested Gandhi to relieve him from the burden of office, as it would help smoothen relations both in the government and in the party.¹² With Gandhi's assassination, the political scenario changed. Both Nehru and Patel realised the imperative need to sink their differences in the larger interests of the country.¹³ However, differences between Nehru and Patel continued to surface from time to time. These differences reached a flashpoint on the sensitive issue of the election to the Congress Presidency in 1950. While Nehru initially favoured Shankarrao Deo for the position, he later expressed his support for Acharya Kripalani. Patel on the other hand, backed the candidature of Purushottam Das Tandon.

The Nehru and Patel perspectives and view of this crisis differed

substantially.¹⁴ According to Patel, the issue of the Congress Presidency was to be amicably resolved jointly by Nehru and himself. Patel believed that Kriplani's ascendancy to the Presidency would be injurious to the interests of the Congress Party.¹⁵ Further, when Nehru decided to unilaterally back Kriplani, Patel was left with no option. "Faced with the **volte face** on the Prime-Minister's part, Sardar resolutely decided to sponsor Tandon."¹⁶ Patel was further, convinced that the threat held out by Nehru, that he would resign as Prime Minister in the event of Tandon's election, would never materialize. In fact, soon after Tandon's election, Patel is reported to, in a lighted vein, have asked Rajagopalachari (who was playing the role of a mediator between Nehru and Patel) as to whether he had brought Jawaharlal's resignation.¹⁷

On the other hand, Nehru opposed Tandon, not on personal considerations but, with a view to stem the rot in the Congress.¹⁸ Nehru believed, that Tandon's approach symbolised a 'revivalist out-look' and was responsible for 'encouraging the very forces'¹⁹ that were harmful to the interests of the Congress Party and the nation. Nehru even held out the threat that if Tandon were to be elected, he 'would be completely helpless,'²⁰ and it would be difficult to continue.

When Tandon emerged victorious in the Congress Presidential elections, Nehru did not resign from Prime Ministership.²¹ However, he made known his dissatisfaction and discontent to the development. In a letter addressed to the Chief Ministers (1 September 1950), he stated that : "... the Congress is busy with its own internal troubles and elections and so the initiative passes to others."²²

Later in a press statement issued on 13 September 1950, Nehru gave vent to this anguish in the following words : "The election to the Congress Presidentship has aroused much interest and even excitement.... **All kinds of forces, inside and outside the Congress, made this election have a greater significance ... Communal and reactionary forces have openly expressed their joy at the result.**"²³

Once the objective of securing Tandon's election was achieved, Patel counselled patience and broad-mindedness. He advised Tandon to enlist the support and cooperation of Nehru and persuade him to join the Congress Working Committee. Nehru's strategy has most succinctly been summarized by Gopal : "When he (Nehru) became aware that he was being pushed.... **(he) accepted battle and conducted the fight with political skill....** he secured acceptance by the Congress bodies of resolutions which ill-expressed his own view point.... He (finally) agreed to serve on the

Working Committee but made known his disapproval of the selection of many others.... He could continue in it as a member if he felt the situation in the Congress would be grasped in the way he wanted and a new turn given to the organisation."²⁴

The controversy that surrounded the election of the Congress President in 1950, and the developments thereafter vividly demonstrated the internal power dynamics of the ruling party and the ramifications of the crisis was felt even in the operational details of the political system. The dissensions within the Congress Party was reflective of the wide spectrum of opinion and viewpoints that the party was required to represent. An internalized system of checks and balances was provided for with the influence and power of one group being offset by that of another. However, the dissension was not always within the parameters of control. At times it strayed beyond these barriers, adversely affecting the stature and strength of the party and triggering off a chain of adverse reactions in the political system also.

Patel's death in 1950, drastically altered the power equation within the Congress party on the one hand and the style of functioning of the government on the other. Within the party, Nehru gradually strengthened and fortified his position. The tone and tenor of a resolution brought forward by Nehru, at the A.I.C.C. session in January 1951, stated it all : "I believe that I have a certain utility in the Congress organisation but I feel that progressively, I cannot make myself useful. **I seem to be cut off from the working of the organisation....** I sometimes wonder if it is worthwhile my continuing in this fashion."²⁵

An acknowledged Patel supporter, Gopichand Bhargava was eased out of the position of Chief Minister of Punjab, soon after Patel's death. Bhargava bitterly commented that, "he had become the first victim of the attempt.... to oust such people as were considered to have been loyal to Patel."²⁶

The rift between Nehru and Tandon appeared only to escalate with the passage of time. On 6 August 1951, Nehru resigned from the Congress Working Committee due to his differences with Tandon on issues relating to the organisational details of the party. The crisis ended with Tandon himself resigning as Congress President and Nehru took over the Congress Presidency on 9 September 1951.

The entire controversy discussed above raises certain fundamental issues :

- a) The utility and feasibility of the same individual being both Prime Minister and President of the ruling Party.
- b) In the event of the President of the ruling Party and the Prime Minister being different individuals, the principles that should govern the nature of the relationship between the two and
- c) The dynamics of the relationship between the ruling party and the government.

When Nehru took over as the Congress President in September 1951, for the first time the position of Prime Minister and Congress President came to be occupied by the same individual. Many argued that this development was not only inevitable, but also necessary, in the context of the political environment and the challenges that the system faced. Combining the two offices in the same individual, would facilitate an organised approach to dealing with problems and prevent the ruling party on the one hand and the government on the other, from pulling in opposite directions.

The issue of combining the two offices in one individual had been raised earlier too. In July 1950, the then President of the Congress Party, Dr. Pattabi Sittaramayya had, while favouring 'common leadership for the Congress and the Central Government,'²⁷ suggested that a suitable corresponding change was necessary at the provincial/state level (Provincial Premiers taking over as Provincial Congress Presidents). This suggestion was mooted well before the controversial 'Tandon-Kriplani tussle' or as others would say proxy-war for Congress Presidency was fought.

Even as the count-down for the 1950 Congress Presidential election began, there were many who openly campaigned in favour of Nehru assuming the mantle of Party President too. However, Nehru himself withdrew from the race, by making the following statement: "While my time is all taken up in my work as Prime Minister, it would not be fair to the Congress or to me for me to make a gesture and stand for the Presidentship."²⁸

It is interesting to note that the above statement was made even when Patel was an active member of the Cabinet and shouldered much of the responsibility. After Patel's death in December 1950, "the Government of India was basically a one man show."²⁹ It was in such circumstances that Nehru agreed to accept the Congress Presidentship in 1951. The Congress has in recent times, when in power, followed the convention of having the same individual as Party President and Prime Minister. This has been

detrimental to the interests of both the party and the government.

Even in the event of the office of the Prime Minister and the Congress President not being combined, the arrangement was not free from limitations. The "relation between the head of Government and the head of the Organisation is a delicate and difficult one and one that has led to many controversies."³⁰ By virtue of his position and stature the Prime Minister invariably wielded greater influence and was in a stronger position. In the event of a tussle, it was the Congress Presidency which became the casualty. When the shadow of controversy relating to the Congress Presidential election of 1950 was gradually emerging, a news paper editorial had cautioned: "One of the paramount issues of the Congress Presidentship pertains to the relation between the Head of the Congress and the Head of the Government... We are sure that these conundrums and complexities will be solved by slow degrees according to the needs of each occasion."³¹

The controversy relating to Rafi Ahmed Kidwai also throws considerable light on the relationship between the Prime Minister (Nehru) and the Party President (Tandon). However, this controversy has to be viewed in the backdrop of the already fragile relationship that then existed between Nehru and Tandon. Kidwai, in July 1951, launched a scathing attack on the Congress Party - specifically directed at Tandon - and resigned from the party and the Government. However, he withdrew his resignation from the Government but maintained that he was not in the Party.³² Tandon took objection to Kidwai's stand and stated that: "I am very doubtful if the Prime Minister could have agreed to this arrangement... for this would create an impossible position. The Prime Minister and his Cabinet are responsible to the Congress."³³

Nehru relented to the demand for the supremacy of the Party and Kidwai once again resigned from the Cabinet. Kidwai, however, maintained that those who spoke or worked against Nehru were traitors.³⁴

After Nehru, gave up the post of Party President in 1954, the incumbents were many a time referred to as "glorified office boys of the Congress Central Government headed by the Prime Minister."³⁵ Thereafter, it was "not easy to coax others to accept that office; the incumbent designate had, in fact, to be dragooned."³⁶ The Congress Party has unfortunately, not been in a position to evolve conventions that specifically demarcated the spheres of influence and area of operation of the two offices.

The control that Nehru came to exercise over both the party and the Government resulted in the thinning down of the line of distinction

between the party and the authority of Government, the Centre preferred to utilize the party machinery rather than the Governmental process. As a result : "What the Centre could not impose on the State through the apparatus of Constitution, it could impose through the party channels".³⁷

The alarming process of the increasing interference of the Congress workers in the administrative process had begun in the late 1940's. In one of his letters to a Congressman in Gujarat, Patel deprecated this tendency : "Recently the Congress President has addressed a circular to all Congressmen that they should not interfere with the day to day work of the Government. Surprisingly, the Congress President of your place protested.... that only proves that the circular... was amply justifiable."³⁸

The thinning down of the line of distinction between the party and the Government was also reflected in Nehru's fortnightly letters to the Chief Ministers. After a visit to Calcutta, Nehru wrote to the Chief Minister's that he "felt reassured that the Congress continues to draw its strength from the heart of the people."³⁹ On another occasion he emphasised that the "preservation of the unity and stability of India largely depended on the functioning of the Congress organisation."⁴⁰ His conflict with Tandon was the focal theme of his 19 August 1951, letter to the Chief Ministers.⁴¹ Many of the letters appeared more as correspondence between Congress leaders and not between Government functionaries.

Critics of Nehru also level the charge that Nehru neglected party building, resulting in the Congress machinery steadily deteriorating. It is asserted that "The Party continued to function as an electioneering machine. Here again, Nehru could have initiated action to change the character of the Party.... But he only marked time."⁴²

However, it must be noted that the actions Nehru undertook or did not undertake were dictated by the pressure of circumstances he found himself in. "Each one of his failures was a failure of a genuine democrat inclined to take people on trust and unwilling to suspect them of foul play until there was over-whelming evidence."⁴³ Nehru's greatest strength at times appeared as his greatest weakness.

Nehru's approach and contribution has to be considered in the backdrop of the challenges that an infant democracy faced. His effort was in the direction of warding off the challenges. This was and always remained his principal priority.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. India, Debates, Constituent Assembly, Vol. 5, p.4,5. Emphasis added.
2. Young India, 3 October 1929.
3. As quoted in Morarji Desai, *The Story of My Life*, (Madras, 1974) Part I, p.136. Emphasis added.
4. B. V. Keskar, Symposium on Nehru, "Homage to Nehru" Issue, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, Vol.46, 15 Nov. 1964. p.63.
5. For a detailed discussion on the issue, see Homage to Nehru issue, n. 4.
6. Minoo Masani, "Congress and Nehru," *The Sunday Statesman*, 12 December, 1985.
7. Reprinted with new title. "We want no Ceasars", *Bhavans Journal*, 1 November, 1984, p.19.
8. *Ibid*, p.16, 17, emphasis added.
9. S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru - a Biography*, (Delhi, 1983) Vol.2, p.309.
10. M.V. Kamath, "A House Divided", *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 14 July, 1985, p. 31.
11. S. Gopal n.9, Emphasis added.
12. In a letter addressed to Gandhi dated 16 January, 1948, Patel stated that : " If I prove to be a burden to a life long colleague (Nehru) and be a source of anxiety to you and yet I allow myself to continue in office, I would only think of myself that I am there only for the lust of power in me." *Sardar's Letters, Mostly Unknown - II*, Birth Centenary Volume V, year 1947-48, Part I (Ahmedabad, 1979), p. 174.
13. Soon after Gandhi's assassination, Nehru wrote to Patel (3 Feb, 1948) : "The old controversies have ceased to have much significance and it seems to me that the urgent need of the hour is for all of us to function as closely... as possible." Patel replied (5 Feb, 1948) that : "The paramount interests of the country and our mutual love and regard, transcending...differences... have held us together... we have always sustained a unity of heart which has stood many a stress and strain... Sardar's letters, n. 12, pp. 175-177.
14. Nehru's perspective is outlined in S. Gopal, n.9 and Patel's perspective in, V. Shankar, *My Reminiscences of Sardar Patel*, (New Delhi, 1974) Vol. 2.
15. Kriplani had earlier resigned the Congress Presidentship on account of his differences with Nehru. Kriplani's candidature had also been ruled out at a meeting between Patel and Nehru. For details see, V. Shankar, n.14.
16. V. Shankar, n. 14, p. 111.
17. *Ibid*, P. 112.
18. S. Gopal, n. 9, p. 93.
19. *Ibid*.
20. *Ibid*.
21. In a speech delivered at Lucknow, soon after Tandon's election, Nehru stated that he did not resign principally on the ground that he thought he could do something in the international field. As quoted in M.V. Kamath, n. 10.

22. Jawaharlal Nehru, Letters to Chief Ministers 1947-1964, (New Delhi, 1986) Vol.2, p. 190.
23. Deccan Herald, 14 September, 1950.
24. S. Gopal, n.9, p. 95, 96.
25. As quoted in M. V. Kamath, n. 10.
26. As quoted in B. D. Dua, Presidential Rule in India (New Delhi, 1979), p. 90.
27. Deccan Herald, 2 July, 1950.
28. Deccan Herald, 14 August 1950.
29. S. Gopal, n.9, p.304.
30. Morarji Desai, n.3, p. 260.
31. Deccan Herald, 14 August 1950.
32. Deccan Herald, 23 July 1951.
33. As quoted in Deccan Herald, 24 July 1951, Emphasis added.
34. Deccan Herald, 25 July 1951.
35. Frank Moraes, India Today, (New York, 1950) p. 98.
36. Asoka Mchta, A Decade of Indian Politics, (New Delhi, 1979) p. 16.
37. Phul Chand, "Federalism and the Indian Political System," Journal of Constitutional and Parliamentary Studies, Vol. 6(1), 1972, P. 159.
38. Sardar's Letters, Post Centenary., Vol. 1, Part II, Year 1947-48, (Ahmedabad, 1980) p. 229.
39. Jawaharlal Nehru, Letters to Chief Ministers (New Delhi, 1989), Vol. 1, p. 35.
40. Ibid, p. 143.
41. Nehru, n. 22, p. 43.
42. Shamlal, "Failure of a Democrat", Seminar, November, 1964, P.40.
43. Ibid, p. 41.