

NEHRU AND CENTRE STATE RELATIONS : A STUDY IN THE DYNAMICS OF INDIAN FEDERALISM

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Federal structure is mainly conceived to harmonize existing conflicting interests and to provide against future conflicts. The problems in every federation, as a learned author puts it, is to keep, centrifugal and centripetal forces in equilibrium so that neither the planet states might fly off into nor the sun of central government draw them into a consuming fire.

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The initial phase in the implementation of any well conceived scheme of political organisation is critical to its long term success. The approach and capacity of those responsible for the smooth and proper functioning of the scheme of organisation, during this phase, verily determines the success or otherwise of this scheme. The dynamics of Indian federalism is a case in point. The shape that Indian federalism has assumed, has been largely dictated by the attitudes and preferences of its political leaders. In this context, the approach that was adopted by Jawaharlal Nehru, as the first Prime Minister of India, on matters relating to federalism and centre - state relations, has had a direct bearing on the course charted by Indian federalism and merits detailed scrutiny. This article focuses on the overall perspective adopted by Nehru on this vital issue, in the years following Independence.

In the days that preceded partition, it was hoped that the granting of a high degree of autonomy to the states would forestall the division of the country. In the post partition scenario, it was felt that a strong central authority was imperative to maintain the unity and integrity of the nation. Nehru believed that the framework for India was a federation with a strong centre.¹ The speeches of Nehru in the Constituent Assembly on matters relating to the federalism distinctly display a concern for primacy to considerations of national unity². In this context, he cautioned that:

It is very important for us not to take any step

which might lead towards loosening the fabric of India.³

The practical realities that shaped the approach adopted by the Constituent Assembly towards federalism, were succinctly stated by Granville Austin:

The exigencies of the present as well as the pattern of the past impelled the Constituent Assembly to create a strong central government.⁴

Further, the members of the Constituent Assembly had before them a clear set of priorities. The spotlight was on issues relating to ways and means to preserve the nation's independence and ensuring the freedom and liberty of the citizens. The preamble summed up, eloquently, the agenda of priorities. For the Indian people:

.... the politically significant issue, other than independence, was, community rights and status. 'State rights' issues were secondary ...⁵

The federal arrangement that was envisaged by the Constituent, created a federation with a strong centre. Even while tilting the power equation in favour of the centre, the constitution provided for specific areas of influence and operation for both the centre and the states. As Morris Jones analyses:

shared power, however, did not mean competitive relations ... it was anticipated that centre and states would have their separate and distinctive arenas⁶

While taking cognisance of the ground realities of India's political history and the need to preserve and further cement the forces of political unity, the members of the Constituent Assembly envisaged a federal structure which, while providing distinctly for a measure of state autonomy ensured the existence of a strong centre. They fervently hoped that this balance that they had so

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assiduously managed to arrange, would pave the way for constructive and harmonious cooperation between the centre and the states.

II

How far was the vision of the founding fathers of the Constitution, translated into a reality can be perceived from the actual working of the federal system. Federalism, more often than not, is a 'matter of process and degree'.⁷ The working of the Indian political system as a whole, the stark realities of Indian politics and the cross-currents that operated therein, contributed significantly to the evolution of independent India's federal traditions, in the period under study.

On many an occasion, after assuming charge as Prime Minister, Nehru had, underscored the need for harmonious relationship between the centre and the states. The fortnightly letters that he wrote to the Chief Ministers was a move in the direction of establishing better coordination and effective communication with them. This relationship, was sought to be further strengthened by a clear and common understanding of the national priorities. In one of the fortnightly letters to the Chief Minister's this dimension was unequivocally highlighted:

We have a full and detailed Constitution of India defining the rights and responsibilities of the Centre and of the states. But, however good the constitution of a country might be, it depends ultimately on the people of that country, and more especially on those in positions of responsibility, how work is carried on ... the element of cooperation, of seeking friendly counsel with each other and of ever keeping the larger end in view, are of paramount importance.⁸

While recognising the importance of provincial autonomy, Nehru stressed that given the constraints within which modern governments function, a strong element of centralization was inevitable. In his correspondence with the Chief Ministers, he expressed his commitment to decentralization while at the same time he emphasised the role of the centre.

I feel more and more that we must function more from below than from the top. The top is important of course and in the modern world a large measure of centralization is inevitable. Yet, too much of centralization means decay at the roots⁹

For Nehru, the larger framework of national unity could not be lost sight of. The emotional integration of the nation was a fundamental pre-requisite to progress and development. Thus, his early letters to the Chief Ministers, dwelt at length on the need to preserve national unity and to discourage the rise of divisive forces.

Nehru was apprehensive of the growth of extreme provincialism, as it would be detrimental to the larger interests of the nation. Given the fragile nature of India's national unity, he felt that too much provincialism was something that India, at that stage, could ill afford.¹⁰ In this connection, his reaction to the demand for the creation of linguistic states assumes significance.

The vitiated atmosphere created by 'provincial expansionism', which was there to see, in the years following independence, Nehru felt, would destroy both the unity and the progress of the nation. He even threatened to resign if such issues assumed a high sense of priority.¹¹ The stability of the nation, should always remain the primary and principal concern of policy makers:

I can very well appreciate the desire in some parts of the country for a separate provincial existence ... but sometimes we have to take first things first First priority must necessarily be to preserve the unity, strength and stability of India. Everything that comes in the way of that may prove harmful.¹²

Nehru was critical of the attitude of certain forces, which had refused to accept the Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, on the ground that the Commission had not conceded their demands. Such an attitude was, for him, the betrayal of democracy and severely undermined the unity of the nation. Commenting on the attitude of such forces, he said:

... we are prepared to have unity provided that unity is fashioned after our liking certain conditions which are less than national and which may be provincial ... have precedence over the broader national approach.¹³

When the issue of boundary disputes between states arose, Nehru asserted that for the central government, it was immaterial as to which part of India formed part of which state. While intervening in the debate on the floor of the Lok Sabha, Nehru elaborated:

... it does not make much difference to me whether any internal boundary of the state is drawn here

or there There may be other things which may be more important.¹⁴

Thus, while Nehru, was enthusiastic in his support for provincial autonomy, it had to harmoniously blend into the broader fabric of national unity and stability. An undue emphasis on provincialism, he felt, would run counter to the strenuous ongoing efforts at nation building. Centre-state cooperation for Nehru, rested upon both recognising and appreciating the primacy of national unity.

III

The pattern of increased centralization in the working of Indian federalism was further accentuated by the inter-play of a variety of forces and factors.

The years following Independence, saw the continued domination of the Congress party over political affairs. The party occupied the centre-stage in politics at both the centre and in most of the states. Such a scenario inevitably propelled the system in the direction of greater centralization. Further, the non-existence of any strong alternative national party or stable regional parties consolidated the process of greater centralization.

The pivotal role of the Congress in Indian politics was further strengthened by the role played by Nehru in the shaping of India's political destiny. The influence that he exercised as a result of his national and international stature, played a decisive role in directing the course of Indian politics. During his premiership, he, by and large, controlled both the government and party apparatus. A western commentator even goes to the extent of stating that Nehru:

... monopolized authority in New Delhi not for his own sake, but because he has always been convinced of his pre-eminent wisdom.¹⁵

Nehru's influence over the party was reflected in the composition of the Congress Working Committee, whose members invariably supported the approach and policy that he adopted. As Santhanam observed, the 'strength and influence decline (in the party) as one proceeds from the top to the bottom.'¹⁶ After his differences with Kriplani and P.D. Tandon,¹⁷ he himself took over as the Party President (1951-54). In the latter years, he ensured that this position was occupied by his trusted supporters. The manner in which the Congress Presidents functioned drew the contemptuous comment that, they were like glorified office boys of the Congress Central

Government headed by Nehru.¹⁸ Myron Weiner comments on the nature of the central authority in the following words:

... a kind of 'unprincipled authoritarianism', ...where in reality government is centralised, leadership tends to be authoritarian, decisions are made by a relative few ...

The control that Nehru exercised 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. When dealing with a Congress controlled state government, the centre often preferred to utilise the party machinery rather than the governmental process.²⁰ As a result:

What the Centre could not impose on the States through the apparatus of Constitution, it could enforce through the party channels.²¹

Nehru's fortnightly letters to the Chief Minister's made frequent references to the internal affairs of the Congress party. His conflict with P.D. Tandon and his (Nehru) resignation from the C.W.C. was the focal theme of his 19 August 1951, letter to the Chief Ministers.²² This also reflected the narrowing down of the line of distinction between party and government affairs.

The nature of the relationship between Nehru and the Chief Ministers has been a subject of animated debate. There is a strong view that Nehru encouraged the rise and continuance of strong Chief Ministers. It is asserted that he underscored the importance of strong and effective governments at the state level, wherein the leadership derived its sustenance from the grass roots and support of the people.²³ The interaction between Nehru and the Chief Ministers it was believed, was based on the principles of negotiation and compromise and not as orders to agents.²⁴ Nehru favoured:

the emergence of the Chief Ministers by strengthening their position vis-a-vis the party organisation through the Parliamentary Board.²⁵

However, it is also opined that the party leadership at the centre would, in most cases, nominate the Chief Minister of a state (when the Congress was in power). The state ministries, it was believed, were relegated to the status of subordinate agencies.²⁶

A proper analysis of the nature of the relationship between Nehru and the Chief Ministers of Congress

ruled states would involve the consideration of a host of factors. An important factor was, who became the Chief Minister. If the Chief Minister was a leader in his own right, was able to command the support of the state party organisation and the legislative wing and was capable of winning elections on his own strength, he wielded considerable influence and enjoyed a high degree of independence. If on the other hand, the Chief Minister owned his position to the central leadership, was supported by the party because of a central directive, and required the active involvement of Nehru in election campaigns, he enjoyed a lesser degree of independence and autonomy.

Looked at from another angle, there were certain states which were of critical importance to Nehru either from the angle of national security or from the view point of special links.²⁷ In such states, central intervention and influence was more pronounced. Further, the leadership conflict at the state level was, on several occasions, inspired by the backing received by the different contenders, from the central leaders.²⁸ In such cases too, the central leadership had a major say. In the other cases, the central leadership preferred to adopt a neutral stance and left the leadership choice to the state legislative party.²⁹

In the event of an internal dispute, in a Congress ruled state, an appeal was invariably made by the state unit, to the central leadership to intervene and diffuse the crisis. In this context the view is expressed that:

... in its relations with the state party units, the High Command compromised, reconciled and arbitrated differences, but tolerated no revolt. Such differences would often take the shape of competition and rivalry between the 'ministerial' and the 'organisational' wings of the government party ...³⁰

There are also instances, wherein, Nehru openly frowned upon factionalism and personal prejudices within the state congress party, leading to a change in state leadership. One of his fortnightly letters to the Chief Ministers dwells at length on this issue.³¹

Another scenario presents itself, in cases where the Congress had to form a government in coalition with other parties. Three cases are striking in this regard. After the General Elections of 1952, the Congress was forced to form a coalition government in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Madras. In all the three states, the efforts of

the Congress Party, was in the direction of pressuring the coalition partners to merge into the Congress. While the pressure tactics succeeded in Madras, it was of no avail in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Nehru was the Party President during this period.

In case of the non-Congress ruled states, the approach of the central government was distinctly different. The strategic geographical position of Jammu & Kashmir and its importance from the angle of National Security, compelled the centre to intervene in the state politics. Nehru has been criticised by commentators for sacking an inconvenient ministry and foisting a succession of puppet regimes in the state.³² In PEPSU, the Akali Dal which formed the government in 1952, could survive for only one year. The most striking case in that of Kerala. In the 1957 General Elections, the Communist Party was voted to power and formed the government. When the Communist government introduced its Education Reform Bill, it was met with a stiff protest from the opposition parties. This snowballed into a movement against the government in which even the Congress party actively participated. The stand of Nehru as the Prime Minister and Indira Gandhi as the Congress President make a study in contrast. While Nehru was in favour of a cautious approach, Indira Gandhi was in favour of action against the Communist government. Nehru stated:

So far as I am concerned, I do not propose, nor intend, nor look forward to, nor expect governments falling except through democratic process³³

Indira Gandhi on the other hand felt, 'Central action (in Kerala) is long overdue in view of the hard facts of the situation.'³⁴ The crisis reached a flash point when President's Rule was finally declared. Nehru's dilemma was succinctly stated by S. Gopal:

He (Nehru) was undoubtedly inhibited by his loyalty to the Congress Party Nehru agreed that had there been a similar crisis in a state governed by the Congress he would have acted sooner. But it was also true that if the local Congress had agitated against a Congress government, it would have been sternly and promptly ordered to desist.³⁵

On issues relating to the office of the Governor, Nehru impressed upon the Chief Ministers to restrict the constitutional position and status of the Governor. At

the same time when there arose an instance, when there arose a difference of opinion between the Governor and the Chief Minister (Bihar), Nehru is reported to have expressed the view that he could advise the President to remove the Governor, but could not interfere in the functioning of an elected Chief Minister. However, Nehru has been severely criticized by commentators for misusing the office of the Governor. Many a time defeated Congress politicians, defecting opposition leaders and retired civil servants were appointed to these positions. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, as the President of India, is believed to have cautioned Nehru on this score.³⁶ The view is also expressed that many Governors, 'used to further the Congress Party interests in general, but, if worse came to worst, even the interest of a particular faction in the Congress Party'³⁷

The steps adopted by the Central Government to step up the process of economic change and modernisation, was in no small measure, responsible for a greater degree of centralization. The 'realities of social and economic policies whose ramifications refused to observe the constitutional boundaries', tilted the power balance further in favour of the centre. Nehru was firm in his conviction that the centre should play a major role in the process of socio economic change. The states, he felt, looked at these issues in a narrow prospective and had 'no concept of India, no concept of the progress of India

and no concept of what the modern world is'.³⁹ The Central government dictated:

... policies, directives, guidelines and suggestions to the state government on all matters on the one hand, and subjecting them to centralised planning on the other. Planning Commission, ... under Nehru's personal insistence, came to enjoy the status of a super-cabinet ...⁴⁰

IV

Nehru's approach to federalism and centre-state relations, have to be considered in the backdrop of the challenges that India faced in the post-Independence years. The efforts of Nehru, during these years were largely in the direction of warding off the challenges to India's national integrity, consciously reconstructing the fabric of national unity and accelerating the pace of national development. This was and always remained his principal priority. During his premiership, the constitutional norms and conventions were by and large adhered to. For Nehru, recognising the pre-eminent status of the national priorities on the one hand and ensuring the rights of the states on the other. The stresses and strains that we presently notice in the working of Indian federalism, was largely a contribution of the post-Nehruvian phase of Indian politics.

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