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Abandoning the idea of India

R. Sudarshan

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The death of Jawaharlal Nehru signalled an end to an era of open-mindedness. It remains to be seen if India will ever recover a Nehruvian self-confidence and recreate institutions, which in their heydays brimmed with brilliant ideas

On May 28, 1964, I was a 10-year-old carried across by waves of mourners in Delhi, from the ramparts of Red Fort towards the Yamuna, to see flames rising from the funeral pyre of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Twenty years later, I was again a part of several processions for peace near my home in Jangpura Extension, this time fearfully watching flames leap out of shops and homes belonging to Sikhs, which had been singled out and become the target of arson in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In those 20 years, the idea of India, embodying diversity and democracy, tolerance and self-confidence, had given way to a closing of the Indian mind and an upsurge of xenophobia. The "foreign hand" phobia was particularly strong during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's many years in office, especially during the internal state of Emergency.

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In June this year, an Intelligence Bureau (IB) report accused some "foreign-funded" non-governmental organisations, including Greenpeace, of "serving as tools for foreign policy interests of western governments," by sponsoring agitations against nuclear and coal-fired power plants across the country. Their actions, according to the IB, had a negative impact on India's GDP growth!

Receptivity to ideas

Immediately after Independence, we might have expected India to suspect the motives of imperialist powers. But there was actually no xenophobia at that time. Jawaharlal Nehru's receptivity to ideas from all quarters was phenomenal in its range and depth. S. Gopal, Nehru's biographer, points out that the socialist Nehru believed in the marketplace of ideas, not commodities. He invited a number of intellectuals to be his interlocutors. Mahatma Gandhi had affirmed with supreme confidence: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any …." Sardar Patel, remembered as the Iron Man, played a key role in safeguarding India's "steel frame." He granted constitutional protection to all Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers who opted to serve independent India (Article 314, repealed in 1972). In 1934, Nehru had declared that

he would have nothing to do with the ICS tradition, as it was neither Indian, nor civil and much less a service. But he did not object to Sardar Patel's proposal to provide constitutional safeguards to ICS officers and its successor services.

Powerful countries will always want to advance their foreign policy agenda and they are bound to gather all manner of intelligence to that end. But this need not create paranoia and bans on foreign funds. In 1950, the U.S. State Department must have worried about Nehru's admiration of the achievements of the Soviet Union and his sympathy for the 1949 revolution in China. Anxiety about the advance of communism in Asia may have prompted the U.S. to encourage Paul Hoffman, former administrator of the Marshall Plan and president of the Ford Foundation, to visit India. When Nehru learnt that Hoffman wished to visit India, he sent to him a warm and welcoming letter in which he praised his leadership of the Marshall Plan and told him that India, recently liberated from colonial dominance, was more deserving of reconstruction and development than countries ravaged by World War II.

Bold experiments

Paul Hoffman visited India in 1951, later followed by Douglas Ensminger, a rural sociologist from the U.S. State Department, Nehru sent them to visit a rural development project in Etawah which he greatly admired. This project was a brainchild of Horace Holmes, an agricultural extension specialist, and Albert Meyer, a city planner. Hoffman's visit led to the Ford Foundation opening its first international office in New Delhi with Ensminger as its representative. Ensminger's claim that he was Nehru's closest confidant should be taken with a pinch of salt. But it is a fact that the Indian Prime Minister granted this private American foundation diplomatic privileges and authorised land to be leased to it in the Lutyens's Bungalow Zone, where an American architect, Joseph Allen Stein, built his "Steinabad" to blend with Lodi Garden.

Nehru turned to Paul Appleby, a Ford Foundation consultant, for ideas to restructure the machinery of government. He accepted Appleby's recommendation that India needed a premier institution to train officers in the art and science of policymaking. Nehru became the founding president of the Indian Institute of Public Administration in 1954. In his foreword to his first report on public administration, Appleby said: "it is my general judgement that the Government of India is a highly advanced one, and in the revelation of the government's hospitality to criticism and its insistent search for improvement." Nehru encouraged the Ford Foundation to prepare a report on India's food crisis. He went through the report carefully. He asked for more specific proposals to implement its recommendations. The second report resulted in the Intensive Agricultural District Programme, piloted initially in seven agriculturally well-endowed districts. These districts became the proving ground for the Green Revolution launched in 1965 under the stewardship of C. Subramaniam. The confidence which Nehru reposed in India's scientists and his encouragement to them to seek out foreign interlocutors, was inspiration enough for M.S. Swaminathan to invite Norman Borlaug to India in 1963 and followed up his visit with experiments in India to adapt Mexican wheat varieties to Indian conditions.

Nehru took a personal interest in many of the innovative projects and ideas of consultants brought to India by the Ford Foundation. Wolf Ladejinsky impressed upon Nehru the urgency of land reforms to arrest the growing numbers of landless labourers. Land to the tiller became his rallying call. But it fell on the deaf ears of the Congress party's leadership in many States which remained imbued with the "old zamindari mentality," as Nehru called it. Unlike the land reforms programme, which failed, there were other foreign-inspired ideas which had more successful outcomes. Nehru encouraged the Ford Foundation to support the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) established in 1956 to provide independent policy advice to both government and the private sector. P.S. Lokanathan, its first director, left a legacy of professional integrity that has endured to this day. On the advice of Pupul Jayakar, Nehru invited Charles and Ray Eames to visit India. The 1958 Eames Report was warmly received by Nehru. It led to the establishment of the National Institute of Design (NID), which is a tribute to the genius of Indian design and what the

Eameses called “vernacular expressions of design” (they wrote paens of praise for the *lota*) and “everyday solutions to unspectacular problems”. NID remains an invitation to “make in India,” for civilisational reasons, not for the crass and commercial reasons now in vogue.

A remark by Vinobha Bhave, to the effect that the days of politics and religion were gone and the days of science and spirituality have come, greatly impressed Nehru. He was struck by the symbolism of the Trimurti of Elephanta Caves gazing benignly across the Arabian Sea at the Atomic Research Centre in Trombay, a monument to the triumph of India’s scientists. Nehru kept in touch with Robert Oppenheimer, listened to J.B.S. Haldane, and entrusted to Verrier Elwin plans to safeguard tribals in the northeast of India.

Inputs for policy

Nehru welcomed the participation of a number of foreign scholars in a grand experiment of democratic socialism. He hand-picked Mahalanobis and Pitambar Pant to shape the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission and the Indian Statistical Institute were encouraged by Nehru to invite brilliant minds to visit and work in India — these included Ragnar Frisch, Jan Tinbergen, Oskar Lange, Charles Bettelheim, Richard Stone, Simon Kuznets, N. Georgescu-Roegen, Branko Horvat, Paul Baran, Ian Little, Michał Kalecki, Nicholas Kaldor, Gunnar Myrdal and Joan Robinson. No other institution anywhere in the world would have welcomed, with such supreme self-confidence, such a vast range of ideas and debates concerning India’s most important policy choices. Milton Friedman visited India and criticised the Mahalanobis model. Nehru, ever an ardent disciple of Harold Laski, did not find those ideas compelling.

The death of Nehru signalled an end to an era of open-mindedness. The Planning Commission’s collaborative project with the MIT Center for International Studies ended in 1964. Sukhamoy Chakravarty, Kirit Parikh, Henri Lefebvre, Richard Eckhaus, Alan Mann, all scholars of impeachable integrity, came under the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cloud. This was the moment when the Planning Commission became fearful of foreigners. It remains to be seen if India will ever recover a Nehruvian self-confidence and recreate an institution which in its heyday brimmed with brilliant ideas.

(R. Sudarshan, former staff of UNDP and the Ford Foundation, is Dean, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, Sonipat.)