



**NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

**PERSPECTIVES IN
INDIAN DEVELOPMENT**

**New Series
57**

**Tracing Nehru in
Contemporary Indian Politics**

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**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2015**

NMML Occasional Paper



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Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-85-9

Price Rs. 100/-; US \$ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri
Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

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Tracing Nehru in Contemporary Indian Politics*

Ajay Gudavarthy

In two dominant senses that political scientists often trace Nehru are: first, the developmental state—and it has been a general trend to believe that by the 1990s there was the death of the developmental state; second, the legacy that is often drawn on—that of secularism and which is a contested debate most of the time in India. I'll avoid those two partly known territories and venture into something else which I feel is one unmistakably significant feature of Nehruvian legacy—that of centrism in Indian politics. This centrism is part of not only our institutional makeup now, but is also part of what I would call the common sense of the way Indians work through their everyday political behaviour. For instance, in a recent interview Arvind Kejriwal says “I am not left, I am not right, I am practical...”. This is the kind of centrism I am talking about of which Indian politics carries a huge legacy and much of this goes back, to my mind, to Nehru.

How do we trace this specific kind of centrism back to Nehru? First, I think the very structural conditions during the anti-colonial movement and the conditions in which India actually became independent that political scientists Rudolphs point is that of the sequential relationship between democracy and industrialization. Rudolphs argue that, “...the sequential relationship of democracy and industrialization helped to revitalize and reorient traditional social groups and to enfranchise the agricultural sector before the

* Paper presented at a workshop titled ‘Nehru’s India’, held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 1 May 2014.

objective conditions for post feudal class formation were well established. In independent India, voting based on universal suffrage paralleled and unto an extant preceded industrialization.” (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2013)

And this according to Rudolphs points towards actually marginalized class politics and that they brought in state as an important third sector of both mobilizing the economy and the politics. So, in that sense, we have moved away from one sort of leaning in terms of class politics, which pushes one kind of centrism, which disallows any kind of polarization of social/class forces in Indian politics. The second part is that, the other arguments that one can draw in terms of the nature of anti-colonial movement and that is the Congress party in course of anti-colonial movement was initially created to advance upward mobility for India’s urban educated middle class, who in turn, to expand political representation, aligned with the rural middle classes and this leads one to argue that this combination of a class interest in creating more representative political institutions and a political party that institutionalized proto-democratic commitments was above all responsible for creation of democratic institutions, soon after Independence. In other words, there was a structural link between universal adult franchise and the multi-class nature of Indian polity and society. I think there was some sort of a structural fit and we need to further explore this. I don’t think that there is much work done on this in terms of why India went in for an adult franchise, since there was not much visible pressure on India moving towards declaring itself as a Republic based on complete universal adult franchise. The broad social structural context of that of a multi-class, and multi-ethnic character of Indian society was the reason behind opting for universal adult franchise and this universal adult franchise in fact preceded industrialization, leading to a marginalization of class politics and centralization of state as the third sector.

In this sense, perhaps, Nehru was a man who belonged to those times. As Carlos Nino (1996) points out that acts are historically constituted, and that you actually constitute them in specific

contexts. In accordance with this foundational multi-class character I would argue that Nehru actually belonged to those times. Consider, for instance, the fact that a great amount of rhetoric that Nehru created around socialism, and contrast it to the remarkably little attention that even a burning question like abolition of zamindari system received in the constituent assembly debates. In the Objective Resolutions to the Constituent Assembly on 13 December 1946, Nehru said: “We have given the content of democracy in this resolution, and not only the content of democracy but also the content, if I may say so of economic democracy in this resolution. Others might take objection to this resolution on the ground that we have not said that it should be a socialist state but the main thing is that in such a resolution if in accordance with my own desire I had out in that we want a socialist state, we would have put in something (*sic*) which would have been agreeable to many and may not be agreeable to some and we wanted this resolution not to be controversial in regard to such matters.” (CAD)

The entire Nehruvian emphasis on *consensus* and the *politics of accommodation* had unmistakable Gandhian stamp on them, which Granville Austin argues as two strategies that were unique to Indian constitution-making process. Nehru kept emphasizing all through that one should arrive at consensus and not follow a mere ‘majority principle’. Even in 1950 while launching the Planning Commission, Nehru toned down the socialist rhetoric making sure there is again consensus on the need for planning, in order to achieve industrialization.

If we move further, consider the entire process of linguistic reorganization of the states, which, I again think, had the signature stamp of Nehru, it had a *classical* political method of accommodating the regional elite alongside many of the political formulations that Nehru suggests very actively, including the ideas such as mixed economy, decentralization, the entire debate between fundamental rights and directive principles where the exclusive thrust was to draw some sort of a balance between the two, and finally of course the socialist pattern of society with

private capita, among other such political strategies and ideals. All of this constitutes what many of the political scientists analysing political processes in India refer to it as a case of an ‘Indian paradox’ (Weiner, 1976). In economic terms political scientists such as Francine Frankle refer to this as the ‘Gradual Revolution’; in political terms it has been referred to as the ‘Passive Revolution’ by Sudipto Kaviraj drawing from Antonio Gramsci, and in cultural terms Christopher Jaffrelot refers to this as a ‘Silent Revolution’. This process of *hybridization* of the political process could be traced to the kind of centrism that Nehru has tried to gift to Indian democracy.

Following the *Nehruvian era*, during Indira Gandhi’s phase, which was again an escalation of centrism that Nehru offered to Indian polity, one could possibly read the entire phase of the Emergency as one where certain authoritarian methods were used for pushing certain welfare policies of the kind focused upon in the ‘20-Point Programme’. Partha Chatterjee, makes a very interesting point and I quote him here: “...emergency was the last sustained attempt in India to push through a developmental agenda by authoritarian bureaucratic methods of the kind that had been used, with varying degrees of effectiveness in third world countries...the failure of emergency drew home the lesson in governing circles that bio-political agendas could not be successfully pursued without passing through the sieve of voluntary consent and that governmentality could not be effectively administered except by opening its terms of negotiation with the affected population groups.” (Chatterjee, 2013). In other words, Chatterjee is trying to make the point that Emergency was actually a high point of the *old* type of governmental mechanism, of the *old* kind of authoritarian bureaucratic mechanisms meaning which is the political strategies of the prior regime, and what he has in mind here is the Nehruvian era.

Chatterjee is trying to argue that the Nehruvian era marked by planning was actually a top-down and high-end bureaucratic strategy of implementing bureaucratic policies and he is also



arguing that the Emergency was one of the last modes through which that method was followed in Indian politics. He further argues in his book *Politics of the Governed* that during the post-Emergency phase what we witness is that the State is more than willing to negotiating with the population groups and there is more participatory ethos that comes in. This is a very intriguing aspect of Indian democracy that on the one hand is the entire agenda of universal adult franchise which has been such a fundamental aspect of Indian democracy and constitution making, and on the other hand the political process ends up with Emergency where it takes 25 to 30 odd years to realize that what the Indian state was following was a democracy that was top down in nature in terms of its expansion of governmental mechanisms. And this in a strange way, or shall we say in a paradoxical sense, is a Nehruvian gift to Indian democracy and therefore the question is still open, the jury is still out as to how we relate to the Nehruvian kind of centrism in contemporary politics.

Centrism and Contemporary India

If we were to talk about India today with the unraveling of political events as it is happening, how do we assess this kind of *Nehruvian centrism*?

There are different kinds of assessments that one can trace. Perhaps the most obvious of them is that there have been a great number of champions of Indian democracy's centrist character. Scholars that immediately come to my mind are Ramachandra Guha, Sunil Khilnani, and Ashutosh Varshney, among others. Some of them have been great champions who have argued that it is the Nehruvian centrism, or to put it another way *Nehruvian liberalism*, which actually needs to be given credit in terms of how it has pulled back much of the "extremist" tendencies in Indian democracy and Indian politics, and here when they talk about extremism they have both left wing extremism and right wing extremism in mind. Actually, many of these scholars do not make much of a distinction between these two types of extremism, which incidentally also tells us something about the nature of this



centrism that we are talking about, that we don't make much of a distinction.

They talk of both the camps as two extremist camps, and the success of Nehruvian liberalism according to many of these writers is that these "extremist" forms do not find space in Indian democracy. They grow but they immediately get moderated. Let me quote Khilnani on this, he says "...liberalism is committed to discovering the truth but it knows this to be a slow project. Today's battles, in the home and in the street, in the courts and in the legislatures, through the ballot and in the media, over the rights of women, sexual liberty, free speech, education, these are not signs of a death of liberalism. They speak of a society animated by its principles and its promises. If still, in spite of its institutional capacities and practices that can secure those promises. There will be detours ahead but the terrain on which we build are those unmistakably opened by Nehru." (Khilnani, 2014). I further quote him on this: "In choosing to make development and governance the criterion by which to judge the performance, the BJP is issuing a threat to become a party just like any other. To be judged by standards that any party in a liberal democratic system would accept. Its old dream of creating a master cleavage that could bring the majority over to its side is shattered. It must play a game of liberal democratic electoral politics, eking out support on the margins." (Ibid). In many senses, this has been a kind of dominant narrative of Nehruvian scholars that a huge success of Nehru actually has been that his model of liberalism does not only always succeed in arresting 'extremist' mobilizations, mostly of the right wing, but they also include within the same ambit left wing 'extremism'.

But the question that I would want to extend is, does Nehruvian centrism exhaust its political *effect* in arresting extremism of this kind; 'extremism' of the left wing and 'extremism' of the right wing. Is that the only consequence? and therefore do we need to only celebrate this kind of Nehruvian liberalism? I am trying to push this argument a little further and argue that perhaps Nehruvian centrism takes a different character

when we begin to observe Indian democracy in terms of its bottom-up mobilizations. What then would be the character of this centrism? It is true as Khilnani and even as Ashutosh Varshney argues that it is this kind of centrism that does not allow a certain kind of right wing extremism to grow but is that the only mode in which Nehruvian centrism works? If you look at the other end of the spectrum I would argue that perhaps this centrism is working itself around us all the time and its effects are manifest all around us most of the time. We need only to trace it back to the way it has worked itself from the Nehruvian period. And I can trace any number of political phenomenons but let me take a few representative cases to actually argue that how does one look at some of this political phenomenon.

Emergence of caste-based parties in India has been a highly influential phenomenon and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) stands out as one test case, and when BSP began its mobilizations, a range of scholars said that it is the 'social revolution' that India was looking for. I think, Kancha Illaiah was one of the foremost who articulated this. But what has happened to BSP in course of time? It clearly shifted from its *Bahujan* agenda to what is referred to as its *Sarvajan* agenda. From an exclusive Dalit party it is now a party which is giving the highest number of tickets to Brahmins. I think in 1998 it gave up to 15 per cent, representing a new kind of *reverse social osmosis*. And this reverse social osmosis is undeniably a feature of the kind of centrism that I have been talking about; this centrism therefore does not work only in its top-down version but also in its bottom-up combination. Now how do we look at this kind of arrest that happens in terms of anti-caste movements? How do we analyse this new kind of alliance between Dalits and Brahmins? Or this kind of what I call the reverse social osmosis? I think there is a complex political process working itself there, but I leave it at that.

Similarly, consider the entire process of formation of smaller states in India in more recent times. We have shifted from linguistic reorganization of states based on language and culture to the development criterion. But what has been the nature of

these movements for smaller states? They have again had an undoubtable imprint of centrism. To begin with, none of these movements are based on class mobilization or politics. Telangana is a clear case example of where we have moved from demands such as land reforms to demands for equitable redistribution of water resources. So there is the longstanding issue of landlessness that completely gets sidelined. Second, the centrality of ‘bullock capitalists’ that Rudolphs had written about gets manifested in the rise of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) at the height of the Telangana movement who in fact formed the backbone of the movement for a separate state. A third feature which the Rudolphs point out and which we can find is the ideological agreement on Telangana—across political formations from the BJP to the Maoists, which is something unique to India. And this is again, I would argue, the residual effect of Nehruvian centrism. We revisit Nehruvian centrism time and again in Indian politics. It may take different forms, the demands may take different forms but one cannot somehow succeed bypassing or circumventing it.

My third representative case is the emergence of anti-corruption movements across India, whether it is JP movement or the more recent Anna Hazare phenomenon. Anna Hazare is a classical occurrence of an uncanny combination of participatory ethos with a very centralized institution. And this is the core character of Nehruvian centrism. It is a combination of a deeply anti-political rhetoric which is based on the separation between the social, the moral from the political domains and it is this tension that goes on in the Anna Hazare movement—one between this social-cultural domain and the political-representative domain. This tension in Indian politics is again a kind of a *new form* that Chatterjee’s last ‘substantial attempt’ of top-down bureaucratic methods take. According to Chatterjee’s argument the Emergency was the last point of top-down methods in Indian politics. I think that one would disagree with that. Instead I think that we revisit that top-down governmental mechanisms in a different form in the Anna Hazare movement. This attempted separation between the social, the moral, and the political represents precisely that divide which Chatterjee was talking of

during the Emergency time. We have perhaps actually not seen the last of it and my point would be that we are seeing that in different forms in contemporary Indian politics and Anna Hazare movement is a classic example of how we revisit that in a separation of the *socio-cultural on the one hand and the political-representative on the other hand*.

The same kind of dualism is visible in the recent rise of the ‘Modi phenomenon’. One needs to only take a look at the nature of the campaign and the kind of balancing act between issues in order to make sense of the renewed and continued effects of centrism in Indian politics. On the one hand, Modi campaign was based on a pitch to move beyond old kind of constituency/identity-based fragmented politics to a new kind of politics based on development and governance. In this ostensible conflict between *governance* and *identity politics* the BJP had claimed that it was moving beyond divisive caste politics—*sab ka saath, sab ka vikas* (participation by all for development for all), even as the entire campaign in Bihar was based on referring to Mr. Modi’s OBC status. Mr. Modi himself claimed in Kerala that he belonged to the “Dalit family”; it is for this “family” that he wishes to do something if he takes the reins—he had said. He shared the dais with Baba Ramdev, again a silent gesture toward combining OBC politics with Hindutva. Even as the BJP’s manifesto did not mention its support for reservations and instead promised to move toward “equal opportunity,” it is believed that a constitutional provision of reservations is mere “tokenism.” Mr. Modi did not reveal which sub-caste he actually belonged to; instead he claimed to represent all the poor in India. He claimed to be a “*chaiwallah*” (tea seller) who rose through sheer determination unlike the “*shehzada*” (prince) of the Congress. This resort to identity, while laying a claim to a new kind of politics, represents the uncanny ability to combine evidently *self-contradictory* processes in Indian politics (Gudavarthy, 2014).

My final point is that we are also witnessing as a result of Nehruvian centrism a huge spurt in *intra-subaltern conflict*. Increasing conflict between the subaltern groups, and not between



elite and subaltern groups, which is why *Subaltern Studies* has already receded and Partha Chatterjee has already written its obituary. What we are witnessing is a massive, unprecedented expansion of intra-subaltern conflicts. Conflicts between OBCs and Muslims—Muzaffarnagar is a clear case of that; OBCs and Dalits—Khairlanji is a clear example of that; Dalit sub-caste conflict in Andhra Pradesh; conflicts between the SCs and STs—Odisha is a clear case of that, between *Pannos* and *Kandhas*; and there are any number of examples one might cite in order to elaborate this point on intra-subaltern conflicts. And this expansion of the conflict is one of the by-products, perhaps the central products of the kind of centrism that Indian democracy has followed. So one of the impacts of the Nehruvian legacy would be that we are gradually ending up towards, leaning towards, moving towards a new kind of right leaning centrism in contemporary Indian democracy. How much of this has been the gift of Nehruvian centrism is a question open to further historical scrutiny.

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