

SHASHI THAROOR

# Nehru's Relevance in India Today

FOUR MEN EMBODIED the vision of free India in the 1940s—Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, and Ambedkar. Gandhi's moral rectitude, allied to Jawaharlal Nehru's political passion, fashioned both the strategy and tactics for the struggle against British rule. Sardar Patel's firm hand on the administration integrated the nation and established peace and stability. Ambedkar's erudition and legal acumen helped translate the dreams of a generation into a working legal document that laid the foundations for an enduring democracy.

While the world was disintegrating into fascism, violence, and war, Gandhi taught the virtues of truth, nonviolence, and peace. While the nation reeled from bloodshed and communal carnage, Ambedkar preached the values of constitutionalism and the rule of law. While parochial ambitions threatened national unity, Patel led the nation to a vision of unity and common purpose. While mobs marched the streets baying for revenge, Nehru's humane and nonsectarian vision inspired India to yearn again for the glory that had once been hers.

Of the four, Gandhi and Nehru stood out. Despite differences over both tactics (Nehru wanted independence immediately whereas Gandhi believed Indians had to be made ready for their own freedom) and philosophy (the agnostic Nehru had little patience for the Mahatma's spirituality), the two men proved a formidable combination. Gandhi guided Nehru to his political pinnacle; Nehru in turn proved an inspirational campaigner as president of the Indian National Congress, electrifying the nation with his speeches and tireless travel.

Upon the Mahatma's assassination in 1948, just five months after independence, Nehru, the country's first prime minister, became the keeper of the national flame, the most visible embodiment of India's struggle for freedom. Gandhi's death could have led Nehru to assume untrammelled power. Instead, he spent a lifetime immersed in the democratic values Ambedkar had codified, trying to instill the habits of democracy in his people—a disdain for dictators, a respect for parliamentary procedures,

an abiding faith in the constitutional system. Till the end of the decade, his staunch ally Patel provided the firm hand on the tiller without which India might yet have split asunder.

For the first seventeen years of India's independence, the paradox-ridden Jawaharlal Nehru—a moody, idealist intellectual who felt an almost mystical empathy with the toiling peasant masses; an aristocrat, accustomed to privilege, who had passionate socialist convictions; an Anglicized product of Harrow and Cambridge who spent over ten years in British jails; an agnostic radical who became an unlikely protégé of the saintly Mahatma Gandhi—*was* India. Incorruptible, visionary, ecumenical, a politician above politics, Nehru's stature was so great that the country he led seemed inconceivable without him. A year before his death a leading American journalist, Welles Hangen, published a book entitled *After Nehru, Who?* The unspoken question around the world was: "After Nehru, what?"

Today, five decades after his death, we have something of an answer to the latter question. As an India still seemingly clad in many of the trappings of Nehruvianism steps out into the twenty-first century, a good deal of Jawaharlal Nehru's legacy appears intact—and yet hotly contested. India has moved away from much of Nehru's beliefs, and so (in different ways) has the rest of the developing world for which Nehruvianism once spoke. As India completes its seventh decade of independence from the British Raj, a transformation—still incomplete—has taken place that, in its essentials, has changed the basic Nehruvian assumptions of postcolonial nationhood. Nehru himself, as a man with an open and questing mind, would have allowed his practical thinking to evolve with the times, even while remaining anchored to his core beliefs. So have we.

That is why I undertook my 2003 biography, *Nehru: The Invention of India*. I sought to examine this great figure of twentieth-century nationalism from the vantage point of the beginning of the twenty-first. Jawaharlal Nehru's life is a fascinating story in its own right, and I tried to tell it whole, because the privileged child, the unremarkable youth, the posturing young nationalist, and the heroic fighter for independence are all inextricable from the unchallengeable prime minister and peerless global statesman. At the same time I sought to analyze critically the four principal pillars of Nehru's legacy to India—democratic institution-building, staunch pan-Indian secularism, socialist economics at home, and a foreign policy of nonalignment—all of which were integral to a vision of Indianness that is fundamentally challenged today.

How did Nehru construct these four pillars and what do they mean today?

FIRST, DEMOCRACY. It was by no means axiomatic that a country like India, riven by so many internal differences and diversities, beset by acute poverty and torn apart by Partition, would be or remain democratic. Many developing countries found themselves turning in the opposite direction soon after independence, arguing that a firm hand was necessary to promote national unity and guide development. With Gandhi's death, Nehru could have very well assumed unlimited power within the country. And yet, he himself was such a convinced democrat, profoundly wary of the risks of autocracy, that, at the crest of his rise, he authored an anonymous article warning Indians of the dangers of giving dictatorial temptations to Jawaharlal Nehru. "He must be checked," he wrote of himself. "We want no Caesars." And indeed, his practice when challenged within his own party was to offer his resignation; he usually got his way, but it was hardly the instinct of a Caesar.

As prime minister, Nehru carefully nurtured the country's infant democratic institutions. He paid deference to the country's ceremonial presidency and even to its largely otiose vice presidency; he never let the public forget that these notables outranked him in protocol terms. He wrote regular letters to the chief ministers of the states, explaining his policies and seeking their feedback. He subjected himself and his government to cross-examination in Parliament by the small, fractious but undoubtedly talented Opposition, allowing them an importance out of all proportion to their numerical strength, because he was convinced that a strong Opposition was essential for a healthy democracy. He took care not to interfere with the judicial system; on the one occasion that he publicly criticized a judge, he apologized the next day and wrote an abject letter to the Chief Justice, regretting having slighted the judiciary. And he never forgot that he derived his authority from the people of India; not only was he astonishingly accessible for a person in his position, but he started the practice of offering a daily *darshan* at home for an hour each morning to anyone coming in off the street without an appointment, a practice that continued until the dictates of security finally overcame the populism of his successors.

It was Nehru who, by his scrupulous regard for both the form and the substance of democracy, instilled democratic habits in our country. His respect for Parliament, his regard for the independence of the judiciary, his courtesy to those of different political convictions, his commitment to free elections, and his deference to institutions over individuals, all left us a precious legacy of freedom.

Jawaharlal Nehru's opening remarks when he moved the motion at the newly established Constituent Assembly on December 13, 1946, gives us a view of the immense pressure and responsibility he placed on himself to ensure that the embodiment of his democratic vision for the country responded fittingly to the situation and did justice to its enshrinement in the process of Constitution-making. He had to preserve the "past" idea of India and march toward the "future" idea of India.

Nehru said,

"As I stand here, Sir, I feel the weight of all manner of things crowding around me. We are at the end of an era and possibly very soon we shall embark upon a new age; and my mind goes back to the great past of India to the five thousand years of India's history, from the very dawn of that history which might be considered almost the dawn of human history, till today. All that past crowds around me and exhilarates me and, at the same time, somewhat oppresses me. Am I worthy of that past? When I think also of the future, the greater future I hope, standing on this sword's edge of the present between this mighty past and the mightier future, I tremble a little and feel overwhelmed by this mighty task. We have come here at a strange moment in India's history. I do not know but I do feel that there is some magic in this moment of transition from the old to the new, something of that magic which one sees when the night turns to day and even though the day may be a cloudy one, it is day after all, for when the clouds move away we can see the sun later on."

The American editor Norman Cousins once asked Nehru what he hoped his legacy to India would be. "Four hundred million people capable of governing themselves," Nehru replied. The numbers have grown, but the very fact that each day over a billion Indians govern themselves in a pluralist democracy is testimony to the deeds and words of this extraordinary man and the giants who accompanied him in the march to freedom.

SECOND, SECULARISM. Nehru strived to prevent Partition, but when it occurred, he never accepted the logic that since Pakistan had ostensibly been created for India's Muslims, what remained was a state for Hindus. He lived up to his lifelong conviction that India belonged to all who had contributed to its history and civilization, and that the majority community had a special obligation to protect the rights, and promote the well-being, of India's minorities. In both governmental policy and personal practice, Nehru stood for an idea of India that embraced those of every religion, caste, ethnicity, or language.

Nehru saw our country as an "ancient palimpsest" on which successive

rulers and subjects had inscribed their visions without erasing what had been asserted previously—we not only coexist, but thrive in our diversity which is our strength. He was followed by a generation of secular nationalists who echoed this tradition, making “unity in diversity” the most hallowed of independent India’s self-defining slogans. It is this secularism that is being questioned today in an effort to redefine nationalism in more sectarian terms, limited as its architects are by a lack of vision and an absence of depth that prevents them from seeing the larger principle that India has always defined for the world, then and today. As dutiful citizens of the country we must resist any attempts to reduce India to a Hindu version of Pakistan. That would be a betrayal of Nehru’s vision and of his life, as well as of the very essence of what it means to be Indian.

Even with caste and social relations, the country has moved forward significantly since Nehru’s time. We have witnessed convulsive changes: Who could have imagined, for three thousand years, that a woman from the Dalit community, once considered outcasts, would rule India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, as Mayawati has done three times? It’s still true that in many parts of India, when you cast your vote, you vote your caste. But that too has brought about profound alterations in the country, as the so-called lower castes have taken advantage of the ballot to seize electoral power. And in cultural affairs, with the notion of Hindutva being proclaimed, and argued and debated from the rooftops in recent times, we have had a searching re-examination of identity. But throughout it all, India has hewed to Nehru’s secular vision, insisting that all these identities only remained safe under the sheltering carapace of an Indianness that embraced all equally.

**THIRD, SOCIALISM.** It is fashionable today to decry Nehruvian socialism as a corrupt and inefficient system that condemned India to many years of modest growth levels. We do not deny, as Nehru’s own grandson said three decades ago, that over time the socialist model as practiced in India developed many flaws. But at the core of Nehru’s socialism lay his conviction that in a land of extreme poverty and inequality, the objective of government policy must be the welfare of the poorest, most deprived, and most marginalized of our people. In his day, the best way to accomplish that was by building up structures of public ownership and state control of national resources, as well as enhancing the nation’s economic capacity through government intervention.

Today Nehru’s own Indian National Congress, of which I am a member, welcomes, indeed encourages, the involvement of the private sector

in the generation and distribution of wealth. We are proud of our own role in liberalizing our country's economy and in making possible so many new opportunities for our young to succeed in a globalizing world. But we remain profoundly wedded to Nehru's concern for the weakest sections of our society. This is why we can still say we still claim to be socialist today. Our socialism is not antigrowth; rather, it aims to ensure that the benefits of our country's growth are given principally to the deprived masses, who need it most. Whether we grow by 9 percent, as we once did, or by just about 6 percent, as we are doing now, our fundamental commitment must be to the bottom 25 percent of our society. In the long run, I am certain that Nehru will be remembered for not abandoning vast sections of society to hanker after a notion of growth that only favors a select few, at the cost of everybody else.

It is a commitment to this that allowed for an updated version of Nehru's idea of India to develop in the twenty-first century—one that has widened the scope of its democracy through such innovations as the Right to Information Act; one that has defended secularism in the face of violent threats to our nation's diversity; one that has deepened socialism through the creation of a framework of rights, including the right to work, the right to food, the right to education, and the right to fair compensation for land, all of which have strengthened and empowered the poorest of our people; and one that has remained a proud and independent nation in the community of nations. It was Nehru who built the scientific base for India's space and engineering triumphs today. Without his establishment of what is now the Indian Space Research Organization, there would be no Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan space probes; without the Indian Institutes of Technology he established, Indians would not have a worldwide reputation for engineering excellence or have established 40 percent of the startups in Silicon Valley. Today, we are world leaders in Information Technology, the provision of digital services, and in the launching of rockets and satellites. In all this, we are upholding and continuing the legacy of a remarkable human being whose vision soared well above the poverty and misery that colonialism had reduced his country to.

**FINALLY, FOREIGN POLICY.** Nehru was a convinced internationalist. For him, nonalignment was the only response to the bipolar divisions of the Cold War era. After two centuries of colonial exclusion from the global system, Nehru was determined to protect its strategic autonomy; his India was not about to mortgage its independence by aligning itself

to either superpower in the Cold War. In that form, it might be argued that his vision is no longer relevant in the changed circumstances of the twenty-first century. Today, there are no longer two superpowers to be nonaligned between. But in its essence, the power of nonalignment was to ensure that India was free to take its own positions without allowing others to decide for it; the Nehruvian vision was about safeguarding India's independence and self-respect against potential encroachments on its sovereignty. Thanks to him, all Indians can be proud of the role we play in the international community. We are nonaligned in the sense that we are aligned with no one nation or bloc, and we remain free to conduct our foreign relations according to our own lights and according to our national interest.

Nehru was also a skilled exponent of soft power, much before the term was even coined: he developed a role for India in the world based entirely on its civilizational history and its moral standing, making India the voice of the oppressed and the marginalized against the big power hegemons of the day. This gave our country enormous standing and prestige across the world for years, and strengthened our own self-respect as we stood, proud and independent, on the global stage.

Indeed, we are still drawing from these traditions. After all, in the information age, it is not the side with the bigger army that wins, but the side which tells the better story. India must remain the "land of the better story." As a society with a free press and a thriving mass media, with a people whose creative energies are daily encouraged to express themselves in a variety of appealing ways, India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of its rivals. This is not about propaganda; indeed, it will not work if it is directed from above, least of all by government. But its impact, though intangible, can be huge. This soft power, too, is Nehru's legacy; he created a standing for India out of all proportion to our military strength or economic might.

Yet soft power is not just what we can deliberately and consciously exhibit or put on display; it is rather how others see what we are, whether or not we are trying to show it to the world. It is not just material accomplishments that enhance India's soft power. Even more important are the values and principles for which India stands, and I do believe Nehru would have applauded this evolution of his own approach to world affairs.

INDIA HAS IN RECENT YEARS undergone profound transformations in its politics (from the dominant Congress system to a proliferation

of regional parties to the dominance of the newly ascendant Bharatiya Janata Party), its economics (from a controlled “socialist” economy to a thriving free-enterprise system), its trade (from protectionism to globalization), and its social relations (from a rigidly hierarchical caste system to a more egalitarian policy affirming opportunities and outcomes for the “lowest” castes, and from a secular political culture to one in which a party of the Hindu majority is overtly asserting its strength). Now, any of these transformations could have been enough to throw another country into a turbulent revolution. But we have had all four in India and yet we have absorbed them, and made all the changes work, because the Indian revolution is a democratic one, sustained by a larger idea of India, an India which safeguards the common space available to each identity, an India that remains safe for diversity. That was Nehru’s vision, and this is his vindication.

The truth is that Nehru’s extraordinary life and career is part of the inheritance of every Indian. The very term “Indian” was imbued with such meaning by Nehru that it is impossible to use it without acknowledging a debt: our passports incarnate his ideals. Where those ideals came from, whether they were brought to fulfilment by their own progenitor, and to what degree they remain viable today are all legitimate issues for debate. Jawaharlal Nehru’s impact on India is too great not to be reexamined periodically. His legacy is ours, whether we agree with everything he stood for or not. What we are today, both for good and for ill, we owe in great measure to one man. That is why his story is not simply history.

Today, both Gandhi’s and Nehru’s legacies are fundamentally contested, and many Indians have strayed from the ideals bequeathed to them by Gandhi and Nehru, Ambedkar and Patel. Yet they, in their very different ways, each represented that rare kind of leader who is not diminished by the inadequacies of his followers. Today the ruling BJP and its followers lose no opportunity to denigrate Nehru, especially on social media, accusing him of every conceivable sin of both commission and omission. It is like throwing pebbles at a mountain. They cannot even begin to dent the scale of his contributions to India.

Even the most distinguished leader of the prime minister’s own BJP has in the past—despite many areas of disagreement—acknowledged the legacy of Nehru as a champion of the country. Speaking in Parliament on Nehru’s death, Atal Behari Vajpayee declared emotionally—and poetically—that with the prime minister’s passing “a dream has remained half-fulfilled, a song has become silent, and a flame has vanished

into the Unknown. The dream was of a world free of fear and hunger; the song a great epic resonant with the spirit of the Gita and as fragrant as a rose, the flame a candle which burnt all night long, showing us the way." The loss, Vajpayee averred, was not merely that of a family or even of a party. Mother India, he said, was in mourning because "her beloved Prince has gone to sleep"; even humanity was sad because its servant and worshipper had left it forever. Vajpayee went on to describe the departed prime minister as a "benefactor of the downtrodden" and the "chief actor of the world stage" whom he compared to none less than Lord Ram, for like Valmiki's (and the Hindutvawadis's) hero, Nehru was "the orchestrator of the impossible and inconceivable." He too (I'm still quoting Vajpayee) "was not afraid of compromise but would never compromise under duress."

One might say that these words were only to be expected from a gracious adversary in tribute to a deceased prime minister. But Vajpayee's statements went far beyond the claims of ritual. He called on the nation to rededicate itself to Nehru's ideals. "With unity, discipline and self-confidence," Vajpayee said, in words that could have been a Congressman's, "we must make this Republic of ours flourish. The leader has gone, but the followers remain. The sun has set, yet by the shadow of stars we must find our way. These are testing times, but we must dedicate ourselves to his great aim, so that India can become strong, capable and prosperous . . ."

This remains the cherished goal of all Indians. As we make our political choices in Uttar Pradesh today and across the country in due course, we would do well to recall the first leader of independent India and the values and principles on which he built our democratic polity.

Thank you, and *Jai Hind*.

This speech was delivered on election day in Uttar Pradesh, February 18, 2017, at the First International Literary Conference at Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Lucknow, India (Professor Om Prakesh Dwivedi, principal conference organizer).