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+91 99405 72462



+9163819 07438



ijmrsetm@gmail.com



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Gandhian Influence on Nehru

Dr. Irsad Ali Khan

Associate Professor, Political Science, Government Bangur College, Didwana, India

ABSTRACT: Gandhi & Nehru: poles apart but they transformed each other and the freedom struggle

Correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru reveal a complex, nuanced relationship. They differed with each other sharply but also influenced each other greatly.

The American journalist Louis Fischer, after conducting extensive interviews with both Gandhi and Jinnah, noticed an importance difference in their responses to questions that were put to them. Putting a question to Jinnah was like asking a phonogram. His answers were so fixed that they could almost be pre-recorded. The answers were not likely to be different, no matter how many times the question was put to him.

But with Gandhi, asking a question was akin to starting a creative process. Gandhi's initial response was like the draft of a book in the process of being written. Thinking and speaking happened simultaneously. Soon Gandhi would also incorporate the response of the questioner into his answer. The answer would thus keep getting modified and develop as the dialogue went on.

Nowhere is this trend more conspicuous than in Gandhi-Nehru encounters stretching over three decades. No two leaders of the freedom struggle were so different from each other, and also so intimately connected to each other, as were Gandhi and Nehru. Superficially it would appear that the two were poles apart. There could be hardly anything in common between Nehru, with his Marxism, universalism and focus on modern science and technology and Gandhi with his spinning wheel, evening prayers and inner voice. Yet there existed an extremely deep bond between them which often helped to tide over an otherwise extremely stormy and contentious political relationship.

There is a fairly widespread and popular picture of the nature of relationship between Gandhi and Nehru. It is that of Nehru being patronised and pampered by Gandhi, Nehru needing Gandhi to establish him in Indian politics and Gandhi finally propping Nehru to the helm of Indian politics in independent India.

During the course of the freedom struggle, there was another image of a young and radical Nehru rebelling against Gandhi and developing as a rival to him. This image of the two representing two different and rival strands in the freedom struggle was dispelled by Gandhi himself when he wrote in 1936: "Are we rivals? I cannot think of myself as a rival to Jawaharlal or him to me. Or, if we are, we are rivals in our love for each other in the pursuit of the common goal." In 1942, Gandhi declared that Nehru would be his political heir.

However the image of an opportunist Nehru using Gandhi as a crutch to make it to the top has been much more enduring in independent India. Of late it has gained some momentum. This image also fits in with a climate in which Nehru-bashing has become the order of day. It is therefore necessary to highlight the multiple dimensions of their relationship and bring out its true essence.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, Nehru, freedom, struggle, independent, momentum, goal, rebelling, relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

There are broadly speaking three dimensions to this relationship. First, it followed the classical Hegelian pattern in which a thesis encountered an anti-thesis and the two culminated into the synthesis. Secondly, through a process of criticism and mutual correction, they were able to restrain each other and, in the process, shape each other's political universe. And thirdly, cumulatively and together, the two transformed the struggle for independence and also created the blueprint for India's social transformation along modern lines. The examples of the three kinds can be easily found in their interactions and correspondence with each other and also in their political activities. Nehru started his political career as a self-proclaimed follower of Gandhi. He met Gandhi in 1916 and soon came under his spell. In particular the programme of non-cooperation with the British really appealed powerfully to Nehru and he jumped at it. Nehru was



“simply bowled over by Gandhi straight off”. He threw in his lot with Gandhi without thinking of any consequences.[1,2]

A visit to Europe and the USSR in 1927 radicalised Nehru’s politics and he began to show signs of impatience with what he considered to be a slow pace with which the national movement was proceeding. He wanted Congress to emphatically declare in favour of complete independence instead of a mere ‘Swaraj’ or self-rule.

Nehru also wanted to integrate India’s struggle against British imperialism with the global struggle against imperialism and colonialism in general. This was really a big leap forward in India’s freedom struggle as it stood in 1927. Nehru decided to give full expression to his new ideological worldview and he persuaded the Congress at its Madras session to pass a resolution in favour of complete independence. Nehru also denounced feudalism and capitalism and talked of mobilising workers, peasants and students.

This was a new language for the Congress and brought Nehru into his first major confrontation with Gandhi, who totally disapproved of the new ideological flavor within the Congress. He called the resolution for complete independence “hastily conceived and thoughtlessly passed.” This was the first expression of Gandhi’s open disapproval of Nehru’s language and politics.

He also followed it with a warning to Nehru in a letter: “You are going too fast, you should have taken time to think and become acclimatised. Most of the resolutions you prepared and got carried could have been delayed for one year. Your plunging ...was a hasty step. But I do not mind these acts of yours so much as I mind your encouraging mischief-mongers and hooligansIf careful observation of the country in the light of your European experiences convinces you of the errors of the current ways and means, by all means enforce your own views, but do please form a disciplined party.”[3,4]

The reprimand from Gandhi brought a sharp reaction from Nehru. In his reply, Nehru wrote that Gandhi’s response to the Congress resolutions was “wholly unjustified.” He also alleged that if the Congress did not declare complete independence as its goal earlier, it was largely because of Gandhi’s restraining influence. “I hope you will agree with me that it is not healthy politics for any organisation to subordinate its own definite opinion on a public issue out of personal regard only.”

Nehru then added in the same letter: “...you chastise us like an angry school master, but a school master who will not guide us or give us lessons but will only point out from time to time the error of our ways.” Nehru also expressed his full disagreement with Gandhi’s ideas in his book *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909. “I have often felt how different my ideas were from yours. And I have felt that you were very hasty in your judgements, or rather having arrived at certain conclusions you were over eager to justify them by any scrap of evidence you might get.... You misjudge greatly I think the civilisation of the West and attach too great an importance to its many failings. You have stated somewhere that India has nothing to learn from the West and that she has reached a pinnacle of wisdom in the past. I entirely disagree with this viewpoint and I neither think that the so called Ram Raj was very good in the past, nor do I want it back.”

It was a long letter in which Nehru emphasised all those points where he fundamentally disagreed with Gandhi and disapproved of his ideas.[5,6]

Gandhi’s reply to this letter was brief but carried a ring of finality: “Though I was beginning to detect some differences in viewpoint between you and me, I had no notion whatsoever of the terrible extent of these differences.... I see quite clearly that you must carry an open warfare against me and my views. For, if I am wrong I am evidently doing irreparable harm to the country and it is your duty after having known it to rise in revolt against me.... The differences between you and me appear to me to be so vast and radical that there seems to be no meeting ground between us. I can’t conceal from you my grief that I should lose a comrade so valiant, so faithful, so able and so honest as you have always been; but in serving a cause, comradeships have got to be sacrificed. The cause must be held superior to all such considerations.” Gandhi then suggested that their correspondence, containing all the differences, should be published so that the people know where the two leaders stand vis-à-vis each other on most political issues.

Nehru in the meanwhile may have realised that he had overstated their differences and that it was still possible for them to work together. He had in the same letter written that Gandhi was infinitely greater than all his little books and ideas



and that Gandhi's importance lay primarily in his "action and daring and courage". Gandhi's suggestion of making their difference public carried a possibility of political separation of the two leaders. This possibility clearly disturbed Nehru.

He replied back: "Your letter came as a bitter shock and was painful reading. Painful because with relentless logic you had contemplated certain eventualities which I had not considered possible or even thought of in their entirety....No one has moved me and inspired me more than you and I can never forget your exceeding kindness to me. There can be no question of our personal relations suffering. But even in the wider sphere am I not your child in politics, though perhaps a truant and errant child?"

Thus came to an end their first major encounter. [7,8]It would appear to everyone that this encounter culminated in Nehru's complete surrender to Gandhi. Indeed if the march of events could be halted at this point, it would seem that Nehru gave in to Gandhi and his reservations about any radical action.

However in a year's time, Gandhi insisted on Nehru being made the president of the Congress at its Lahore session in 1929. Nehru insisted on Congress declaring complete independence as its goal. This time Gandhi backed him fully and served an ultimatum to the British government. He followed it up with his famous Dandi March in 1930 and the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Soon both the leaders were in separate jails and Nehru, obviously thrilled with the new atmosphere of struggle, wrote to Gandhi: "May I congratulate you on the new India you have created by your magic touch! What the future brings I know not, but the past has made life worth living and our prosaic existence has developed something of the epic greatness in it."

So who won this round of the encounter? Basically Nehru triggered in Gandhi a creative process of dialogue and introspection. A thesis met its anti-thesis and flowed into the synthesis of complete independence. The real gainer of this encounter was Indian nationalism and the struggle for freedom.[9,10]

II. DISCUSSION

Quite apart from arriving at a synthesis through mutual conflict, the two also restrained each other and in the process enriched each other's politics. Nehru's commitment to Marxism and a great resolve to transform the Congress in a Socialist direction during the early 1930s brought him into a serious conflict with Right wing Congress leaders such as Patel and Rajendra Prasad, and threatened to split the entire movement into two. This developed into a serious crisis within Congress.

Nehru was aware of it but did not seem to mind taking the crisis to its logical culmination, i.e. a split in Congress and in the national movement. Gandhi too was aware of it but approached it differently. He decided to put the crisis itself to a test by making Nehru the president of the Congress in 1936, with the majority of the Working Committee members against him. Nehru decided to use his new position as an opportunity to preach both socialism and class war from the Congress platform.

This antagonised the Right wing members of the Congress Working Committee and seven of its members resigned, refusing to work under Nehru. Nehru too appeared inclined to put in his resignation. The national movement was thus plunged into a deep crisis and stood on the verge of a split. Gandhi, who had been watching these developments, decided to intervene and he did it by restraining Nehru.[11,12]

He wrote in a letter explaining the real significance of Nehru being the Congress president: "You are in office... but you are not in power yet. To put you in office was an attempt to put you in power, quicker than you would otherwise have been. Anyway that was at the back of my mind when I suggested your name for the crown of thorns [Congress president ship]. Keep it on though the head be bruised."

Gandhi urged the other members to take back their resignations and insisted on Nehru to carry along with him the dissenting voices within the Congress. From this point onwards, Nehru developed a remarkably accommodating spirit in always highlighting the common consensual areas among vastly differing personalities. The stress on this common baseline consensus made it possible for leaders as divergent as Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad



and Rajagopalachari to work together, even while retaining their differences. Nehru was restrained by Gandhi, and restrained for good.

Gandhi's politics too was influenced by Nehru in many ways. Nehru imparted some new dimensions to Gandhi's politics. For instance Gandhi had never shown much enthusiasm for constitutional matters. This was understandable given Gandhi's antipathy towards formal structures of power. He had all his reservations about the Swaraj party which had been formed in 1924 to extend the national movement into the legislative bodies.

He was also not very enthusiastic about the Nehru Report, a proposed constitution for India drafted in 1928 by Motilal Nehru and Tej Bahadur Sapru, as the Indian response to the Simon Commission. In his Hind Swaraj, Gandhi had used some very harsh words for parliaments in general. He had likened parliament to a "prostitute and a sterile woman".[13,14]

However in the 1930s, Gandhi developed a great inclination for constitutional matters. He began to argue for a great need of a constitution for India to be prepared by a duly elected Constituent Assembly. Such was his enthusiasm for a Constituent Assembly that, in an interesting debate with Nehru, he argued that the task of the Constituent Assembly need not wait for independence and can actually precede it. Later Gandhi admitted that he had been converted into a great votary of the constitutional matters largely because of his interactions with Nehru. He called Nehru his general guide in all such matters.

The two leaders were not simply transforming the national movement; they were transforming each other too. Gandhi had declared in Hind Swaraj that Indian society had reached near perfection in the past and did not need to learn anything from the West. This was obviously a very blinkered view. However three decades later, when Nehru organised the Asian Conference in March 1947, Gandhi made the most remarkable speech.

He said that he would refuse to live in a world that was not one. He urged all members of the Asian Conference to work together to bring about such a world. From a blinkered Indian isolationism to a most profound universalism was a great journey for Gandhi. There is no doubt that Nehru played an important role in this journey.[15,16]

Nehru too went through many such transformations in which Gandhi's influence was quite indelible. Of particular relevance was the change in his attitude to religion. In the 1920s and 30s Nehru equated religion with irrationality, superstition and intolerance. Deeply disturbed by the emergence of communal politics in the 1920s, Nehru saw religion as a major social problem.

In a letter, written in 1926, Nehru argued that the only solution to the Hindu-Muslim problem was to "scotch our so called religion.... How long that will take I cannot say but religion in India will kill that country and its people if not subdued." However, he developed a more complex and nuanced position on religion and its role in social life, particularly after 1947.

On the one hand Nehru looked at religion as "blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interests." But, on the other hand, he also saw it as a moral force "which supplied a deep inner craving of human beings ...[and] which has brought peace and comfort to innumerable tortured souls." Gandhi's stamp was very clear in this change in Nehru's perspective. It is clear that the two leaders brought about the most important transformations in each other's politics.

The relationship between Gandhi and Nehru was multi-dimensional. At a personal level, it was marked by a deep love and mutual admiration. At a political level, the two leaders restrained, shaped, modified and corrected each other in a long process of dialogue, debate and working together. Both of them together transformed India's struggle for freedom and played their part in creating a blueprint for the future of India.

All this could become possible because the two understood each other very well and their insights about each other carried deep and profound social and psychological dimensions. Perhaps it would be true to say that nobody else in politics understood Nehru better than Gandhi did. And certainly nobody else understood Gandhi as well as Nehru did.[17,18]



It is therefore not surprising that after Gandhi died, the most evocative and profound commentary came from Nehru: "As he grew older, his body seemed to be just a vehicle for the mighty spirit within him. Almost one forgot the body as one listened to him or looked at him, and so where he sat became a temple and where he trod was hallowed ground."

III. RESULTS

Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru shaped the destiny of India and of Indians thereof. One cannot think of India without 'Bapu' and 'Chacha Nehru'. They became natural leaders of India by sheer hard work, honesty, pristineness of thoughts, purity, readiness to work for the mother land and its people to set example for others to follow. They were iconic personalities who derived legacy through their creativeness, thought, action, deed and ethical behaviour. Gandhi said that 'My life is my message.' Similarly, for Nehru: 'Aaraam is Haraam.'

In pre independence India, Gandhi - being an undisputed leader - dominated the freedom struggle. Contrary in post-independent India, Nehru being the first Prime Minister built everything from scratch. Jawaharlal Nehru built India brick-by-brick and laid strong foundation of a strong parliamentary democracy and all modern institutions and system of governance. When we talk about New India, strong India, self-reliant India, Make-in India, we must not forget that its foundation was led by Nehru. Today, we proudly call India self-sufficient in food, a vibrant democracy, a secular and emerging super power. We are nuclear power, space power and what not! Credit goes to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and his vision for India.[19,20]

Sacrifice of Gandhi and Nehru for the cause of country and people is unparalleled in Indian history. We can criticize, romanticize Gandhi and Nehru which is natural due to ideological differences. But we must remember that we cannot afford to ignore their sacrifice and contribution. Gandhi and Nehru must be seen in 'Text' and 'Context'. They were close associates and derived strength from each other. They were responding to contemporary challenges but its impact was everlasting. India was in their blood and deed. They dedicated their lives to Her liberation and cause.

Gandhi and Nehru met, for the first time, during Lucknow Congress during Christmas, 1916. In due course of time, Nehru became a true follower of Gandhi. Not a blind one. Nehru wrote about Gandhi in An Autobiography - "What a wonderful man was Gandhiji after all, with his amazing and almost irresistible charm and subtle power over people. His writings and his sayings conveyed little enough impression of the man behind; his personality was far bigger than they would lead one to think. And his service to India, how vast they had been. He had instilled courage and manhood in her people, and discipline and endurance, and the power of joyful sacrifice for a cause, and, with all his humility, pride. Courage is the one sure foundation of character, he had said; without courage there is no morality, no religion, no love. One cannot follow truth or love so long as one is subject to fear." With all his horror of violence, he had told us that "Cowardice is a thing even more hateful than violence." And "Discipline is the pledge and guarantee that a man means business. There is no deliverance and no hope without sacrifice, discipline, and self-control. Mere sacrifice without discipline will be unavailing." Words only and pious phrases perhaps, rather platitudinous, but there was power behind the words, and India knew that this little man meant business."

Further Nehru wrote: "He came to represent India to an amazing degree and to express the very spirit of that ancient and tortured land. Almost he was India, and his very failings were Indian failings. A slight to him was hardly a personal matter, it was an insult to the nation..."[21,22]

Nehru himself admitted in The Discovery of India that "Some kind of ethical approach to life has a strong appeal for me, though it would be difficult for me to justify logically. I have been attracted by Gandhiji's stress on right means and I think one of his greatest contributions to our public life has been this emphasis. The idea is by no means new, but this application of an ethical doctrine to large-scale public activity was certainly novel. It is full of difficulty, and perhaps ends and means are not really separable but form-please check together one organic whole."

Gandhi and Nehru shared a rare bond of love, affection and understanding of each other's thought and action. Both had a deep understanding of Indian culture and civilization and also a deep sense of history. To understand Gandhi and Nehru, we have to be objective and analytical but at the same time synergic, interdisciplinary and holistic. Unfortunately, we are trained to be specialists; we see the parts but not the whole. But if everything is related to



everything else, and nothing stands apart, knowing the part alone would lead to knowing the whole. Universe is a system of which the solar system is a subsystem; in the solar system, the earth is a sub-system; in the earth as a system, lithosphere, hydrosphere, ionosphere, atmosphere and biosphere are sub-systems; in the biosphere, human species form a sub-system; in the human species each family and individual forms a subsystem. This being the case, to understand even an individual in full, we have to treat him as a part of the whole universe. True that he is more closely related to the systems nearer to him but he is influenced and also influences by his thoughts and deeds not only his fellow human beings, but also all that which surrounds him, nature included. All that we do has its implication far wider than we realize. Real Gandhi and Nehru are men of systems and unless we see them that way, we cannot understand them.

Firstly, both Gandhi and Nehru had firm faith in freedom and democratic values. Secondly, Gandhi and Nehru both studied in England and had a liberal outlook. Gandhi spent 21 years in South Africa which give him an experience of how to fight non-violently with the mighty British Empire. [23,24] Both Gandhi and Nehru travelled widely and their long stays in England had a direct impact on their thinking. Thirdly, Gandhi and Nehru by birth were both Hindu by birth. But they were secular in public and private life. Fourthly, Gandhi and Nehru never lived a life of duality. They never had any mask. They were 'Karmayogis' inside-out. Fifthly, Gandhi and Nehru both had a deep understanding of Indian History and Culture. Gandhi used ancient wisdom in modern context wisely. He wrote 'Indian Home Rule' (Hind Swaraj), 'An Autobiography or My Experiment with Truth' and 'Satyagraha in South Africa'. These three books are essential to understand Gandhi. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru's three classic-'Glimpses of world History', 'An autobiography' and the 'Discovery of India'- remain essential readings for understanding his ideas. No Prime Minister of any country wrote like Nehru. Finally, both derived power from masses. They inspired masses and masses inspired them. They connected themselves with masses. They became their natural leaders. Both will be remembered till eternity.

Gandhi had a firm faith that Jawaharlal Nehru would speak when Gandhi was no more. After going through words and deeds of Nehru, one can draw a conclusion that in every sense Nehru was a true Gandhian. He had an idea of India and Indians. The credit of whatever fruit of development we are enjoying today goes to Nehru. He laid the foundation of Modern India. It is because of him today that we have a vibrant democracy, an independent Election Commission and Judiciary. Nehru gave us AIIMs, IITs, IIMs, Bhakra-Nangal Dam, Hirakund, BARC, Indian Space Programme, BHEL, Steel Plants and other industrial complexes which are essential for development of a newly independent country like India. We, the educated people and Gandhians, [25,26] who are basically anti-Gandhi in their thought, action and deed create a watertight compartment between Gandhi and Nehru. One must read Nehru's first speech which he gave after getting freedom from the yoke of British Empire. Every word carries meaning and vision for future, what he wanted to do for India and Indians. Nehru fulfilled the dream of Bapu. Methods might have been different but every action of Nehru was Gandhian - keeping the aspirations of people of newly independent country at the centre. Gandhi rightly said about Nehru on April 1, 1947, at a Prayer meeting that 'By the grace of God, we have a gem of man in our midst who wants to embrace the whole world. Should we not maintain peace if only to honour him?'

One can see Gandhi in Nehru and Nehru in Gandhi. Today, we have forgotten Gandhi and Nehru. They stood for self-respect, honesty, integrity and self-esteem of individual and believed in the system of governance. My lifelong mission is to promote Gandhian and Nehruvian values in the whole world. One cannot create history by changing the names of institutions created by Nehru. Nehru is Nehru, the creator of secular, democratic and vibrant India. [27,28]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Indian economic liberals may find both M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru wanting vis-à-vis the ideology of economic liberalism. [29,30] But their story highlights a rich dialogue of ethics and dharma, responsibilities and rights, and the roles of individual, community and the state. There is a deep layer of disagreement between the two which reflects a clash of two civilizations—an Indian ethic reflected in Gandhi's thought versus a Western one that India's first prime minister had embraced. Socialism was a global fashion in the first half of the 20th century and was even stronger in the British Commonwealth than in other parts of the world. Much of India's leadership was already sold on to some variant by the 1930s, more so its intellectual leaders, be they Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Abul Kalam Azad or even Subhas Chandra Bose. This large-scale embrace by the Congress leadership was not a post-independence phenomenon when



Nehru had unbridled leadership. And so India must stop blaming him for the socio-economic losses sustained due to state control of the economy for much of post-independence years. We must stop blaming Nehru because they would have occurred anyway, with or without him. Newly independent India needed to be delivered from its tattered past marked by colonial and feudalistic exploitation and humiliation.[31,32] In Nehru's modernity, India saw an ability to negotiate confidently with both, the regressive forces internally and oppressive forces externally. Whether it was reservations, large industry, planning or the Non Aligned Movement, both modernity and state intervention went hand-in hand. So a socialist state is not Nehru's gift to India, but what is, is the notion that socialism and the state are unsurpassed tools of making a tired, exploited and humiliated people into a modern, self-confident, progressive nation. That notion has unfortunately not gone away whatever economic policies governments of today may profess.[33,34] Gandhi was without doubt a resolute figure less taken in by the intellectual fashions of the day. His instincts derived his own sense of the self and an inherent dislike of use of force by the state. It was not socialism that Gandhi disliked, but the use of force by the state that socialism demanded. Others such as Vallabhbhai Patel, C. Rajagopalachari and Rajendra Prasad were also less taken in by socialist ideals prevalent then, being more steeped in realities of India than untested intellectualism. But they did not have the wrapping of modernity nor the ability to counter Nehru. With Gandhi's death, India lost its strongest voice for intellectual autonomy and a deep faith in individualism. But his sense of individualism was not the same as understood in Western traditions of economic thought. For him, individual ethics and morality were a key precondition. In Gandhi's missives to Nehru, and the latter's silent response, we can decipher a deep silent dialogue between the two.[35,36] The core of this silent debate has to do with the importance of personal morality and the creation of a social milieu that supports such behaviour. Today, it may be considered to be an impossible objective but Gandhi's vision was predominantly that. All other elements—swadeshi, swaraj, Khadi, panchayati raj, enlightened anarchy, etc.—were rooted in this element. A key element of his thought rested around swadharma or individual responsibility.[37]

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+91 99405 72462



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ijmrsetm@gmail.com

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