## INDIA ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

By 1945 Indians had done the hard work of convincing the British to abandon their colonial position in South Asia, the centerpiece of one of the world's major empires. At the head of the independence movement was the Indian National Congress, organized in 1885. Its leaders were British-educated members of the upper classes who had enjoyed opportunities for advancement under the colonial regime. They formulated their demands for independence with care. Their wish was to take over, not destroy, the institutions created by the British. Nor did they wish to upset the caste, class, or gender systems on which their privileged position depended. Their dream was to make India modern by building steel mills and to make it internationally respected.

Mohandas Gandhi emerged as the charismatic leader of the Congress party's drive for independence. Trained in London in law, he returned home in 1915 and pressed his demands on the British following a strategy of nonviolence and observing in his daily life a simplicity and a spirituality that gave him broad popular appeal unique among the independence leadership. Frustrated by the British during the 1920s and 1930s, Gandhi seized on wartime to demand immediate independence. By the end of World War II it was clear that colonial control was no longer tenable. The prospect of Britain's departure precipitated communal clashes. Hindus and Muslims turned on each other, leading to calls for separation of the colony into two states. Much against Gandhi's wishes, the division did occur, with Pakistan overwhelmingly Muslim and India preponderantly Hindu. In 1947 Britain handed India its formal political independence. Shortly thereafter, Gandhi, aging and ill, died from a bullet fired by a Hindu extremist. The baton of national leadership passed to his chief lieutenant, Jawaharlal Nehru.

### 3.7

### Jawaharlal Nehru Recounts the Influences That Shaped His Social Outlook and Politics

Nehru figures prominently in twentieth century Indian history — as one of the leading figures during the independence movement, as the prime minister and commanding personality during his country's first decades of independence, and as the founder of a political dynasty whose influence would extend into the 1990s. His reflections on his early years and India's anti-colonial struggle, *Toward Freedom*, is a product of prison life to which the British repeatedly subjected Nehru as well as Gandhi and their colleagues in the Indian National Congress from the 1920s through World War II. Nehru enjoyed preferential treatment at the hands of his jailors including relatively comfortable accommodations and special leaves to visit acutely ill family members. After hectic rounds of public speaking and organizing on the outside, prison gave him time for reading, reflecting, and finally in 1934–1935 penning this personal account. It was published in 1936, and in 1940 during another prison stint, Nehru updated his story.

The autobiography tells us a lot about Nehru's family background (upper class), his cultural orientation (including a preference for writing in English), and his political loyalties (nationalist and socialist). What are the major problems that he admits to grappling with? How do his experiences and aspirations compare with those recounted by Mao and Ho? Why did all three find it important to chronicle the origins of their political activism?

Source: Michael H. Hunt, The World Transformed, 1945 to the Present: A Documentary Reader (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2004)

## From *Toward Freedom*

1941

My childhood was . . . a sheltered and uneventful one. I listened to the grown-up talk of my cousins without always understanding all of it. Often this talk related to the overbearing character and insulting manners of the English people, as well as Eurasians, toward Indians, and how it was the duty of every Indian to stand up to this and not to tolerate it. Instances of conflicts between the rulers and the ruled were common and were fully discussed. It was a notorious fact that whenever an Englishman killed an Indian he was acquitted by a jury of his own countrymen. In railway trains compartments were reserved for Europeans, and, however crowded the train might be — and they used to be terribly crowded — no Indian was allowed to travel in them, even though they were empty. . . . Benches and chairs were also reserved for Europeans in public parks and other places. I was filled with resentment against the alien rulers of my country who misbehaved in this manner; and, whenever an Indian hit back, I was glad. . . .

Much as I began to resent the presence and behavior of the alien rulers, I had no feeling whatever, so far as I can remember, against individual Englishmen. I had had English governesses, and occasionally I saw English friends of my father's visiting him. In my heart I rather admired the English. . . .

[Sometime in 1920 Nehru and some colleagues visited a remote area where peasants were protesting their dire conditions.] That visit was a revelation to me. We found the whole countryside afire with enthusiasm and full of a strange excitement. Enormous gatherings would take place at the briefest notice by word of mouth. One village would communicate with another, and the second with the third, and so on; and presently whole villages would empty out, and all over the fields there would be men and women and children on the march to the meeting place. . . . They were in miserable rags, men and women, but their faces were full of excitement and their eyes glistened and seemed to expect strange happenings which would, as if by a miracle, put an end to their long misery.

They showered their affection on us and looked on us with loving and hopeful eyes, as if we were the bearers of good tidings, the guides who were to lead them to the promised land. Looking at them and their misery and overflowing gratitude, I was filled with shame and sorrow — shame at my own easygoing and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city which ignored this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India, sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India. A new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed, and utterly miserable. And their faith in us, casual visitors from the distant city, embarrassed me and filled me with a new responsibility that frightened me.

---

Jawaharlal Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru,* rev. ed. (New York: John Day, 1941), 20–21, 56–57, 73, 189–92, 229–30, 232, 234, 266.

I listened to their innumerable tales of sorrow, their crushing and ever-growing burden of rent, illegal exactions, ejectments from land and mud hut, beatings; surrounded on all sides by vultures who preyed on them — zamindar's agents,[1] moneylenders, police; toiling all day to find what they produced was not theirs and their reward was kicks and curses and a hungry stomach. Many of those who were present were landless people who had been ejected by the landlords and had no land or hut to fall back upon. The land was rich, but the burden on it was very heavy, the holdings were small, and there were too many people after them. Taking advantage of this land hunger, the landlords . . . charged huge illegal premiums. The tenant, knowing of no other alternative, borrowed money from the moneylender and paid the premium, and then, unable to pay his debt or even the rent, was ejected and lost all he had. . . .

[The force beginning to drive the independence movement forward in the early 1920s] was a strange mixture of nationalism and politics and religion and mysticism and fanaticism. Behind all this was agrarian trouble and, in the big cities, a rising working-class movement. Nationalism and a vague but intense countrywide idealism sought to bring together all these various, and sometimes mutually contradictory, discontents, and succeeded to a remarkable degree. And yet this nationalism itself was a composite force, and behind it could be distinguished a Hindu nationalism, a Moslem nationalism partly looking beyond the frontiers of India, and, what was more in consonance with the spirit of the times, an Indian nationalism. For the time being they overlapped and all pulled together. . . . It was remarkable how Gandhiji[2] seemed to cast a spell on all classes and groups of people and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction. He became, indeed (to use a phrase which has been applied to another leader), "a symbolic expression of the confused desires of the people." . . .

Whether Gandhiji is a democrat or not, he does represent the peasant masses of India; he is the quintessence of the conscious and subconscious will of those millions. . . . A man of the keenest intellect, of fine feeling and good taste, wide vision; very human, and yet essentially the ascetic who has suppressed his passions and emotions, sublimated them and directed them in spiritual channels; a tremendous personality, drawing people to himself like a magnet, and calling out fierce loyalties and attachments — all this so utterly unlike and beyond a peasant. And yet withal he is the greatest peasant, with a peasant's outlook on affairs, and with a peasant's blindness to some aspects of life. But India is peasant India, and so he knows his India well, reacts to her slightest tremors, gauges a situation accurately and almost instinctively, and has a knack of acting at the psychological moment. . . .

Many of us had cut adrift from this peasant outlook, and the old ways of thought and custom and religion had become alien to us. We called ourselves

[1]Zamindars were landholders who carried out grass-roots government functions such as tax collection under the British colonial system.

[2]The "ji" added to Gandhi's name is a widely used term of respect.

moderns and thought in terms of "progress," and industrialization and a higher standard of living and collectivization. We considered the peasant's viewpoint reactionary; and some, a growing number, looked with favor toward socialism and communism. . . .

To me, personally, Gandhiji had always shown extraordinary kindness and consideration, and my father's death had brought him particularly near to me. He had always listened patiently to whatever I had to say and had made every effort to meet my wishes. This had, indeed, led me to think that perhaps some colleagues and I could influence him continuously in a socialist direction, and he had himself said that he was prepared to go step by step as he saw his way to do so. It seemed to me almost inevitable then that he would accept the fundamental socialist position, as I saw no other way out from the violence and injustice and waste and misery of the existing order. He might disagree about the methods but not about the ideal. So I thought then, but I realize now that there are basic differences between Gandhiji's ideals and the socialist objective. . . .

I had long been drawn to socialism and communism, and Russia had appealed to me. Much in Soviet Russia I dislike — the ruthless suppression of all contrary opinion, the wholesale regimentation, the unnecessary violence (as I thought) in carrying out various policies. But there was no lack of violence and suppression in the capitalist world, and I realized more and more how the very basis and foundation of our acquisitive society and property was violence. Without violence it could not continue for many days. A measure of political liberty meant little indeed when the fear of starvation was always compelling the vast majority of people everywhere to submit to the will of the few, to the greater glory and advantage of the latter.

. . . With all her blunders, Soviet Russia had triumphed over enormous difficulties and taken great strides toward this new order. While the rest of the world was in the grip of the depression and going backward in some ways, in the Soviet country a great new world was being built up before our eyes. Russia, following the great Lenin, looked into the future and thought only of what was to be, while other countries lay numbed under the dead hand of the past and spent their energy in preserving the useless relics of a bygone age. . . . [T]he presence and example of the Soviets was a bright and heartening phenomenon in a dark and dismal world. . . .

Russia apart, the theory and philosophy of Marxism lightened up many a dark corner of my mind. History came to have a new meaning for me. The Marxist interpretation threw a flood of light on it, and it became an unfolding drama with some order and purpose, howsoever unconscious, behind it. In spite of the appalling waste and misery of the past and the present, the future was bright with hope, though many dangers intervened. It was the essential freedom from dogma and the scientific outlook of Marxism that appealed to me. . . .

It seemed clear to me that nationalism would remain the outstanding urge, till some measure of political freedom was attained. Because of this the Congress had been, and was still (apart from certain labor circles), the most ad-

vanced organization in India, as it was far the most powerful. During the past thirteen years, under Gandhiji's leadership, it had produced a wonderful awakening of the masses, and, in spite of its vague bourgeois ideology, it had served a revolutionary purpose. It had not exhausted its utility yet and was not likely to do so till the nationalist urge gave place to a social one. . . .

. . . [I]t is absurd to say that the leaders [of the Indian national movement] betray the masses because they do not try to upset the land system or the capitalist system. They never claimed to do so. Some people in the Congress, and they are a growing number, want to change the land system and the capitalist system, but they cannot speak in the name of the Congress. . . .

. . . I write this sitting in a British prison. . . . I dislike British imperialism, and I resent its imposition on India; I dislike the capitalist system; I dislike exceedingly and resent the way India is exploited by the ruling classes of Britain. But I do not hold England or the English people as a whole responsible for this. . . .

Personally, I owe too much to England in my mental make-up ever to feel wholly alien to her. And, do what I will, I cannot get rid of the habits of mind, and the standards and ways of judging other countries as well as life generally, which I acquired at school and college in England. My predilections (apart from the political ones) are in favor of England and the English people, and, if I have become what is called an uncompromising opponent of British rule in India, it is, almost in spite of these.