

Nehru's Vision of Swaraj and Socialism

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Abstract

The thought of socialism is an age old phenomenon in the human society. Its traces can be found in the writings of Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Shades of socialistic thoughts can also be discovered in the *Santan Dharma* scriptures, Islamic scriptures and the teachings of Jesus Christ. But it was only in the beginning of the 19th century that socialism as a political, social and economic philosophy gained momentum.

Jawaharlal Nehru believed that no country or individual could develop much without social freedom and a socialist structure of the society and the state. The idea of socialism had been a constant thought in his mind since the pre-independence days. As an economic modernist of his times, Nehru believed in the development of large-scale industries, which he thought was the only key to overcome poverty in the country. Nehru's concept of socialism was not merely a rigid theoretical doctrine. Theories when put to practice entertain pragmatic difficulties. When Nehru got the opportunity to apply his concept of socialism as the first Prime Minister of India, he had to confront with many complications. His idea of socialism was subjected to many changes looking to the vast population of India. A strict adherence to any doctrine may prove detrimental at times, more so in a country, like, India. Nehru,

therefore, envisaged a policy of mixed economy, of course socialist in nature, which would be best suitable to the needs of the country. India has both a rural and an urban economy and what is required is a harmonious blend between the two for the growth and development of the country. The construction of a series of big dams for agricultural irrigation along with the production of hydroelectricity i.e. energy for industrial purposes reflects Nehru's idea of drawing a balance between the two major sectors of the country.

What Nehru meant by *Swaraj* was not merely political freedom but beside political freedom it should include social and economic justice for the Indian masses. Independence should bring not only a change of the officials but should also bring a change in the fundamentals of the life of a nation.

The year 1991 will always be remembered in India as a year which is witness to a drastic change in the Indian economy policy. This was the year when the Government of India drifted from Nehru's policy of mixed economy and announced the new economic policy which consisted of a wide range of reforms. Thirty years have passed under this new economic system and now the time has come when we should evaluate and analyze how far this new approach has been beneficial to the country.

Today, the country is face to face with innumerable problems; problems related to inflation, unemployment, caste, class and religious activism. The country needs to address these problems in a determined way before it is too late. I understand that the time has come when we need to once again look back to Nehru's vision of *Swaraj* and socialism for a pragmatic solution to these problems.

Keywords - *Swaraj* and socialism, pragmatic difficulties, mixed economy, economic modernist, large-scale industries, First Five Year Plan, under-employment, social freedom, vital creed, rigid theoretical doctrine.

Jawaharlal Nehru was the only Indian leader, with the exception of Mahatma Gandhi, who at the time of independence had thought and worked out for himself a definite political, economic and social philosophy. After his visit to Russia in 1927, Nehru had started believing that no country or individual could develop much without social freedom and a socialist structure of the society and the state. The idea of socialism had been a constant thought in Nehru's mind since then. In his Presidential Address to the Indian National Congress at Lucknow on 12 April 1936, Nehru observed:

I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problem and of India's problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. Socialism is, however, something even more than an economic doctrine; it's a philosophy of life and as such also it appeals to me. I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. (Gopal, *Nehru An Anthology* 300)

Exploring the meaning of socialism, Nehru further contended:

That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structure, the ending of vested interest in land and industry, as well as the feudal and autocratic Indian states system. That means the ending of private property, except in a restricted sense and the replacement of the present profit system by a higher ideal of co-operative service. (Gopal, *Nehru An Anthology* 300)

In his speech at Allahabad on 13 April 1939, Nehru stated:

In order to improve the living conditions and remove the appalling poverty of the people, the whole structure of the society should change. We may not be able to make the new structure strong until it is build on the foundation of socialism. Socialism does not mean harming anyone or destroying anything. Socialism is a means to

improve the productive capacity and the economic conditions of a country. I believe that the world cannot progress and poverty cannot be removed without a socialist policy. At the same time, we cannot have socialism until power vests in the people. This gives rise to the question of *Swaraj*. Therefore our first task is to wrest freedom. (Gopal, *Selected Works* vol.9, 283)

The thought of socialism is an age old phenomenon in the human society. Its traces can be found in the writings of Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Shades of socialistic thoughts can also be discovered in the *Santan Dharma* scriptures, Islamic scriptures and the teachings of Jesus Christ. But it was only in the beginning of the 19th century that socialism as a political, social and economic philosophy gained momentum. In his distinctive work, *Glimpses of World History*, Nehru attempts to discover the origination of this idea in the modern world:

It was Robert Owen, it is said, who, first used the word socialism, somewhere about 1830. Of course, the idea of a leveling-up between the rich and the poor, and a more or less equal distribution of property, was not a new one. Many people had advocated it in the past. In the early communities there had even been a kind of communism, the whole community or village holding land and other property in common. This is called primitive communism, and it is to be found in many countries, including India. But the new socialism was something much more than a vague desire to equalize people. It was more definite and, to begin with, it was meant to apply to the new factory system of production. It was thus a child of the industrial system. Owen's idea was to have workers cooperative societies, and that workers should have a share in the factories. He established model factories and settlements in England and America with more or less success. But he failed to convert his brother employers or the

government. His influence during his time, however, was great, and he gave currency to the word socialism, which has since then captivated millions. (Nehru 620)

Nehru's concept of socialism includes the establishment of large scale industries under the control of the state. This idea of Nehru seeks reinforcement in his speech delivered at Nagpur on 22 January 1940:

The charkha has always been in the Congress programme, though not in the pledge. Taking this pledge does not mean that we do not want big industries. I myself favour large industries, not under individuals but under state control. Side by side, cottage industries should be supported. The pledge is only meant to stress the beneficial nature of cottage industries to India. (Gopal, *Selected Works*, vol.10, 310)

This socialist pattern of society could be established by a democratic method that is by persuasion of the people for the people and by the people. This was not an easy task to accomplish looking to the diversity of the Indian society with so many religions, caste, communities, languages, etc. But time provides evidence to the fact that under the leadership of his mentor, Gandhiji, Nehru was able to accomplish this task very efficiently. Like socialism, the idea of national planning too has occupied Nehru's mind much before India became free. After independence, the step before him was to modernize the country through planned economic development. But this development should be inclusive of social justice so that the freedom of the individual and the democratic rights of the common citizens could not be jeopardized. Nehru, therefore, envisaged for the implementation of Five Year Plans to realize his socialistic dreams on democratic lines.

The concept of the introduction of Five Year Plan for the growth and development of India was not a new concept born of Nehru's mind. Joseph Stalin introduced it in Soviet Union for the first time in 1928. Many countries both communist and democratic adopted this

pattern of development including China. India continued with this pattern of planned development up till 2017 after which time it has now been replaced by *Niti Ayog*.

As an economic modernist of his times, Nehru believed in the development of large-scale industries, which he thought was the only key to overcome poverty in the country. This thought of his gained support from many senior leaders of the times. At the same time he was not opposed to the idea of the development of cottage industries. He was convinced that there was no conflict between the two. Certain vital industries like, defense and public utilities industries must be developed on a large scale by the state and other small scale or cottage industries might also exist side by side. Striking at the capitalistic structure of the times, Nehru wrote to Krishna Kripalani on 29 September 1939: “It is not large-scale industry that brings any injustice and violence but the misuse of large-scale industry by private capitalists and financiers” (Gopal, *Selected Works* vol.10, 540). Nehru believed that for the development of cottage industries on a widespread scale, political and economic power is necessary. A country devoted to cottage industries, he believed, will not be able to get the required political or economic power and finally will fail to push cottage industries too. And therefore, Nehru suggested for India, a system which envisaged a co-ordination between big industries and cottage industries.

Socialism for Nehru was not merely a doctrine but a vital creed which he held with all his head and heart. In his Presidential Address to the Indian National Congress, Lucknow, 12 April 1936, Nehru says:

I work for Indian independence because the nationalist in me cannot tolerate alien domination; I work for it even more because for me it is the evitable step to social and economic change. I should like the Congress to become a socialist organization and to join hands with the forces in the world which are working for the new civilization. . . .

How does socialism fit in with the present ideology of the Congress? I do not think it does. I believe in the rapid industrialization of the country and only thus, I think, will the standards of the people rise substantially and poverty combated. (Gopal, *NehruAn Anthology* 301)

This could be made possible only if state takes the lead in the establishment of industries. And Nehru did accomplish this task when he got the opportunity as the first Prime Minister of independent India. Many public sector industries were established by the Govt. of India then, either independently or in collaboration with other countries like Russia, West Germany, etc. Of course, the First Five Year Plan could not emphasize on the required rapid industrialization because of the other different kind of problems the country was facing then, like, the rehabilitation of the refugees and scarcity in food grains, etc. Therefore, Nehru gave priority to agricultural development in the First Five Year Plan so as to make India self-sufficient in food. In his speech in the Lok Sabha on 15 December 1952 Nehru said:

If I remember correctly, a very large sum is to be spent on irrigation. We certainly attach importance to industry; but in the present context we attach far greater importance to agriculture and food and matters pertaining to agriculture. If our agriculture foundation is not strong then the industry we seek to build will not have a strong basis either. Apart from that, the situation in the country today is such that, if our food front cracks up, everything else will crack up, too. . . . If our agriculture becomes strongly entrenched, as we hope it will, then it will be relatively easy for us to progress more rapidly on the industrial front, whereas if we concentrate only on industrial development and leave agriculture in a weak condition we shall be weakening industry. (Gopal, *Nehru An Anthology* 309)

The First Plan also included solution to the problems which had arisen as a consequence of the partition of the country. But Nehru focused the Second Plan on rapid industrialization.

According to this Plan, the state would work as an entrepreneur and will at the same time provide capital to private industry through banks as the financial markets were yet to develop in India then. It seems that the Prime Minister, due to, may be, being apprehensive about any future assault on India's political autonomy, was wanting the state to dominate the production of capital goods and intermediate goods so as to consolidate the Indian economy strategically.

The situation in India cannot be compared with European countries. Western countries with their small and growing population got gradually industrialized. India, like China has enormous man power because of its population but suffers poverty because of its vast unemployment or under-employment. Nehru believed that "it is better to find employment for large numbers of people at a low income level than to keep most of them unemployed" (Gopal, *Nehru An Anthology* 307). Any scheme which ensures the wastage of our man power or which creates unemployment is bad and therefore should not be encouraged. The object of the government should be to ensure maximum production, equitable distribution and no employment.

What Nehru meant by *Swaraj* was not merely political freedom but beside political freedom it should include social and economic justice for the Indian masses. Independence should bring not only a change of the officials but should also bring a change in the fundamentals of the life of a nation. "Mahatma Gandhi's greatest contribution" to India, said Nehru on October 3, 1940 at *Harijan Ashram*, Allahabad –

is the inclusion of social justice along with political freedom. His desire for social justice has found expression in Harijan work and charkha. These will create conditions of real Swaraj. You should remember this great contribution of Mahatma Gandhi and try to complete the work begun by him. He has infused new life and given a new light to the people of the country. The cause of degradation of India is untouchability and unless it is removed there is no chance of India rising to her full

stature as a great nation among the nations of the world. . . . If Harijans are given opportunities of education and economic facilities, there is no reason why they should not be able to compete favourably with the rest of the society. To me greatest religion is humanity. I shall devote myself to its service. I dream of a time when there will be social justice and economic equality.

(Chand 5)

To Nehru, social welfare meant well being of the Indian society in all respects. “It includes almost everything that one can think of spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social. It covers thus the entire field of human activity and relationships.” Hindustan Times, October 20, 1940. He further opined that:

A uniform civil code for the whole of India is essential. Yet I realize that this cannot be imposed on unwilling people. It should, therefore, be made optional to begin with, and individuals and groups may voluntarily accept it and come within its scope. The state should meanwhile carry on propaganda in its favour. One urgent need is the extension of the Civil Marriage Act to cover marriages between any two persons, to whatever religion they may belong, without any renunciation of religion, as at present. This will of necessity be optional. Another desirable step is to have records kept of all marriages. This will be useful in many ways and it will gradually make people think in terms of civil marriages. The sacramental for of marriage should certainly continue for all who want them, but it will be desirable later to have a civil registration also which the state will recognize. Divorce laws, especially for the Hindus, are a crying need, and so indeed are so many other changes. We want changes which apply to both men and women, we want changes also especially applicable to women, who have suffered for ages past under a double burden. Let us accept the democratic principle

of equal rights and equal obligations as between man and man, and man and women, and frame our laws and social structure accordingly. (Chand 8)

The reader would excuse me for the length of the quotation but many of the thoughts expressed by Nehru then i.e. in 1940, have become a part of the laws in India today and the remaining rest are in the process of becoming laws.

Nehru's concept of socialism was not merely a rigid theoretical doctrine. Theories when put to practice entertain pragmatic difficulties. When Nehru got the opportunity to apply his concept of socialism in the governance of India, he had to confront with many complications. His idea of socialism was subjected to many changes looking to the vast population of India. A strict adherence to any doctrine may prove detrimental at times, more so in a country, like, India. Nehru, therefore, envisaged a policy of mixed economy, of course socialist in nature, which would be best suitable to the needs of the country. India has both a rural and an urban economy and what is required is a harmonious blend between the two for the growth and development of the country. The construction of a series of big dams for agricultural irrigation along with the production of hydroelectricity i.e. energy for industrial purposes reflects Nehru's idea of drawing a balance between the two major sectors of the country. Nehru also pioneered the introduction of nuclear research facility in India with the establishment of Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in 1954.

The British had emptied the coffers when they left India and Nehru had practically nothing when he took over as the Prime Minister. Moreover, the country was witnessing the biggest massacre which had ever occurred in the world. In such a volatile situation, it is remarkable to note that besides undertaking administrative control of the country and pleading for peace and tranquility, Nehru was also preparing to lay down a strong foundation for the future building of new India. It is amazing to note that within a span of just 17 years

which Nehru got as the Prime Minister, he could approve and establish such a large number of public sector industries, research laboratories, Universities, dams, etc.

The year 1991 will always be remembered in India as a year which is witness to a drastic change in the Indian economy policy. This was the year when the Government of India drifted from Nehru's policy of mixed economy and announced the new economic policy which consisted of a wide range of reforms. Under this new policy, Government of India approached International Banks for the arrangement of finance for the development of the country. These Banks asked the Indian Government to open restriction on trade done by private sector and between India and other countries. LPG i.e. liberalization, privatization and globalization is the common term associated with this NEP. Thirty years have passed under this new economic system and now the time has come when we should evaluate and analyze how far this new approach has been beneficial to the country.

Today, the country is face to face with innumerable problems; problems related to inflation, unemployment, caste, class and religious activism. The country needs to address these problems in a determined way before it is too late. I understand that the time has come when we need to once again look back to Nehru's vision of *Swaraj* and socialism for a pragmatic solution to these problems.

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