

## NEHRU'S RESPONSE TO SOCIALISM (IN PRE-INDEPENDENCE INDIA)

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NEHRU THE MAN HAS BEWITCHED MANY, AND HAS BEWILDERED, PERHAPS, more. Such a complex character and developing mind, naturally, defies definition, and both his contemporaries and posterity find it difficult to place his views and policies under conventional labels. His was, in fact, a prismatic personality that shone in different hues according to the onlooker's angle of vision.

A wealthy aristocrat by birth, Nehru was by temperament and training an individualist, a liberal, and a humanist. Well-read and widely-travelled, he was always open to new ideas and arguments, but was incapable of accepting anything blind-folded as a dogma. Proud and fearless, he was ever sensitive to the woes of the oppressed and the depressed, and his kind courageous nature rebelled at the sight of injustice and tyranny, anywhere and in any form. Such a sensitive soul was sure to respond to the impact of socialism, which by common consent is one of the reigning ideologies of this age.

Even in his student days in England, he had been "vaguely attracted to the Fabians and Socialistic ideas", and back in India he was considerably influenced by the teaching of Swami Vivekananda.<sup>1</sup> But, for years, these were just faint feelings, and he admits, "In 1920 I was totally ignorant of labour conditions in factories and fields, and my political outlook was entirely bourgeois."<sup>2</sup> However, the resounding echoes of the Bolshevik Revolution, the impact of Gandhi's unique personality and methods, his first direct contact, in 1920-21, with the peasants of his home province - their problems and pathos—and last but not the least, his presence at the Conference of Oppressed Nationalities at Brussels and visit to Soviet Russia, in 1927, brought in him profound changes.<sup>3</sup> What had long been for him idle attractions or sublime sentiments now got transmuted into a positive urge to find the way to and strive for social justice and equity.

The Russians under the communists seemed to him to have found the way out and were in earnest to reach the goal. He was immensely impressed

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<sup>1</sup> J. Nehru, *Autobiography*, (Bombay, 1962), p. 25. Also S.N. Mukherjee (ed.) *St. Anthony's Papers*, No. 18, (Oxford, 1966), p. 99, f.n. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> "My outlook was wider, and nationalism by itself seemed to me definitely a narrow and insufficient creed . . . . Without social freedom and a socialistic structure of society and State, neither the country nor the individual could develop much." Dorothy Norman, *Nehru the First Sixty Years*, vol. 1, (Bombay, 1965)—(hereafter referred to as Dorothy Norman)—, p. 138.

with their achievements, and wrote to his daughter, Indira, "The second wonder that the Soviets performed was to transform great parts of the area out of all recognition by prodigious schemes of planning. . . . The most notable advances have been in education and in industry."<sup>4</sup> He was equally impressed with the writings of Marx, which guided the leaders of Soviet Russia. He was absolutely sincere when he said of Marx that "he seems to me to have possessed quite an extra-ordinary degree of insight into social phenomena, and this insight was apparently due to the scientific method he adopted."<sup>5</sup> "So", he admits, "I turned inevitably with goodwill towards communism, for whatever its faults, it was at least not hypocritical and not imperialistic . . . . These attracted me as also the changes taking place in Russia."<sup>6</sup>

With his progressive and scientific outlook he could never believe, like Gandhi, that the evils of Western industrial society originated in industrialism. To him these social evils were the "necessary consequence of industrial development on capitalist lines."<sup>7</sup> Besides, he believed with Marx that capitalism would soon collapse in the industrially advanced West,<sup>8</sup> and asserted that "it is obvious that if capitalism collapses in Europe and America it cannot survive in Asia."<sup>9</sup> Naturally, he wanted India to learn the lesson of history in time, and to plan for future industrial progress on socialistic lines. It was under his presidentship that the U.P. Congress Committee took the lead, in April 1928, by recommending that "it is essential to make revolutionary changes in the present social and economic structure of the society and to remove the gross inequalities."<sup>10</sup> Then in the late autumn of that year Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Srinivas Iyengar organized the Independence for India League within the Congress. One of the primary objectives of this League was the reconstruction of the Indian society on the basis of social and economic equality.

His election as president of the Congress at Lahore, in 1929, in preference to Patel, fifteen years his senior and then the widely-acclaimed hero of the Bardoli peasant movement, speaks of his growing influence over the younger generation, who increasingly believed in complete independence and socialism. From the presidential chair he declared, "I must frankly confess that I am a socialist. . . . Our economic programme must therefore be based on a human outlook, and must not sacrifice man to money. If an industry cannot be run without starving its workers then the industry must be closed down. If the workers on the land have not enough to eat then the intermediaries, who deprive them of their full share, must go."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> J. Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, (London, 1949), p. 686.

<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography, op. cit.*, p. 591.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Norman, pp. 156-57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 262-63.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>10</sup> J. Nehru, *Recent Essays and Writings*, (Allahabad, 1937), p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Norman, p. 205.

Two years later, it was mainly at his initiative that the famous resolution regarding fundamental rights was accepted by the Congress at its Karachi session. In fact, he was in those years the virtual knight errant of socialism, and more than anyone he made it popular and respectable in India through his pen and speeches. Writing about these years, he says "Everywhere I spoke on political independence and social freedom, and made the former a step towards the attainment of the latter. I wanted to spread the ideology of socialism, especially, among Congress workers and the intelligentsia."<sup>12</sup>

Still, despite all his enthusiasm for Marxism and the communist experiment in Soviet Russia, he could not join hands with the communists, the only well-knit group of socialists in India till the early thirties. He admired their ardour for progress and equality, and valued their influence in fighting many of the age-old evils of the custom-bound Indian society. But he was too much of a free thinker and a democrat to be one of them. When he said, "Marx may be wrong in some of his statements",<sup>13</sup> he only revealed the intellectual attitude that was to remain a characteristic of his all his life. He would not accept anything for granted, nor could he follow anyone uncritically. He was only too candid when he wrote to Subhas Chandra Bose on 3 April 1939, "I suppose I am temperamentally and by training an individualist, and intellectually a socialist. . . . I hope socialism does not kill or suppress individuality."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one may well claim that it was his hope that socialism would liberate the individual that made him a socialist. He wrote in February 1939, "I do not see why under socialism there should not be a great deal of freedom for the individual; indeed far greater freedom than the present system gives. He can have freedom of conscience and mind, freedom of enterprise, and even the possession of private property on a restricted scale. Above all, he will have the freedom, which comes from economic security, which only a small number possess today."<sup>15</sup> To such an apostle of freedom socialism without the spirit of democracy was equivalent to tyranny. In fact, he had been exposed to many diverse influences—of Western humanism, Marx, Gandhi, and Tagore, to name a few—and he absorbed from each of them the elements he valued. Naturally, he could not accept Marxism as a dogma or the dictates of the Communist International as sacrosanct. He wrote about himself, in 1938, "My roots are still perhaps partly in the 19th century, and I have been too much influenced by the humanist liberal tradition to get out of it. . . . I dislike dogmatism, and the treatment of Karl Marx's writings or any other book as revealed scripture, which cannot be challenged, and the regimentation and heresy-hunts, which seem to be a feature of modern communism.

<sup>12</sup> *Autobiography, op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 591.

<sup>14</sup> J. Nehru, *A Bunch of Old Letters*, (Bombay, 1960), p. 363.

<sup>15</sup> N. B. Sen, *Wit and Wisdom of Jawaharlal Nehru*, (New Delhi, 1960), p. 552.

I dislike also much that has happened in Russia and especially the excessive use of violence in normal times." <sup>16</sup>

Naturally, he disliked many of the attitudes and assumptions of the communists, and admits, "Communists often irritated me by their dictatorial ways, their aggressive and rather vulgar methods, their habit of denouncing everybody, who did not agree with them."<sup>17</sup> He was particularly bitter with the Indian communists for, what seemed to him, their dogmatic attitude and open criticism of the national leadership. According to him, "One of the reasons for the weakness in the numbers as well as influence of the communists in India is that, instead of spreading a scientific knowledge of communism and trying to convert people's minds to it, they have largely concentrated on abuse of others."<sup>18</sup>

According to him the communists, unlike Gandhi and many other Congress leaders, "have little knowledge of or contact with rural areas", and were incapable of applying their ideology to Indian problems. By concentrating almost exclusively on the numerically insignificant urban proletariat, and antagonising many others with their methods and pronouncements, the communists, he felt, were merely engaged in a copy-book imitation of what was being done in the West.<sup>19</sup> But an imitation of the West, he believed, would not serve much purpose. After all, "in India nationalism and rural economy were the dominating consideration, and European socialism seldom deals with these."<sup>20</sup> In fact, he heartily disliked the ideological rigidity of the Indian communists and their subservience to the Communist International.

In the meantime, the love-hate response of some young intellectual nationalists to communism had led to the creation of the Congress Socialist Party in May 1934. These Congress members felt attracted towards Marxism and the developments in Soviet Russia, and "felt that the Civil Disobedience Movements failed because of inadequate mass response."<sup>21</sup> The Congress, they thought, had failed to enthuse the masses in the name of freedom and democracy, which meant little to them."<sup>22</sup> They would have normally joined the communists. But the latter, though they swore by the "masses" and "revolution", had not joined the Civil Disobedience Movements, and were openly critical of the existing national leadership.<sup>23</sup> Besides, they accepted

<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography, op. cit.*, p. 591.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Norman, pp. 282-83.

<sup>21</sup> *The Indian Annual Register*, 1936, vol. ii, p. 310.

<sup>22</sup> Narendra Dev, *Socialism and National Revolution*, (Bombay, 1946), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> The Sixth World Congress of the Communist International adopted an ultra-leftist policy. The *International Press Correspondence* of 9-1-1930 advised the Indian Communists, "The National Congress actually retards the revolutionary movement. . . sever your contact with the National Congress and the League of Independence." However, the *Communist International* admitted on 1-6-1932 that the biggest mistake of the Indian Communists had been that they "stood aside from the mass movement of the people against British Imperialism." G.D. Overstreet and N. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, (Berkeley, 1960), pp. 82-83.

foreign control and guidance. Naturally, these Congress Socialists could not join the communists, and formed their own group within the Congress to transform it from within and "to put a more dynamic programme before the country".

Although almost everyone expected that Nehru would find these socialists congenial to his taste, he never formally joined them. The latter, however, looked upon him as their friend, philosopher, and guide,<sup>24</sup> and "His clear enumeration of socialist ideas in *Whither India* was a model for many of them."<sup>25</sup> Nehru, in his turn, had genuine respect and affection for some of them, and needed their support in his struggle with the Right-oriented Old Guard which controlled the Congress. He included three socialists in his working committee, when he was elected the Congress President at Lucknow in April 1936, and he welcomed the communists within the Congress after the Communist International had accepted Georgii Dimitrov's thesis on Anti-Fascist Popular Fronts with all liberal democratic forces. From the presidential chair at Lucknow he declared, "The Congress must be not only for the masses, as it claims to be, but of the masses." He invited M.N. Roy (the celebrated revolutionary and former Comintern leader), after his release from jail, to attend the Congress session at Faizpur, in December 1936, and gave him the status and importance of a very respectable delegate. He, in fact, valued the views and influence of some of these Left-wing leaders, and sought to give the Congress a socialistic orientation by inducting them into positions of power within it.

But most of these Congress Socialists, he felt, were as dogmatic in their approach as the communists, and he did not believe that ideological rigidity was of much use.<sup>26</sup> He had revealed his flexible attitude when he said in his presidential address at Lucknow, on 14 April 1936, "I imagine that every country will fashion it [socialism] after its own way and fit in with its national genius." In his message to the Congress Socialists on 20 December 1936 he said, "It is right that we should understand the theory underlying this approach. This helps to clarify our minds and give purpose to our activities. But two aspects of this question fill my own mind. One is how to apply this approach to Indian conditions. The other is how to speak of socialism in the language of India. I think it is often forgotten that if we are to be understood we must speak the language of the country."<sup>27</sup> But none knew rural India or spoke its language better than old Gandhi, and the only way, Nehru knew, to be politically effective was

<sup>24</sup> *Socialism and National Revolution, op. cit.*, pp. 3, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Brecher, *Nehru A Political Biography*, (London, 1959), p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> At their second annual conference at Berut in January 1936 the Congress Socialists issued the following statement, "Marxism alone can guide the anti-imperialist forces to their ultimate destiny. Party members must, therefore, fully understand the technique of revolution, the theory and practice of class struggle, the nature of the state and the processes leading to the socialist society." P.L. Lakhnapal, *History of the Congress Socialist Party*, (Lahore, 1946), p. 144.

<sup>27</sup> P. Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, vol. ii, (Bombay, 1947), p. 7.

to be with him and then, if possible, to influence him. The socialist leader, Narendra Dev, himself admitted, "Most of us are only intellectual socialists."<sup>28</sup> Naturally, Nehru's attitude towards them, in the words of another socialist leader, Sampurnanand, "was one of amused contempt."<sup>29</sup>

Besides, he never liked the idea of forming groups and factions within the Congress, which in his opinion was then the only fit instrument capable of organising the masses both against imperialism as well as for socialism. That is why he had said in his presidential address to the All India Trade Union Congress at Nagpur in 1929, ". . . bourgeois as the outlook of the National Congress was, it did represent the only effective revolutionary force in the country. As such, labour ought to help it, and co-operate with and influence it."<sup>30</sup> Surveying the political situation in 1933, he wrote, "To desert the Congress seemed to me to cut oneself adrift from the vital urge of the nation, to blunt the most powerful weapon we had, and perhaps to waste energy in ineffective adventurism."<sup>31</sup> He believed that the only beneficiary of any split within the Congress would be the British imperialism. So he said after the Congress session at Lucknow in 1936, "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." Three years later, during the crisis that convulsed the Congress after its session at Tripuri, he wrote Subhas Chandra Bose, "I feel it would be injurious in the interest of India and our cause for me or you to create this definite split."<sup>32</sup>

These only prove the obvious that Nehru was first a nationalist and then a socialist. He knew perfectly well that the socialism of his dream could never be practised in India unless she was free, and unity was the precondition of her freedom.<sup>33</sup> But that unity of action, he knew, could be achieved only through the Congress under Gandhi's leadership, though he sincerely believed that the Congress "is a bourgeois movement. . . . and its objective so far has been not a change of the social order, but political independence."<sup>34</sup> Still he wrote, what he obviously hoped, ". . . gradually the lower middle class began to dominate the Congress, and later the peasantry made their influence felt."<sup>35</sup> With such a view of things, he considered it wiser to work through an organized mass party to educate his people about socialism than to join any breakaway faction.<sup>36</sup> While the communists and many Socialists considered it proper to expose the policies of the Congress and to oppose those, if necessary, Nehru thought it wiser

<sup>28</sup> *Socialism and National Revolution, op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Sampurnanand, *Memories and Reflections*, (Bombay, 1960), pp. 72,80-81.

<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Norman, p. 176.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>32</sup> *A Bunch of Old Letters, op. cit.*, p. 351.

<sup>33</sup> "But before socialism comes or can even be attempted, there must be the power to shape our destiny; there must be political independence." Dorothy Norman, p. 451.

<sup>34</sup> *Autobiography, op. cit.*, p.365.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Norman, p. 333.

to be in the Congress, and to influence and to reform it slowly from within. Regarding their differences, Namboodripad writes, "The essence of that conflict [between Nehru and the socialists] consisted in their different approaches to the question of the political instrument through which the struggle for socialism is to be conducted."<sup>37</sup>

Some events in the year 1936, however, had dampened his enthusiasm for socialism and had convinced him of the need for a better understanding with Gandhi and the Right-wing old guard of the Congress that controlled the organization. The latter were alarmed at his pronouncements on socialism, and were bent upon reducing him to virtual impotence, though he was the Congress President that year. Ten out of fourteen members of the Congress Working Committee belonged to the old guard, and they opposed him on almost every issue. Nehru wrote to Sayed Mahmud of his predicament, on 5 May 1936, "I was completely isolated and there was not a single member to support me."<sup>38</sup> Then came the showdown at the end of June, when six members of the working committee, headed by Rajendra Prasad, Patel, and Rajagopalacharia, tendered their resignation with, at least, the tacit approval of Gandhi.<sup>39</sup> Nehru, too, in despair decided to resign. The crisis, however, was smoothed over by Gandhi, and all concerned withdrew their resignation. While trying to assuage Nehru's hurt feeling, he told him in plain language, "If they are guilty of intolerance, you have more than your share of it. The country should not be made to suffer for your mutual intolerance."<sup>40</sup> But what is more significant was Gandhi's reminder that "you are in office by their unanimous choice, but you are not in power yet."<sup>41</sup> The whole affair convinced Nehru that it was not yet possible for him to carry Gandhi and most Congress leaders with him in his quest for socialism, and that it was only with the former's blessings that he could still be the second-in-command of the national movement. Loss of Gandhi's confidence, he knew, would soon drive him into political wilderness. Having felt the chill discomfort of political isolation, Nehru buried his ideological hatchet and drew closer to Gandhi. The latter, as if in reward, again placed on his head the crown of presidentship of the Congress session at Faizpur in December 1936. There his presidential address was in sharp contrast with the one he had delivered at Lucknow only a few months ago. Now he emphasised, "Congress must be the basis and pivot of united action."

Besides, Nehru must have instinctively felt that membership of any group or sub-group would, in the long run, adversely affect his chance of playing the role of an all-India leader. It has to be admitted that, despite his strong passion and known prejudices, he succeeded remarkably in raising

<sup>37</sup> E.M.S. Namboodripad, *Economics and Politics of the Socialist Pattern*, (New Delhi, 1966), p. 56.

<sup>38</sup> As cited in Michael Brecher, *op. cit.*, p. 223, f. n. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Rajendra Prasad's letter to Nehru from Gandhi's *asram* at Wardha, dated 29-6-1936, cited in *A Bunch of Old Letters*, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-85.

<sup>40</sup> Gandhi to Nehru on 8-7-1936, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>41</sup> Gandhi to Nehru on 15-7-1936, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 196-98.

himself above narrow communal, regional, or factional strifes. Next to the great Gandhi he was the Congress in the eyes of the world. To quote Frank Moraes, the eminent author and journalist, "*Hamlet* without the Prince is not more inconceivable than Congress without Nehru."<sup>42</sup> None except Gandhi was more popular; few, if any, were equally acceptable to different groups of interest and shades of view. This nationalist par excellence was on the one hand a zealous campaigner for a Brave New World and on the other the trusted political heir of the Mahatma himself. He was the link between many opposing interests and viewpoints. The Gandhite and the communist, the rabid nationalist and the social reformist, all could find in him an area of agreement, and place in him a certain amount of confidence. This was because his ideals were primarily human and his approach essentially liberal. If his liberalism mellowed his zest for socialism and rendered its contours indistinct, it also enabled him to make his version of liberal socialism acceptable to millions of Indian intelligentsia and Congress workers. The liberalism he personified is now almost a thing of the past, but socialism in India which is a living and growing force, owes more to this liberal crusader for a better world than to anyone else. Considering his approach and achievements, some look upon him as the first of India's socialists, while to many others he was the last of the liberals.

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<sup>42</sup> P.D. Tandon (ed.), *Nehru Your Neighbour*, (Calcutta, 1946), p. 25.