

Indian Political Science Association

NEHRU AND SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA (1920-47)

Author(s): C. P. Bhambhri and C. P. Bhamberi

Source: *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April-June 1969), pp. 130-148

Published by: [Indian Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41854319>

Accessed: 25/06/2014 01:58

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Indian Political Science Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Indian Journal of Political Science*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

NEHRU AND SOCIALIST MOVEMENT IN INDIA (1920-47)

By

C.P. BHAMBHRI*

During India's freedom struggle, a serious debate was going on in the country about the goal and purpose of freedom and on what should be the social and economic content of political independence. In this debate two important leaders of the movement, Gandhi and Nehru, found themselves poles apart, and made serious attempts to sell their respective ideas to the nation. The effort of these two leaders to provide an ideological content to the national freedom in the form of competitive alternatives, and the resultant clashes and conflicts in which many other important personalities were also involved, showed the desire of the Indian elite to define the picture of future India when they would be called upon to 'build' after the British had left. One ideologue of the national movement, Nehru, wanted the country to accept the goal of socialism for free India. In his numerous writings and speeches, Nehru declared himself to be a socialist. At the Lahore Session of the Congress (December 1929) in his Presidential address, Nehru said :

I must frankly confess that I am a Socialist and a republican,... we must realise that the philosophy of Socialism has permeated the entire structure of society the world over, and almost the only points in dispute are the pace and the methods of advance to its full realization. India will have to go that way too, if she seeks to end her poverty and inequality, though she may evolve her own methods and may adapt the ideal to the genius of her race.¹

He restated his position in *Whither India* :

India's immediate goal can, therefore, only be considered in terms of the ending of the exploitation of her people. Politically, it must mean independence and the severance of the British connection, which means imperialist domination ; economically and socially it must mean the ending of all special class privileges and vested interests. The whole world is strug-

* Reader in the Department of Political Science, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

1. Presidential Address to the National Congress, Lahore, December 1929, Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Freedom*, (Unwin Books, London, 1962) p. 14.

gling to this end ; India can do no less, and in this way the Indian struggle for freedom lines up with the world struggle.²

If socialism was so important to Nehru, what did he do in making the national movement accept it ? Did he succeed in his efforts ? Further, what was his attitude towards other organized socialist parties in India in the pre independence period viz. the Communist Party of India and the Congress Socialist Party ? A question may be raised here : why this attempt to interpret the events of such a stormy period of India's history i.e. 1920 to 1947 with reference to the role and contribution of one individual, i.e. Nehru ? The answer is : Nehru was the focus of socialist ideas in India in this period, and the youth of the country looked towards him for inspiration and guidance. Moreover, from the thirties, Indian national movement worked under a 'Coalitional leadership' of Gandhi and Nehru. Nehru occupied a pivotal position in this era. Hence it is worthwhile to keep him in the centre and interpret the events of this period and evaluate his response to the resurgence in India.

I

SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION

Before discussing Nehru's role in building socialist movement in the country, it is worthwhile to refer to the socio-political situation prevailing in the country at the time of World War I. This was a period of great ferment for India. On the international scene the first Socialist Revolution of the world, the Russian revolution, had far-reaching influence and repercussions. India could not remain aloof of or immune to the tremors created by the October Revolution of 1917. The Indian intelligentsia was attracted towards events in Russia ; and in spite of the policy of British government, a great deal of smuggled literature from Soviet Russia flowed into this country which was read with keen interest.³ Even the official *Report on Indian Constitutional Reform* (1918) had to admit the great impact that the October Revolution was having on India's political atmosphere. It said :

The Revolution in Russia and its beginning was regarded in India as a triumph over despotism. It has given an impetus to Indian political aspirations.⁴

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. Writing about the principles of national self-determination propounded by the Soviet leaders, K.M. Pannikar remarks : "This was indeed an explosive statement and all the nations of Asia, struggling for freedom, heard it with a new hope". *Asia and Western Dominance*, p. 250.

4. Quoted in Zafar Imam, "The Effects of the Russian Revolution on India 1917-19", in S.N. Mukherjee (ed), *The Movement for National Freedom in India*, (St. Anthony's Papers No. 18, South Asian Series, Oxford, 1966) p. 75.

Within the country also, the national movement was becoming more active and aggressive. The policy of 'mendicancy', of appeals, prayers and petitions had been rejected, and the 'father of Indian unrest', Bal Gangadhar Tilak, had created a new atmosphere in the country. The result was that the loyalists became non-cooperators, and national movement under Gandhian leadership became a mass movement for the struggle against imperialism. Writing about this new phase, R. Palme Dutt states :

The new programme and policy inaugurated by Gandhi marked a giant's advance for the national Congress. The Congress now stood out as a political party leading the masses in struggle against the government for the realization of national freedom. From this point the National Congress won its position as the central focus of the national movement.⁵

Working class movement, peasant's no-tax campaign of Bardoli in 1922, organization of Trade Unions and strikes and the Kanpur Conspiracy Trial of 1924 were all the symbols of a new wind of radicalism that was blowing in India. During the period of the First World War (1914-18), industrial development took place at a rapid rate in the country. Its result was growth in the activities of the Indian capitalists, and political consciousness in the Indian working class. This fact (new role of the Indian working class) is described in the Report of the Whitley Commission as follows :

Prior to the winter of 1918-19 a strike was a rare occurrence in Indian industry. The end of the war saw an immediate change. There were some important strikes in the cold weather of 1918-19 ; they were more numerous in the following winter, and in the winter of 1920-21, industrial strikes became almost general in organized industry. The main cause was the realization of the potentialities of the strike in the existing situation and this was assisted by the emergence of the trade union organizers, by the education which the war had given to the masses, and by the scarcity of labour arising from the expansion of industry, and aggravated by the great epidemics of influenza.⁶

The first attempt to form a trade union organization was made by B.P. Wadia who formed the Madras Labour Union among the textile workers of the Mills of Collai, Madras on April 21, 1918. Its main demands were : (a) Mid-day recess of 40 minutes, (b) wage increase by 25 per cent, (c) better treatment to workers by European officers, and

5. R. Palme Dutt, *India Today and Tomorrow*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1955, p. 139.

6. Quoted by Joan Beauchamp, *British Imperialism in India* (1935) p. 135.

(d) payment of wages on the 7th of the month. In a short time, trade unions were formed in important industrial centres of Bombay, Ahmedabad, Calcutta and Kanpur.

The most important activity in Trade Union field was the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1920 as a result of the efforts of N.M. Joshi, Lala Rajpat Rai and Joseph Baptista. Its first session, under the Presidentship of Lala Lajpat Rai, was held in Bombay in October 1920. In 1920, about 60 unions were affiliated to the central body, and about 62 expressed their intention of supporting it. Thus in 20's temper of the people was undergoing radical change, and the socialist ideas were catching the imagination of the sensitive people in India. S.A. Dange started an English weekly, called '*The Socialist*' in Bombay in 1923.

II

NEHRU AND INDIAN COMMUNISTS

Peasant unrest and trade union activities of this period had their impact on the working of the national Congress, and also found concrete expression in the establishment of the first organized socialist party of India, i.e. the Communist Party. For evaluating the role of Nehru in building socialist movement in India, it is essential to know his relationship and attitude towards the Indian Communists. In 1920, some Indians had left on *hijrat*⁷ and at Tashkent at the end of 1920, they set up the emigre Communist Party of India. Attempts to organize Communist Party in India in 1921 met with great repression by the British. The Peshawar conspiracy case (1922-23), the Kanpur Bolshevik or (Communist) conspiracy case (1924) and later the Meerut Communist conspiracy case (1929) were attempts by the British government to suppress the Communist movement in India. The Communist Party of India (emigre) was affiliated to the Communist International in the first half of 1921. The Communist Party of India was established in the country formally on September 1, 1924. After the famous conspiracy cases, the British finally declared the party illegal and banned it in 1934. Besides their active work in the Trade Union Movement, the Communists were fighting for India's freedom in cooperation with the Left-wing of the Congress. The tactics and role of the CPI underwent many changes in the pre-independence period. Its programme of action, its attitude towards the Congress and its leaders, and the

7. '*Hijrat*' means leaving one's country in order to avoid continuous repression. The propagandists of *Hijrat* asserted that British tyranny could no longer be tolerated, and there was no other way than that of leaving the country. Refer to : Muzaffar Ahmad, *The Communist Party of India and its Formation Abroad* (National Book Agency Calcutta, 1962) p. 13.

directives given by the Communist International created situations owing to which the CPI could not run smoothly with the mainstream of the national movement. It occupied a predominant position in the Trade Union movement, but on the political front its successes were limited. India had a few industrial towns and the influence of the Communist Party was confined to the towns only.

Nehru's attitude towards Communism could be put thus : while he did not accept all the fundamentals of Marxism, he did believe that there were class antagonisms and exploitation of the workers and peasants by the property owners in a capitalist society. He also accepted that social organization on socialist principles was better than the exploitative capitalist social order. His assessment of Marx was :

Marx may be wrong in some of his statements...But he seems to me to have possessed quite an extra-ordinary degree of insight into social phenomenon, and this insight was apparently due to the scientific method he adopted.⁸

Nehru was influenced by Marx's scientific method, and later on came to admire the Russian system of economic planning. At an intellectual level, both Marx and Russian experiment impressed Nehru. In a letter to his daughter Nehru wrote :

The second wonder that the Soviet performed was to transform great parts of this area out of all recognition by prodigious schemes of planning. There is no instance in recorded history of such rapid advance of a people...The most notable advances have been in education and in industry. By vast Five-Year Plan the industrialization of Russia has been pushed on at a feverish pace and enormous factories have been set up.⁹

Nehru with all his admiration for Soviet planning did not accept the Communist way for his country. The reasons were his background, personality make-up, impact of Gandhian philosophy of means and his abhorrence to violence. Nehru was essentially a democrat and a liberal. He observed :

My roots are still, perhaps, partly in the nineteenth century, and I have been too much influenced by the humanist liberal tradition to get out of it completely. This bourgeois background follows me about.¹⁰

In a letter to Subhash Chandra Bose, he writes about himself in these words :

8. Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (Allied Publishers, Bombay, 1962), p. 591. (*Autobiography* hereinafter).

9. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History*, (Lindsay Drummond, London, 1949), p. 586.

10. *Autobiography*, p. 591.

I suppose I am temperamentally and by training an individualist and intellectually a socialist...I hope that socialism does not kill or suppress individuality ; indeed I am attracted to it because it will release innumerable individuals from economic and cultural bondage.¹¹

Thus, the background of Nehru, the impact of British education, and his personality make-up precluded him from joining hands with the Indian Communists. Further, he abhorred the methods of the Communists. When he attended the Brussels Congress of Oppressed Nationalities, held early in February 1927, and subsequent meetings of the League, he came into direct contact with the Communists, who were strong in the Congress. The impact of this experience on Nehru was of a 'mixed character'. About this experience he writes :

So I turned inevitably with goodwill towards Communism, for, whatever its faults, it was at least not hypocritical and not imperialistic...These attracted me, as also the tremendous changes taking place in Russia. But Communists often irritated me by their dictatorial ways, their aggressive and rather vulgar methods, their habit of denouncing everybody who did not agree with them.¹²

Another explanation for Nehru's not joining the Communists may be his own social background. He wrote about his politics and himself thus :

My politics had been those of my class, the bourgeoisie..... Indeed all vocal politics then (and to a great extent even now) were those of the middle classes.¹³

About himself he confessed :

I am a typical bourgeois, brought up in bourgeois surroundings, with all the early prejudices that this training has given me.¹⁴

The rough and tumble of Communist politics did not suit the temperament of Nehru. He was particularly bitter with the Indian Communists because of the latter's trenchant attacks on the Congress and Gandhi. Commenting on the Indian Communists he writes :

One of the reasons for the weakness in numbers as well as influence of the Communists in India is that, instead of spread-

11. Jawaharlal Nehru, *A Bunch of Old letters*, (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1960) p 363. (Hereinafter *A Bunch*).

12. *Autobiography*, p. 163.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 529.

ing a scientific knowledge of Communism and trying to convert people's minds to it, they have largely concentrated on abuse of others. This has reacted on them and done them great injury.¹⁵

He criticised the Indian Communists for the lack of scientific approach on their part and for taking refuge behind 'slogans' instead of ideas in politics. Moreover, the infant Communist movement was numerically not very strong. While on the other hand, Congress had a very broad mass base. Thus, the objective situation was that it was the Communists who needed moral support of the Congress or some place within that party and not *vice-versa*. Because the Communists movement was confined to some industrial areas, they did not attract much attention of the Congress leadership. It was not without reason that the Communists were always keen to have collaboration with the Leftists in the Congress party. As movements, the Congress and Communists were of "unequal standing". This also determined the attitude of the Congress leadership in general and Nehru in particular towards the Indian Communists. Comparing the two movements, he observed :

Communists in India have associated with the industrial workers of the big town. They have little knowledge of, or contact with, the rural areas. The industrial workers important as they are, and likely to be more so in the future, must take second place before the peasants, for the problem of today in India is the problem of the peasantry. Congress workers, on the other hand, have spread all over these rural areas and in the ordinary course the Congress must develop into a vast peasant organization.¹⁶

Nehru differed not only with the methods and approach of the Communists, he also criticised them for not having adapted the Communist ideology to the peculiar Indian conditions. On this Nehru was, however, sore with all Indian socialists, whether Communists or members of the Congress Socialist Party. Nehru believed that he himself was making an attempt to adapt this western concept of socialism to the Indian context. Nehru's mind was working in becoming a theoretician of something like 'Indian Socialism'. He admonished the Indian Communists for their blindly following the western concepts and literature and said :

I do believe that the philosophy of Communism helps us to understand and analyse existing conditions in any country, and further indicates the road to future progress. But it is doing violence and injustice to that philosophy to apply it blind-fold and without due regard to facts and conditions.¹⁷

15. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

Thus Nehru and the Communist Party of India were following two separate paths although deriving inspiration from the same source—Marxism. Their attitudes were also different. The Communists were critical of Nehru for, in their opinion, while he criticised Gandhism in theory, he in fact surrendered to it in practice. It was alleged that he had not developed an alternative ideology. This view was expressed by B.T. Ranadive when he said that Nehru's conflicts with old leaders were, "episodic in their character, transitory in their effect."¹⁸

To sum up, the relationship between the Communists and Nehru was based on basic differences, the reconciliation of which was difficult. The result was that they did not agree even on a minimum common programme of action.

III

NEHRU AND SOCIALISTS

Besides the Communists, another group of Socialists emerged within the Congress known as the Congress Socialist Party. It aimed at spreading socialist ideology in the country and strived to give socialist content to the objectives of the Congress. Immediate impetus for its birth came from the sense of despondency generated by the vacuum created by the decline of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932.

The official historian of the Congress writes :

...the apparent failure of the movement (Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-32) of non-violence leading to an accentuation of that attitude of arrogance and despotism in the rulers which for a while lay dormant gave an added impetus to the wavering beliefs of the young who were still on the border line. It was a cry of socialism all round amongst the youth of the country. Students' Federations, and Youth Leagues, became the order of the day. A regular party was carved out long called the Congress Socialist Party and began to function as an organized group within the Congress. There gradually rose a party called the Communist party which soon overwhelmed the former. The C.S.P. and C.P. became familiar terms...The C.S.P. soon lost wind and by 1940 almost disappeared leaving the field to the C.P. whose activities became marked during the second great war, and by the beginning of 1941. Government declared that they had detained as detenus 600 persons ; —a good number of whom were university students.¹⁹

18. B.T. Ranadive, "Crisis in National Leadership", *Congress Socialist* (25 April, 1936).

19. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. II (1935-47) (Padam Publications Bombay 1947) p. 7. Also refer to M.R. Dandavata: (*Evolution of Socialist Policies and Perspectives ; 1934-64*, (Loka Mitra Publications, Bombay, 1964).

In Nasik Jail (1932-33) the convicts of the Civil Disobedience Movement like Jaya Prakash Narain, Achyut Patwardhan, Asoka Mehta, Yusuf Meharally, N.G. Gore, S.M. Joshi and others discussed the problems of Indian society, and projected the idea of creating a national "Congress Socialist Party." On May 17, 1934, the First All-India Conference of Socialists was held in Patna under the Chairmanship of Acharya Narendra Dev. Another Conference was held on October 21-22, 1934 at Ready Money Terrace in Bombay and the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) was formally established with the following declared objective :

The complete independence of India is our goal and by complete independence we mean, India's liberation from British Imperialism and establishment of a Socialist Society.²⁰

The blueprint of the economic reconstruction adopted at the Conference advocated :

All power to the toiling masses, economic planning, nationalization of key industries, government's control over foreign trade, abolition of feudalism and landlordism without compensation, redistribution of land and co-operative and collective farming.

These Congress Socialists were opposed to the willingness of the Congress to participate in legislative activities in pre-independence period, and wanted the Congress to pursue a more revolutionary socialist policy in the economic field. Marxian influence was writ large on an important section of the CSP. At the second conference of the CSP, held at Meerut on January 20, 1936, a statement was issued by the party declaring that :

Marxism alone can guide the anti-imperialist forces to their ultimate destiny. Party members must, therefore, fully understand the technique of revolution, the theory and practice of class-struggle, the nature of the state and the processes leading to the socialist society.²¹

The CSP leadership also admired the achievements of Soviet Russia, and its party conference held at Lahore in 1938 hailed that country as "the only great power struggling for freedom and world peace." Not only this, the CSP believed in close collaboration with the Communist Party, and motivated by a genuine desire for "left consolidation" its annual conference held at Lahore in 1938, set its seal of approval on unity with the Communists. This collaboration was short-lived and the parting of the ways

20. Cf. Acharya Narendra Dev, "Socialism and the National Revolution" in Yusuf Meharally (ed.) *Socialism and the National Revolution* (Padma Publications, Bombay, 1946) ; and Jaya Prakash Narain ; "Towards Struggle", in *Ibid*.

21. P.S. Lakhnapal, *History of the Congress Socialist Party*, p. 144.

came during the World War II.

From the very beginning the Right-wing leadership of the Congress was hostile to the programme and policies of the CSP²². The Congress Working Committee, which met at Bombay on June 17, 1934, administered a rebuke to the leadership of the CSP and passed a resolution asserting that there was no threat to property interests from the Congress. The resolution read :

While the working Committee welcomes the formation of groups representing different schools of thought, it is necessary in view of loose talk about confiscation of private property and the necessity of class war, to remind Congressmen that the Karachi resolution...neither contemplates confiscation nor advocates class war. The Working Committee is further of opinion that confiscation and class-war are contrary to the Congress creed of non-violence.

Nehru did not join the CSP because he did not want to associate himself with any faction in the Congress. He wanted to play the role of a national leader in the national movement, and felt that association with one group might rob him of this role. He was also not satisfied with the way of the CSP functioned. As he said :

The Congress Socialist group immediately came into conflict with the right group, but in such a way that it antagonised the large middle group and did not succeed as it might have done in carrying this large anti-imperialist group with it.²³

Nehru was of the view that the socialists and also the Communists had failed to adopt and adjust socialism to Indian conditions. In his message to Socialists (December 20, 1936) he emphasized this point. He wrote :

Comrade Masani has asked me for a message to your Conference. I send my greetings gladly and I hope that your deliberation will result in good to the great cause we have at heart. That cause today is best served by building up a powerful anti-imperialist joint in the country. It is obvious that the National Congress is the only organization which can function as such a joint front.

As you know, I am vastly interested in the Socialist approach

-
22. As Sampurnanand (one of the founders of the CSP) writes : "This hostility was marked from the very beginning. The old leaders considered the party a challenge to their authority and did everything in their power to submit and reduce it to importance", *Memories and Reflections*, (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961), p. 76.
 23. Dorothy Norman, *Nehru : The First Sixty Years*, (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1965) Vol. I, pp. 575-76.

to all questions. It is right that we should understand the theory underlying this approach. This helps to clarify our minds and give purpose to our activities. But two aspects of this question fill my own mind. One is how to apply this approach to Indian conditions. The other is how to speak of Socialism in the languages of India. I think it is often forgotten that if we are to be understood, we must speak the language of the country. I am not merely referring to the various languages of India. I am referring much more to the language which grows from a complex of associations of past history and culture and present environment. So long as we do not speak in some language which has that Indian mentality for background, we lose a great measure of our effectiveness. Merely to use words and phrases, which may have meaning for us but which are not current coin among the masses of India, is often wasted effort. It is this problem of the approach to socialism that occupies my mind—how to interpret it in terms of India, how to reach the hearts of the people, with its hope—giving and inspiring message. That is a question which I should like a socialist to consider well.²⁴

Nehru's attitude towards the CSP has been criticised by the Congress Socialists. It is alleged that Nehru wanted to take full advantage of this group--because they were ideologically nearer—in his confrontation with the Right-wing leadership in the Congress²⁵, but he would not join the party formally. Nehru had set himself the task of spreading 'Socialist ideology' in the Congress and the country. This was precisely the task of the CSP²⁶. In spite of this identity of objectives the two could not combine their efforts.

IV

NEHRU'S FAITH IN CONGRESS

Nehru did join the Communist Party nor the Congress Socialist Party. The questions that arise here are: What kind of a Socialist Nehru himself was? What tasks had he set before himself to spread the cause of socialism in India? Did he do anything to organize an effective Socialist Movement in the country?

24. Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

25. Refer to Sampurnanand, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

26. Cf; Narendra Dev's Presidential address to the first session of the All-India Socialists Congress: "Our endeavour is to influence the Nationalist Movement... The Congress today may accept socialist programme only in a mutilated form but the whole drive of the nation will be in that direction, because the responsibility for carrying on the struggle for national independence is more and more devolving upon the masses". *Address to Patna Conference*, p. 8; Also see *Socialism and National Revolution*, p. 83.

To understand Nehru's concept of Socialism, it is essential to note that Nehru's political education started quite late. And the other fact clearly connected with this is that he was exposed to different kinds of influences *i.e.* Marxism, Russian Revolution and Gandhi simultaneously. The impact of these two facts was that Nehru tried throughout to reconcile the scientific aspects of socialism with the Gandhian beliefs of 'importance of means' etc. He had to adjust his belief in scientific socialism with Gandhian ideas which he himself thought were not 'Socialist'²⁷ but at the same time "Gandhiji knew India better than we did..."²⁸ and Gandhiji "has done a great service to us by stressing the importance of means."²⁹ The result of this peculiar situation, in which Nehru was placed, was that his socialism got diluted. Any attempt to reconcile the essentials of Marxism with that of Gandhism was bound to be a failure, in spite of Nehru's sincere efforts to do so.

Nehru's dilemmas as a Socialist do not end here. Whatever may be the kind of his socialist beliefs (and at an intellectual level he was quite near scientific socialism), did he build any movement to spread the message of socialism in India? Though he was 'vaguely attracted to the Fabians and Socialistic ideas during his college days in England'³⁰, his political consciousness was really stirred when he came into close contact with the agrarian problems of the United Provinces in India in 1920-21. "In 1920 I was totally ignorant", he says, "of labour conditions in factories or fields, and my political outlook was entirely bourgeois"³¹. This confrontation with downtrodden, and his visit to Soviet Russia in 1927 convinced him of the merits of Socialist philosophy, and he undertook the task of converting Congressmen to socialism. He says:

The burden of my speeches was always much the same... Everywhere I spoke on political independence and social freedom and made the former a step towards the attainment of the latter. I wanted to spread the ideology of socialism especially among Congress workers and the intelligentsia; for those people who were the backbone of the national movement, though largely in terms of the narrowest nationalism.³²

Was the Congress converted to the goal of Socialism? What was the class character of the Congress movement? Who were the people in control of the Congress?

27. Nehru wrote "Sometimes he (Gandhi) calls himself a socialist but he uses the word in a sense peculiar to himself which has little or nothing to do with the economic framework of society which usually goes by the name of socialism" *Autobiography*, p. 616.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 549.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Writing about the character of the Congress, Nehru wrote :

The Indian National Movement is obviously not a labour or proletarian movement. It is a bourgeois movement, as its very name implies, and its objective so far has been not a change of the social order, but political independence.³³

Nehru again wrote that the Congress as it was constituted could not become an instrument for agrarian reform. In 1930 "there was an ideal opportunity for a no-tax campaign, as a part of the general civil disobedience movement, but "if the tenants stopped paying their rent, the landlord suffered immediately. The Congress as a whole, was a purely nationalist body, and included many middling zimindars and a few of the larger ones also. Its leaders were terribly affraid of doing anything which might raise this class issue or irritate the zimindar elements...Congress, being what it was, could not then patronize class conflict".³⁴

Where was the silver lining in this situation ? Why had he pinned his hope in the Congress ? Nehru saw in the growth of the mass base of the Congress a sign of change and hope of his success in transforming the Congress into his way of thinking : "... gradually the lower middle class began to dominate the Congress, and later the peasantry made their influence felt."³⁵ Nehru felt that gradually the Congress would be brought round. He regarded the Congress as the only political party having a mass base which had a tremendous capacity to mobilize the people in favour of socialism in the country and against imperialism and colonial exploitation. Nehru had reason to believe that he had been quite successful in getting resolutions with radical contents adopted by the Congress under his pursuasive influence. He, therefore, thought and, perhaps, rightly³⁶ to rely more on a well-knit mass organization to educate the people about socialism than on splinter groups and factions such as the CSP. He in his Presidential addresses at Lahore Session of the Congress (1929) or Lucknow Session (April 1936) or Faizpur Session (1936) reiterated his belief in socialism and asked the Congressmen to accept it. In 1931, at the Karachi Session, the Congress passed an important resolution on Swaraj, indicating fundamental rights and its economic programme in the following words ;

The state shall own or control heavy industries and services, mineral resources, railways, waterways, shipping and other means of transport.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

36. It may be noted here that while Nehru continued to adhere broadly to the ideals socialism, many erstwhile leaders of the CSP "revisited" socialism and finally gave it up altogether.

Nehru was not fully satisfied with Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy. He wrote :

In the Karachi resolution, it (Congress) took a step, a very short step, in a socialist direction by advocating nationalization of heavy industries and services, and various other measures to lessen the burden on the poor and increase it on the rich. This was not socialism at all, and a capitalist State could easily accept almost everything contained in that resolution.³⁷

He drew the attention of the Congress to adopt an agrarian policy to improve the conditions of the poor peasantry. He pleaded for "a great change in the land laws and the basis of the present system of land tenure." He argued that "this semi-feudal system is out of date and is great hindrance to production and general progress." He demanded the creation of a new system of "peasant proprietorship" and said that the "demands for radical reforms in rent and revenue and the abolition of feudal levies have been made from most of the provinces" ; further, "vast gatherings of peasants testify to their inability to carry their present burdens" ? That this issue was important has also been pointed out by Sitaramayya. He says :

Throughout India there was a great commotion amongst the tenantry against the rack renting both under government and under the zimindars, and against, in particular in respect of the latter, their super arrogation of rights regarding tanks and tank-bunds, water sources and irrigation channels, pastures and forests. And too, the number of intermediaries between the cultivators and government rose to as many as thirteen in Bengal and to various figures in different provinces.³⁸

V

HOPES : ILLUSIONS AND REALITY

In spite of his Presidential addresses, and speech-making, Nehru, however, achieved little in converting "multiclass national movement" to the cause of socialism. Opposition to his ideas was getting crystallized and came into the open when important Right-wing members of the Congress Working Committee resigned in 1936 in protest against the pronouncement of the Congress President Nehru. In their collective letter of resignation, Rajendra Prasad and six others wrote to Nehru on June 29, 1936 :

We feel that the preaching and emphasizing of socialism particularly at this stage by the President and other socialist members of the Working Committee, while the Congress has not adopted it, is prejudicial to the best interests of the country and to the success of the national struggle for freedom which we all hold to be the first and paramount concern of the country... We

27. *Autobiography*, p. 266.

28. Sitaramayya. *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

are of opinion that through your speeches and those of the other socialist colleagues and the acts of other socialists who have been emboldened by the speeches... the Congress organization has been weakened throughout the country.³⁹

The resignations were later withdrawn and the rapprochement was arrived at. But the moral of the episode is that Nehru was a leader of an organization, which was not interested in socialism, and was motivated only by a sole purpose of winning country's freedom. Not only the Right-wing in the Congress, but vested interests outside also wanted the Congress leadership to check Nehru. After all the Congress was always under the influence of property owners—whether landed or industrial. The industrialists supported Gandhian leadership of the Congress which was based on class harmony, capitalists' trusteeship of property and according to which the "capitalists are fathers and workers are children." To them this philosophy was a defence against the threat of class struggle posed by the working-class. Hence for the industrialists, Congress was a 'safety valve' and Nehru seemed to them a great threat. As A.R. Desai states :

Wealthy industrialists like Birla, Ambalal Sarabhai, Kasturbhai Lalbhai, and others, supported the Congress under Gandhi's absolute leadership and financed its programmes. They also subsidized such schemes as the revival of precapitalist handicrafts. In fact, it was mainly due to the financial aid of these industrial magnates who subsidized the All-India Spinners' Association and such other organizations, that the relics of steadily declining old modes of production in India were artificially buttressed and kept alive.⁴⁰

No doubt the Karachi programme of the Congress had laid down that, "In order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions", but this remained only a sentiment with the Congress leadership.

In the light of the above facts it is clear that the Congress was not developing any consciousness for socialism. On the contrary, if it took one step forward at Karachi, it retraced many steps later on, and nullified even the mild resolutions on Fundamental Rights approved at the Karachi session. The Congress could not push any scheme of agrarian reforms

39. *A Bunch* p. 191.

40. A.R. Desai, *Social Background of India Nationalism*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 4th edition, 1966, pp. 204-5. Nehru himself referred to this fact. Even in 1933, Nehru's socialist propaganda was being resented by the members of the Congress Working Committee. He wrote ; "The effect of my socialist propaganda upset even some of my colleagues of the Working Committee, They would have put up with me without complaint, they had done for several years during which I had been carrying on this propaganda, but I was now frightening to some extent the vested interests in the country, and my activities could no longer be called innocuous". *Autobiography*, p. 477.

because of the domination of the zimindars. In spite of being a peasant organization, it failed to do anything for the peasantry. When Nehru's utterances disturbed the Congress leadership and the vested interests, he was pained. In fact it were wealthy industrialists, who had engineered the revolt of the working Committee against him when he was the President (1936). The intention was to control Nehru from within the Congress organization. Nehru knew all this. The question, therefore, arises as to why did he not leave the Congress when he found that its class character was a hindrance in the way of any socialist programme? Why did he not join hands with others to organize a Socialist Movement in the country? When Subhash Bose took up cudgels against the old guard, why did he (Nehru) not join the forces of opposition to the established leadership of the Congress. At the time of Bose's revolt (1938-39)⁴¹ the country's mood was quite different. There was a great ferment in the peasantry and the working class. In the country, besides Trade Union organizations, Kisan (peasant) organizations with a programme of the abolition of landlordism and demands for the reduction of land tax, rent and debts had been organized in the thirties under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand, Professor Ranga, and Indulal Yajnik. Only the proper leadership was needed. Perhaps, the Nehru - Subhash combination could have provided this. Perhaps a Nehru-Subhash walk-out from the Congress would have started the process of polarization in Indian politics. But Nehru did not part company with the Congress and Gandhi because of two reasons. He was convinced that splits and factions would weaken the national movement (*i.e.* Congress), and this situation would be fully exploited by the foreign rulers. He never entertained the idea of leaving the Congress, in spite of the fact that he had basic differences with the majority of the Congress leadership including Gandhi. In a communication to his friends and critics, Jawaharlal referred to his difficulties after the Lucknow Session of the Congress, but clearly stated that:

Even the Socialists realised that the primary issue was political that of independence and on that they concentrated. To talk of splits and the like is an absurdity. There can be no division in our ranks when the call of independence came to all of us.⁴²...

When differences between Subhash and Gandhi were deepening after Tripuri Congress, Nehru wrote to Subhash:

I felt it would be injurious in the interests of India and our cause for me or you to create this definite split.⁴³

It is clear that for Nehru, national freedom was a greater cause than

41. Tripuri Congress, 1939.

42. Pattabhi Sitramayya, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 26.

43. *A Bunch*, p. 351.

providing leadership to the socialists and building a socialist movement in the country as an alternative to the Congress. The second reason why Nehru did not quit the Congress was his belief that while other Left parties in the country were weak, the Congress was the main organization with a strong peasant base. To change and reform the Congress was a better task than to leave it, he thought. Further, the dominating personality of Gandhi, in whom, Nehru found his 'father image', was a very important factor in all important decisions of Nehru. Nehru differed with Gandhi on fundamentals, and described him an 'extraordinary paradox',⁴⁴ but accepted his lead on many crucial occasions. His loyalty and devotion to Gandhi led Nehru to surrender his intellectual convictions many times. Thus, the person who wrote that "In order to combat an unjust system the false premises on which it is based must be exposed and the reality laid bare",⁴⁵ could not understand (or refused to understand) the reality of the built-in Congress resistance to Socialism. Thus, when Trade Unions and Kisan Sabhas were working actively among the masses, he seemed reluctant to face the situation boldly.

VI

ASSESSMENT

Nehru was essentially a democrat of the western liberal category. This was due to the impact of his early education in England. He accepted the essentials of Marxism and appreciated Soviet Russia and its system of economic planning but under Gandhian impact did not accept Communist methods, and even gave secondary position to the concept of class-struggle. Nehru was concerned with evolving a set of principles and ideas to achieve a socialist reconstruction of society with democratic means rather than through a violent revolution. His conviction was that socialism without democracy would mean tyranny in India. Further, his assessment of the existing Indian situation was that any radical transformation was not easily possible because of the compulsions of the objective situation. The masses were deep-rooted in superstition, religion fanaticism and ignorance. The class distinction had not yet crystallized. Industrial labour or the proletariat was confined to a few industrial centres of India. The peasantry, the largest section of the Indian society, was conservative and lacked social consciousness. In the absence of the revolutionary worker and the peasant class ready to fight against the entrenched vested interests, the journey to socialism had to be slow. In February 1938, he declared:

I have been and am a convinced socialist and a believer in democracy, and have at the same time accepted whole-heartedly the peaceful technique of non-violent action which Gandhiji has

44. *Autobiography*, pp. 515-536.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 551.

practised so successfully during the past twenty years. I am convinced that strength can only come to us from the masses, but that strength, either for struggle or for the great work of building a new world, must be a disciplined and orderly strength. It is not out of chaos or the encouragement of chaotic forces that we can fashion the India of our dreams.’⁴⁶

Thus, in the prevailing conditions and due to the infrastructural compulsions, the first step to spread the cause of socialism was to spread its message to the common man through public meetings, election campaigns, (1937 elections) and other media of mass contact.

The contribution outlined above seems to be Nehru’s only contribution to the cause of socialism in India of the pre-Independence period. During World War II, the political movement to win freedom assumed greater importance and Nehru’s attention, time and energy were devoted to this cause, and after the war, to negotiations for Independence. During the crucial period of thirties and forties, Nehru’s response to the ferment among the workers and the peasants was merely to spread the idea of socialism with a belief that if this idea caught the imagination of the people, the socialist movement would gain momentum in the country.

To recapitulate the whole discussion, it can be summarized here that :

1. Nehru did not do much to build socialist movement in India.
2. Nehru always kept in the cause of national independence superior to the cause of socialist movement ;
3. Nehru’s loyalty to Gandhi was supreme, and he diluted his socialism under the impact of Gandhi’s ideas of class collaboration and peaceful methods for social change ;
4. Nehru’s reading of the Congress that “it did represent the only effective revolutionary force in the country⁴⁷” because it had reached the peasant and the village in India prevented him to build socialist movement as an alternative to the “multi-class Congress platform”.
5. Nehru essentially remained a socialist at the intellectual level, but could not reconcile his liberal out-look, belief in democracy, and faith in non-violence with the total philosophy of ‘socialism’.

46. Jawaharlal Nehru, *India and the World: (Essays)*, George Allen and Unwin London, 1936, pp. 184-35.

47. *Autobiography*, p. 198.

All these ideas remained different streams of thought with him. He could not merge them with his socialist beliefs.

6. Nehru as a historian of the modern world, knew it well enough that Socialism had not come to any country without organized struggle and movements. Perhaps his social background precluded him from organizing mass struggles in the country, though he struggled hard for the country's freedom from foreign domination.

The end result of all this was that Nehru disappointed socialists in India, and himself remained "out of place everywhere, at home no where."
