

VERDICTS ON NEHRU: THE RISE AND FALL OF A REPUTATION

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(Second V. K. R. V. Rao Memorial Lecture, Institute of Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, 20 January 2005.)

When Professor Gopal Kadekodi asked me to deliver the Second V. K. R. V. Rao Memorial Lecture, I at first hesitated, on the grounds that as a failed economist I was supremely unfitted for the task. But then I consoled myself that I was at least a product of V. K. R. V. Rao's India, indeed, a product of institutions that V. K. R. V. Rao had built. I had taken a Master's at the Delhi School of Economics (where, admittedly, I drank more coffee than I learnt economics), and later, had worked as a sociologist at the Institute of Economic Growth. Having passed through two of the institutions that were founded by V. K. R. V. Rao, it somehow qualified me to pontificate in the third.

I met V. K. R. V. Rao twice, very briefly each time. But these meetings, and a couple of letters we exchanged, were enough to reveal what was truly distinctive of this man as an institution builder—namely, his encouragement of the young. In a hierarchical culture governed by the nepotism of kin and clan, V. K. R. V. Rao nurtured institutions by focusing on one thing and one thing alone—intellectual merit. Conservative Indians were shocked when he appointed K. N. Raj a Professor at the Delhi School at the age of twenty-nine; and when he brought M. N. Srinivas from Baroda with a *carte blanche* to start a Sociology department and shape it as he chose. But that is how he built institutions of quality, by choosing men and women of quality, and trusting them to do the job.

If I am a product of the institutions built by V. K. R. V. Rao, Rao himself was a product of the India built by Jawaharlal Nehru. He was an 'eminent Nehruvian', a man whose mind was shaped by the world that Nehru nurtured. As Rao would have been the first to acknowledge, without Nehru there could never have been a Delhi School of Economics. For our first Prime Minister cultivated and encouraged a spirit of intellectual freedom that, despite all the machinations of his successors, somehow persists to this day. If India has a still active tradition of social science research, it is due to the work of visionaries like V. K. R. V. Rao and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Rao I knew only slightly, and Nehru of course I never knew at all. But his life and legacy have been of abiding interest to me. The book of mine that I am most fond of is *Savaging the Civilized*, a biography of that other eminent Nehruvian, the anthropologist and tribal rights activist Verrier Elwin. The research and writing of this book, done as it happens while I was a Fellow of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, deepened my interest in Nehru as a historical figure. That process has now been taken further by my current project, which is a history of India since 1947. This book will deal in some detail with Jawaharlal Nehru's historical *role*. This lecture, by contrast, focuses on Jawaharlal Nehru's historical *reputation*. It seeks to ask, and at least partially answer, a question that has long intrigued me—how and why has Nehru's reputation fallen so low? How and why has a man who was greatly adored in his lifetime been so comprehensively villified since his death?

It is safe to say that no modern politician had anywhere near as difficult a job as Jawaharlal Nehru's. At Independence, the country he was asked to lead was faced with horrific problems. Riots had to be contained, food shortages to be overcome, princely states (as many as five hundred) to be integrated, refugees (almost ten million) to be resettled. This, so to say, was the task of fire-fighting; to be followed by the equally daunting task of nation-building. A Constitution had to be written that would satisfy the needs of this diverse and complex nation. An election system had to be devised for an electorate that was composed mostly of illiterates. A viable foreign policy had to be drafted in the threatening circumstances of the Cold War. And an economic policy had to be forged to take a desperately poor and divided society into the modern age.

No new nation was ever born in less propitious circumstances. Fortunately, Nehru had on his side a set of superbly gifted colleagues. His Cabinet included such men of distinction as Vallabhbhai Patel, B. R. Ambedkar and C. Rajagopalachari. They were helped by the remaining officials of the Indian Civil Service; the steel frame that was one of British colonialism's unquestioned gifts to free India.

For all the assistance he got Nehru was, as the elected Prime Minister, most responsible for the success or failure of his Government's policies. For one thing, the other giants I have named all departed early. Patel died in 1950; Ambedkar and Rajaji left the Cabinet in 1951. For another, in the popular mind it was Nehru who was most directly identified with the philosophy of the new nation-state; with ideas such as democracy, non-alignment, socialism, and secularism, ideas to which, in his writings and speeches, he gave such eloquent expression.

At this time, the mid fifties, Nehru's domestic reputation was as high as high can be. He came as close as anyone has, or ever will, to becoming the People's Prince. He was Gandhi's chosen political heir, and free India's first freely elected Prime Minister. After the death of Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950, he towered among his colleagues in the Congress Party. His vision of an India fired by steel plants and powered

by dams was widely shared. He was seen as a brave man, who fought religious chauvinists; as a selfless man, who had endured years in jail to win freedom; and above all as a good man. His appeal cut across the conventionally opposed categories of man and woman, low caste and high caste, Hindu and Muslim, North Indian and South Indian. Representative here are the recollections of a now distinguished Tamil diplomat who grew up in the capital in the fifties. He told me that 'to us Pandit Nehru was a great golden disc shining in the middle of New Delhi'.

A spectacular demonstration of the Indian people's love for Jawaharlal Nehru was on display during the General Elections of 1952. In campaigning for the Congress Nehru covered the country from end to end. He travelled 25, 000 miles in all: 18, 000 by air, 5200 by car, 1600 by train, and even 90 by boat. A breathless party functionary later described this as comparable to the 'imperial campaigns of Samudragupta, Asoka and Akbar' as well as to the 'travel[s] of Fahien and Hieun Tsang'.

In the course of the campaign Nehru 'travelled more than he slept and talked more than he travelled'. He addressed three hundred mass meetings and myriad smaller ones. He spoke to about 20 million people directly, while an equal number merely had his *darshan*, flanking the roads to see him as his car whizzed past. Those who heard and saw him included miners, peasants, pastoralists, factory workers and agricultural labourers. Women of all classes turned out in numbers for his meetings.

This is how a contemporary account describes the interest in Nehru:

Almost at every place, city, town, village or wayside halt, people had waited overnight to welcome the nation's leader. Schools and shops closed: milkmaids and cowherds had taken a holiday; the kisan and his helpmate took a temporary respite from their dawn-to-dusk programme of hard work in field and home. In Nehru's name, stocks of soda and lemonade sold out; even water became scarce. ... Special trains were run from out-

of-the-way places to carry people to Nehru's meetings, enthusiasts travelling not only on foot-boards but also on top of carriages. Scores of people fainted in milling crowds.

No leader in modern times has enjoyed quite this kind of veneration: as Escott Reid suggests, Nehru was for his people the founder, guardian, and redeemer of the Indian nation-state—Washington, Lincoln and Roosevelt all rolled into one. Even the most hard-boiled skeptics were swayed by his charm and charisma. Consider this now forgotten encomium by Nirad Chaudhuri, published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the second week of May 1953, a year after Nehru and his Congress had won a comfortable victory in the first General Elections. The writer was (by this time) a moderately well known Indian, but his subject still towered over him, as well as everybody else. Nehru's leadership, remarked Chaudhuri, 'is the most important moral force behind the unity of India'. He was 'the leader not of a party, but of the people of India taken collectively, the legitimate successor to Gandhiji'. However, if 'Nehru goes out of politics or is overthrown, his leadership is likely to be split up into its components, and not pass over intact to another man. In other words, there cannot, properly speaking, be a successor to Nehru, but only successors to the different elements of his composite leadership'.

As Chaudhuri saw it, the Nehru of the 1950s helped harmonize the masses with the classes. 'Nehru is keeping together the governmental machine and the people, and without this nexus India would probably have been deprived of stable government in these crucial times. He has not only ensured co-operation between the two, but most probably has also prevented actual conflicts, cultural, economic, and political. Not even Mahatmaji's leadership, had it continued, would have been quite equal to them'.

'If, within the country, Nehru is the indispensable link between the governing middle-classes and the sovereign people', continued Chaudhuri, 'he is no less the bond between India and the world'. He

served as 'India's representative to the great Western democracies, and, I must add, their representative to India. The Western nations certainly look upon him as such and expect him to guarantee India's support for them, which is why they are so upset when Nehru takes an anti-Western or neutral line. They feel they are being let down by one of themselves.'

Nirad Chaudhuri always prided himself on his independence of mind, on being above (and ahead) of the herd. But even he could not escape the glow of the great golden disc then shining in the middle of New Delhi. It is noteworthy that Chaudhuri never allowed this essay to be reprinted, a fact which adds to the delight with which I excerpt it here.

Such, then, was Jawaharlal Nehru's reputation at its zenith; it is time now to move on to its nadir.

III

In my early days as an academic, I made the mistake of defending Jawaharlal Nehru in the smoky seminar room of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, off Landsdowne Road in south Calcutta. I was then very young, and my defence was weak and confused anyway. I can't even remember what form it took (I most likely said that he was a decent man, as politicians go). But it was enough to bring the roof down. I got snarls and dirty looks in the seminar room itself, and afterwards was set upon by my immediate boss, then a coming political scientist in his mid-thirties (and now a scholar of world renown). This gentleman called a colleague into his study and, pointing to me, said: 'Ei shala Jawaharlal Nehru shapotaar!'

To be a supporter of Nehru in a Marxist stronghold of those days is much like someone now defending the Emperor Babar in a *shaka* or

camp of that hard-core Hindu organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. For the Left, Nehru was a confused, weak-kneed idealist, full of high-flown rhetoric but without the will or wherewithal to take revolutionary action against the ruling classes. Indeed, the political scientist who chastised me had just then published an essay making this case at some length—here he also compared Nehru, unfavourably of course, to Lenin.

Truth be told, the first Prime Minister of free India was not exactly popular among non-Marxist circles in Calcutta either. The intellectuals mocked his second-class degree from Cambridge, while the brown sahibs pointed out that, unlike his close contemporary the Yuvraj of Cooch Behar, he had not even made the cricket First Eleven at Harrow. And of course Bengalis of all stripes and ideologies lamented the accident of history which had placed him, rather than their adored Subhas Bose, at the helm of the government of free India.

What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow. An old cliché, which in this case turns out to be surprisingly true. For Nehru has been, for some time now, the least liked of Indian politicians, dumped on from all parts of the political spectrum, in all parts of the land. As I know from experience, it is as risky a business to defend Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi or Bombay in 2005 as it was to defend him in Calcutta back in 1982.

A future historian, assessing the decline and fall of Nehru in the Indian imagination, might reckon 1977 to be the watershed, the year in which the delegitimation of an icon began gathering pace. That was when the Janata Government came to power, after thirty long years of Congress rule (and misrule). The Janata Party was forged in the prisons of northern India, by men jailed under the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It brought together three disparate political groupings, united in the first instance by their opposition to Mrs Gandhi. These were the Hindu chauvinist Jana Sangh, the non-Communist (or Socialist) left, and the old style, so to speak 'Gandhian' Congressmen.

The Janata Party is long dead, and its constituents have each gone their separate ways. Yet an examination of their political styles in the years since reveals that aside from the Emergency and Mrs Gandhi, these three political groupings (as well as the intellectuals who have supported them) were, and are, also united by their hatred of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Each of the Janata fragments has had its reasons for opposing Nehru and his legacy. The Jana Sangh, now metamorphized into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), takes its cue from its mother organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that seeks to build a Hindu state in India. Following the RSS, the BJP too trains its fire on Nehru's philosophy of secularism, which they claim rests on the 'appeasement' of the minorities. Nehruvian 'pseudo-secularism' is said to have shown grave disrespect to Hindu sentiments while wantonly encouraging Muslim ones, this resulting in a wave of communal and ethnic conflict, not least in Kashmir.

By contrast, the non-Communist Left takes its cue from the work of the brilliant, maverick intellectual Ram Manohar Lohia. Lohia took a Ph D in political science in the University of Berlin, fleeing the city just as Hitler came to power. After his return he worked ceaselessly to root socialism in the cultural soil of India. Like Lohia, his modern-day followers—who exercise considerable influence in north India—have seen Nehru as the symbol of the upper-caste, upper-class, English-speaking intelligentsia that has held sway since Independence. This elite, they contend, has manipulated both political and economic power to its advantage, if to the detriment of the low caste, non-English speaking majority, whom the Lohiaites themselves seek to represent.

If for the BJP, Nehru could not represent the 'spirit of India' because he did not subscribe to the right religion (indeed, to no religion at all), for the Lohia Socialists his unfittedness to rule was proven by the fact that he stood apart, in class, culture and language, from those he ruled over. The Gandhian critique takes a different line altogether. It

argues that despite being the Mahatma's acknowledged heir, Nehru ultimately betrayed his legacy. Where Gandhi fought for a free India based on a confederation of self-sufficient village republics, Nehru is said to have imposed a model of industrial development that centralized power in the cities by devastating the countryside. Those who attack Nehru in the Mahatma's name have forcefully argued that planned industrialization has fuelled both environmental degradation and social conflict, outcomes that could have been avoided if India had instead followed a decentralized or 'Gandhian' approach to economic development.

To the Hindutva, Lohiaite and Gandhian critiques has now been added a fourth. This comes from the supporters of economic liberalization, who point an accusatory finger at Nehru for pushing the state up the commanding heights of the economy. Without Nehru's folly, they say, India would have long since have become the biggest of the Asian Tigers. As a passionate free-marketeer remarked recently, Professor Rajkrishna's derisive phrase, the 'Hindu rate of growth', should be renamed the 'Nehru rate of growth'.

The criticisms of Jawaharlal Nehru now are vast and varied, so varied indeed that they contradict each other without fear of recognition. Just before the General Elections of 2004, the Delhi monthly *National Review* interviewed two stalwarts of the political firmament: Lal Krishna Advani, then Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the Government of India, for many years now the leading ideologue of the Hindu right; and Dr Ashok Mitra, the former Finance Minister of the Government of West Bengal, and a still serving ideologue of the radical left. This, without first checking with one another, is what they said about Nehru's practice of secularism:

Lal Krishna Advani: 'We are opposed to Nehruvian secularism. We accept Gandhian secularism. Nehru started off with the assumption that all religions are wrong. For Gandhi, all religions are true, and they are

different paths to the same goal. We thought many of Gandhi's political policies were not sound, but we accepted his idea of secularism.'

Ashok Mitra: 'Nehru turned the meaning of secularism upside down. Secularism, he thought, was embracing each religion with equal fervour. And which he exemplified by frequent visits to mandirs and mosques, to dargahs and gurdwaras, to churches and synagogues. But once you embark on this slippery path, you end up identifying the state's activities with religious rituals such as *bhumipuja* and breaking coconut shells to float a boat built in a government workshop. This was inevitable because since Hindus constitute the majority of the state's population, Hindu rituals came to assert their presence within state premises.'

Which of these assertions is correct? Did Nehru hate all religions equally, as Mr Advani suggests? Or did he love all equally, as Dr Mitra claims? Perhaps it does not really matter. Perhaps these statements tell us less about Nehru's actual beliefs (or policies), and more about the political preferences of his contemporary critics. On the one side, there is Mr Advani, who considers 'Hindutva', or Hindu nationalism, the most promising political movement in modern India—and worries why it has not progressed further. Whom does he blame? Nehru. On the other hand, Dr Mitra considers Hindutva to be the most pernicious political movement in modern India—and is angry that it has progressed so far. And whom does *he* blame? Nehru.

It would be intriguing to develop the Advani/Mitra contrast in other directions. Consider thus their likely views on economic and foreign policy. Mr Advani probably thinks that the Nehruvian epoch was characterised by excessive state intervention; Dr Mitra certainly believes that the state did not intervene enough. Mr Advani holds that, in the formative decades of the fifties, India aligned too closely with the Soviet Union; while Dr Mitra thinks that we did not cosy up to Moscow enough. Mr Advani must believe that Nehru did not do enough to promote the

cause of the Hindi language; Dr Mitra most likely holds that he did too much.

For both Mr Advani and Dr Mitra, their political project is best defined negatively: as the repudiation of the economic and social philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru. Lifelong political adversaries though they may be, these Indians are joined in a lifelong fight against a common enemy—Father.

IV

Jawaharlal Nehru's posthumous reputation brings to mind a remark of the nineteenth century British radical, Edward Carpenter. Carpenter claimed that 'the Outcast of one Age is the Hero of another'. He clearly had himself in mind, an environmentalist and prophet of sexual liberation ahead of his time. But the case of Jawaharlal Nehru shows that the opposite can equally be true. That is, the Hero of one age can very easily become the Outcast of another.

Why has Jawaharlal Nehru's reputation fallen so far and so fast? One reason is that as the first, and longest-serving, Prime Minister, he was in a unique position to shape his nation's destiny. He did a great deal, but there is always the feeling that he should have done more—*much* more. And modern middle-class Indians are as a rule very judgemental, especially when it comes to passing judgement on politicians. As his biographer S. Gopal once pointed out, Nehru's 'very achievements demand that he be judged by standards which one would not apply to the ordinary run of Prime Ministers; and disappointment stems from the force of our expectations'.

Allied to this is Nehru's nearness to us in time. We live in a world shaped by him and his colleagues. And no modern man has had such an

authoritative influence on the laws and institutions of his country. Adult suffrage, a federal polity, the mixed economy, non-alignment in foreign policy, cultural pluralism and the secular state—these were the crucial choices made by the first generation of Indian nation-builders. The choices were made collectively, of course, but always with the consent and justification of one man above all—Jawaharlal Nehru. So when Indians today meet to deliberate over them, they single out one man above all for approbation or denunciation. Questions that can be posed in the plural tend to be posed in the singular—instead of asking why India chose the Westminster model of governance over the French Presidential system, we ask why Nehru did so.

It is only forty years since Nehru died. Since Indians still live with the consequences of decisions taken by him and his colleagues, some of them presume that they could have taken better decisions. And so they pass judgements on Nehru the like of which they would never pass on other Indian rulers, on (say) Akbar or even Lord Curzon. Of course, the judgements are anachronistic, made on the basis of what we know in 2005 rather than what Nehru knew in 1955. That does not stop them being made. Far from it. Over the years, I have spoken often about Nehru to audiences in different parts of India, to audiences composed variously of businessmen, students, scholars, and activists. Everywhere, I have met people who know that they could have done Nehru's job better than he did it himself; that is, they know that they could have 'saved' Kashmir, taken India onto a 10% growth path, solved the Hindu-Muslim problem, eliminated corruption in government, and brought peace with our neighbours. How foolish of us not to have elected them all as Prime Minister!

A third reason for the fading of the Nehruvian sheen is political, namely, the decline of Congress hegemony. The debunking of Nehru began with the coming to power of the Janata Party in 1977. Since then, the Congress has steadily lost ground in both the Centre and the States. There have now been as many as eight non-Congress governments at the

Centre; and more than fifty such in the States. The composition of these governments has been non-Congress; their beliefs and practices, often *anti*-Congress. In the realms of politics, economics, culture and the law, these groupings have had ideas often sharply opposed to those that Nehru stood for. While they were out of power these ideas had little salience or popularity; but now that there are in power the ideas themselves have power—as well as influence.

A fourth reason for the fall of Nehru's reputation lies in the misdeeds of his family. What we have here, as the sociologist André Bételle has pointed out, is the reversal of a famous Biblical injunction. Instead of the sins of the father being visited on his children, for seven successive generations, in Nehru's case the sins of the daughter and grandson have been visited upon him.

Perhaps the greatest paradox of modern Indian history is that every act of Nehru that nurtured a liberal democratic ethos was undone by his own daughter. He promoted a political opposition, she squelched it. He respected the press, she muzzled it. He allowed autonomy to the executive, she preferred to rely on 'committed' civil servants and judges. His Congress was a decentralized, democratic organization, her Congress was a one-woman show. He kept religion out of public life, she brought it in.

Like his mother, Rajiv Gandhi was a politician of limited mental ability but with an unrivalled capacity for cronyism and manipulation. His regime further undermined the institutions and processes of liberal democracy. Yet, and this is the paradox hardly anybody notices, those institutions and processes were, in the first place, crafted by Nehru himself.

In truth, Nehru had nothing to do with the 'dynasty'. He had no idea, nor desire, that his daughter would become Prime Minister of India. In 1960, the respected columnist Frank Moraes wrote that 'there is no question of Nehru's attempting to create a dynasty of his own; it would be inconsistent with his character and career'. In fact, Nehru chose not

to nominate a successor at all. That job, he felt, was the prerogative of the people and their representatives. After his death, an otherwise bitter critic, D. F. Karaka, saluted this determination 'not to indicate any preference with regard to his successor. This, [Nehru] maintained, was the privilege of those who were left behind. He himself was not concerned with that issue'—thus, incidentally, giving the lie to the idea that he ever wanted his daughter to succeed him.

After Nehru the Congress chose Lal Bahadur Shastri to become Prime Minister, a post on which he quickly stamped his authority. Mrs Gandhi herself may never have become Prime Minister had not Shastri died unexpectedly. She was chosen by the Congress bosses as a compromise candidate who (they thought) would do their bidding. But once in office Mrs Gandhi converted the Indian National Congress into a family business. She first brought in her son Sanjay and, after his death, his brother Rajiv. In each case, it was made clear that the son would succeed Mrs Gandhi as head of Congress and head of Government. Thus, the 'Nehru-Gandhi dynasty' should properly be known as the '(Indira) Gandhi' dynasty. But blood runs thicker than evidence; and when political commentators persist in speaking knowingly of the 'Nehru-Gandhi dynasty', why will the public think any different?

A fifth reason we Indians tend to give Nehru less credit than his due is that he appears to have lived too long. Lord Mountbatten once claimed that if Nehru had died in 1958 he would have been remembered as the greatest statesman of the twentieth century. Writing in 1957, Escott Reid remarked that Nehru's 'tragedy may be the tragedy of [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt: to remain leader of his country for a year or two after he has lost his grip and thus damage his own reputation and his country's interests'.

This was astonishingly prescient. For it was after 1957 that the clouds began to descend on Nehru. In 1958 there was the Mundhra scandal, the first signs of serious corruption in Government; in 1959 the unfortunate dismissal of the Communist Government in Kerala; in 1960

rising tension on the China border; in 1961 the conquest of Goa (which marred both Nehru's non-alignment and his professions of non-violence); in 1962 the disastrous war with China. These setbacks emboldened the critics to speak of the other failures of Nehru's regime: such as the continuing conflicts in Kashmir and Nagaland, the lack of attention to primary education, the hostility to business, the failure to effect land reforms.

Finally, Nehru's posthumous reputation has also suffered from the neglect of scholars and scholarship. There is an intriguing contrast here with Mahatma Gandhi. In his lifetime Gandhi was looked down upon by intellectuals who, even when they admired his ability to move the masses, thought little of his ideas, which were so completely alien to, and often at odds with, the progressive currents of the day. But after his death the intellectuals have rediscovered Gandhi with a vengeance. In Nehru's case the trajectory has been exactly the reverse; while he lived the cream of the world's intelligentsia crowded around him, whereas after his death they have left him alone.

This contrast is starkly manifest in the continuing production of books about the two men. Thus, the best Indian minds have thought deeply about Gandhi—consider here the fine recent studies of the Mahatma by Ashis Nandy, Bhikhu Parekh, Rajmohan Gandhi, and others. So have some able foreign minds—as for instance Denis Dalton, David Hardiman and Mark Juergensmeyer, all authors of insightful works on Gandhi and Gandhian thought. By contrast, a cast of rather ordinary Indians have written somewhat superficially about Nehru. And we can say the same about the foreigners. For none of the works on Nehru that now pour off the presses remotely match, in empirical depth or analytical insight, the far older works of Sarvepalli Gopal and Walter Crocker.

I do not mean here to over-estimate the power of the printed word. Popular ideas about Nehru will continue to be shaped by propaganda and political prejudice rather than by solid scholarship. Still, had there

been a slew of sensitive, empathetic, elegantly written books on Nehru—comparable to those on Gandhi—this might have promoted a more nuanced understanding of the colossal range of problems Nehru had to confront—a range unprecedented in the political history of the modern world—and allowed for a more healthy appreciation of Nehru’s achievements.

V

I did say that this lecture will focus on Nehru’s historical reputation, but I cannot resist the temptation to pass at least a provisional judgement on Nehru’s historical role. For, as it happens, I have spent much of the past decade studying the India of the nineteen fifties and sixties. I have been reading private papers and government reports, memoirs and, contemporary journals, accounts by anthropologists and political scientists. One man, Jawaharlal Nehru, laid his definitive stamp on those years. How, then, does a historical analysis of what he actually did compare with the criticisms and revisions of the present day? What follows is one historian’s answer.

First, Nehru was without question the chief architect of our democracy. It was he, more than any other nationalist, who promoted universal franchise and the multi-party system. He respected other Congressmen and Opposition leaders, and honoured the freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary.

Second, Nehru had the unique idea of staying non-aligned in a Cold War that was forever threatening to turn Hot. His policy allowed a newly independent, desperately poor, and still vulnerable country room to manoeuvre, and to take economic aid from both sides. This independence also allowed India, and Nehru, to play an important

mediating role in critical international conflicts such as in Korea and Vietnam.

Third, while it is now fashionable to attack Nehruvian economics from the free-market or environmentalist points of view, his views in this respect were not singular, but representative of a wide spectrum of intellectual and scientific opinion. Even the capitalist class was then behind the mixed economy—they thought the state should invest in infrastructure, and protect them from foreign competition. In any case, those economic policies have not been altogether unsuccessful. They have built a decent industrial base, helped assure self-sufficiency in food, and created a pool of technically skilled manpower that has fuelled the recent software boom.

Fourth, Nehru built on the inclusive idea of India framed by Tagore and Gandhi before him. He worked hard to bring women and low castes into public life. He worked overtime to integrate and respect the minorities. It is a striking (if now little-noticed) fact that his period as Prime Minister was largely free of communal riots.

Set against these manifest contributions, of course, are some notable failures. In the realm of domestic politics, Nehru need not have let his fellow Congressmen persuade him to dismiss the Kerala Communist government in 1959, an act which was wrong in itself and set an unpleasant (and since much-abused) precedent. In foreign policy, he should have been more alert to Chinese adventurism and more critical of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. As for his economics, he could have listened more to socialists who advocated rapid land reforms and to Gandhians who preached environmental unsustainability. But it was in the realm of social policy that lay the greatest of all his failures, the inability or unwillingness to wipe out the scourge of illiteracy.

Still, all things considered, Nehru was, in more senses than one, the builder of Indian democracy. Crucially, he respected social diversity as much as democratic procedure; thus his refusal to reduce India or 'Indian-ness' to a dominant religious or linguistic ethos. Nowhere is this

more poignantly illustrated than in an exchange of letters between Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel immediately after independence. The refugees pouring in from West Punjab were calling for retribution against the Muslims who remained in India. Their voice was loud, and for many, compelling. But Nehru told his Home Minister and close co-worker that it must be quelled: for India, if it was anything at all, was emphatically *not* Pakistan. Over there they might ill-treat or persecute their minorities; over here, we would protect and respect ours. There was, wrote Nehru to Patel, 'a constant cry for retaliation and vicarious punishment of the Muslims of India, because the Pakistanis punish Hindus. That argument does not appeal to me in the slightest'. For India was not a mirror image of Pakistan, a Hindu State to its Islamic State. 'Our secular ideals', insisted Nehru to Patel, 'impose a responsibility to our Muslim citizens in India'.

But Nehru was catholic with respect to more than matters of faith. Altogether, he was the least chauvinistic of political leaders. Like the Mahatma, he transcended the divisions of race and religion, caste and class, gender and geography. He was a Hindu who was befriended by Muslims, but also a Brahmin who did not observe the rules of caste, a North Indian who would not impose Hindi on the South, a man who could be trusted and respected by women.

It is true that Nehru could appear superior, not least to his colleagues in party and government. They did not share his cosmopolitan outlook, nor his interest in art, music, literature, or science. But no one did more than Nehru to nurture the values and institutions of democracy in India. It was he who first advocated adult suffrage, he who welcomed a constructive Opposition, he who scrupulously maintained the independence of the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Vincent Sheean once pointed to 'one overwhelming difference between Mahatma Gandhi and Mr. Nehru: the Mahatma would rather retire, fast, pray, take care of lepers and educate children, than go along with a majority opinion in which he could not concur'. Nehru, on the other hand, had in many

instances 'yielded to the majority of his party and of the country...'. Thus Congress Chief Ministers were always elected by the legislators of the concerned state, regardless of Nehru's opinion in the matter. And once he saw that both party and country wanted it, Nehru yielded to the formation of linguistic states—a policy he was personally opposed to.

Nehru's contribution to the building of modern India was immense. He made mistakes, to be sure, but other people in his place would most likely have made bigger ones. As a historian, I am quite clear that India was very fortunate to have him as Prime Minister for that crucial first decade after Independence. His record was unquestionably better than that of those who succeeded him. It was better than that of those who came to rule the other ex-colonial countries of Asia and Africa. And, so far as one can judge these matters, it was probably better than what might have been if some other Indian, say Patel or Bose, had happened to become Prime Minister in 1947.

As I have suggested, Indians are not always best placed to appreciate Nehru's achievements. Indeed, arguably the best single-volume work on Nehru was written by the Australian diplomat Walter Crocker. His *Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate*, is a wise, thoughtful, and detached book, its objectivity deepened by the fact that the author came from a relatively obscure country without high stakes in the Cold War.

Nehru, writes Crocker, 'was that rare man who is both clever and good'. In his lifetime it was Nehru's intelligence that was exaggerated; whereas after his death it has been his decency that has been depreciated. For he was indeed a profoundly good man. As Crocker put it, 'Nehru had less of the common and less of the mean than all but a few men. And he is to be numbered amongst the small band of rulers in history whose power has been matched with pity and mercy'—pity and mercy for the weak, the unfortunate, the forgotten and the persecuted among humankind. His selflessness was widely recognized: thus 'the

great bulk of the people of India sensed, and they never lost the sense, that Nehru wanted only to help them and wanted nothing for himself...’.

In his still authoritative three-volume biography, Sarvepalli Gopal quotes a vivid contemporary appreciation published in that normally sceptical British paper, the *Manchester Guardian*, after Nehru had addressed a press conference in London:

A hundred men and women of the West were being given a glimpse of the blazing power that commands the affection and loyalty of several hundred million people in Asia. There is nothing mysterious about it. Mr Nehru’s power is purely and simply a matter of personality. It is as intangible as that. Put in its simplest terms, it is the power of a man who is father, teacher and older brother rolled into one. The total impression is of a man who is humorous, tolerant, wise and absolutely honest.

This appeared in the summer of 1957, when Nehru was at the height of his prowess and popularity. Kerala and China and all of that still lay in front of him. The praise perhaps is excessive, but not by very much. His political achievements were indeed colossal. And (as I think I hesitatingly pointed out in that dim Calcutta seminar room twenty years ago) he was a leader of a transparent and winning decency of character. We Indians were very lucky to have him as Prime Minister for as long as we did. You don’t believe this? Ask any Pakistani, or Indonesian, or Nepali or Brazilian or Ghanaian or Zimbabwean, whose post-colonial states have been built—if that is the word—by looters and murderers posing as Third World anti-colonialists. It is owing to the work of men like Jawharlal Nehru that we are still reasonably independent, and—despite everything—reasonably democratic as well.