

Jawaharlal Nehru's Views on Democracy

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Nehru had democratic outlook as it is evident from his actions, speeches and propaganda. He laid foundations for democratic socialism in India. It paved way for development of mixed economy. It consists of both public sector and private sector and both sectors importance had been realized by Nehru. When he launched first five year plan he introduced the concept of democratic socialism. Even today he find the relevance of Nehru's idea of democracy and democratic way of functioning Indian government system.

INTRODUCTION

Jawaharlal Nehru's faith in the dignity of the individual and in the importance of the people led him to have faith in democracy as a way of life, and as basis of the social structure. His definition of democracy is not a narrow one because to him it did not mean only the existence of a few political institutions but a dynamic society giving full opportunities to the individual for his development. He confessed that it was difficult to define anything for definitions meant limitations; still he gave a broader definitions to democracy when he remarked: 'Democracy is not only political not only economic; but something of the mind. It involves equality of opportunity to all people, as far as possible, in the political and economic domain. It involves the freedom of the individual to grow and to make the best of his capacities and ability. It involves a certain tolerance of others and even of other's opinion when they differ from yours. It is a dynamic, not a static thing. Ultimately, it is a mental approach applied to our political and economic problems.'¹

ESSENTIALS OF DEMOCRACY

Individual Freedom

Nehru gave the central and primary importance to the individual. It was quite obvious from his thought that the individual's freedom was a pre-condition of man's fuller

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development. A democratic state should furnish a structure of society in which freedom is cherished and human values can be realized. Government and state are merely the means to promote the 'good life' of the individual. He wrote in 1933. 'The form of Government is after all a means to an end, even freedom itself is a means, the end being human well-being, human growth.² Good life of the members is essentially the end of a democratic society.

Every restriction and inhibition stops growth and so freedom is essential for every kind of development. He believed that 'spiritual or any other greatness cannot be founded on lack of freedom and opportunity.³ The same was true of the nation also. He held that freedom for the nation and the people was always good in the long run; but in the final analysis freedom itself was a means to an end, 'that end being the raising of the people in question to higher levels and hence the general advancement of humanity.'

Nehru gave a wider meaning to the concept of freedom. True freedom is not merely political but must also be economic and spiritual. Only then can man grow and fulfil his destiny.' He regarded freedom not merely as a matter of political decisions or of new constitutions, not even a matter of economic policy, but it was something 'of the mind and heart and if the mind narrows itself and is befogged and the heart is full of bitterness and hatred then freedom is absent.' To him India's struggle for political freedom was not a final goal in itself but rather a gateway and opportunity for the nation to progress, the removal of a obstruction which came in the way of our functioning as we wanted to function.⁴ And he held that the nation itself would suffer if the individuals growth and creative abilities were suppressed. 'Nothing can be worse for the world, I think, than a deprivation of human freedom of the individual'.⁵

In spite of his belief in freedom as the very basis of a democratic society, Nehru was not a protagonist of unrestricted freedom. An individual had no absolute freedom to act as he liked. During a debate in the parliament Nehru asserted: 'In a democratic society, the concept of individual freedom has to be balanced with social freedom and the relations of the individual with the social group. The individual must not infringe on the freedom of other individuals.⁶ So there is no such thing as perfect freedom for freedom has meaning only in a social context. He realized that under the mounting strains and stresses of the present age, 'freedom in the modern world is conditional and limited in many ways. Describing himself as 'an individualist and believes in personal freedom'. Nehru did not fail to emphasize the need for limitations on freedom. 'It seemed to me obvious that in a complex social structure, individual freedom had to be limited, and perhaps the only way to real personal freedom was through some such limitation in the social sphere.

For Nehru, state was an agency for protecting the right of freedom of the individual against those individuals and groups who were detrimental to it. He admitted: 'Social life necessitates some form of Government, and the man so placed in authority must curb and prevent all individual or group's tendencies which are inherently selfish and likely to injure society'.⁷ He did not appreciate violence in the name of freedom and did not mind the use of coercive methods by the Government. 'No Government can tolerate the preaching of violence, it has to be curbed by having recourse to the coercive processes.'⁸ He firmly believed that freedom did not mean indulging in wrong methods and inciting violence for some selfish ends.

To strike a balance between the security of the state and the freedom of the individual, it is to be seen that both are properly protected against each other. If the individual is to be protected by law, society is also to be protected against the selfish and predatory individual while keeping in mind the interests of the individual, one should not forget the interests of the individual, one should not forget the interest of the community as a whole which are to be safeguarded by the state. But in this conflict between the security of the state and the liberty of the individual, a clear-cut line of demarcation cannot be drawn. It depends upon the circumstances and a particular given situation. According to Nehru, normally, 'in times of war the demarcation should be in favour of the state and in peace it should be to the advantage of the individual.'⁹

FREEDOM, OBLIGATIONS AND DISCIPLINE

Every right is accompanied by a corresponding duty. Individual's right to freedom has meaning only when he fulfils his obligations. Rights and duties go hand in hand and Nehru held that 'in a social organism an individual cannot be separated from the rest. The rights of the individual must be balanced by the obligations of the individual to the social organism. Without obligations there can be no real rights.

Although democracy provides an opportunity to the individual to go ahead, to develop his potentialities, and to justify his place in society, yet Nehru felt that democracy required a higher standard among far more people than other forms of Government. 'If they do not reach their standard it may be that their democratic apparatus may fail. Democracy must have a basis in the masses of people and in their trained behaviour because if democracy is freedom 'it is also discipline, and we must therefore develop both the freedom and discipline of democracy among our people.'¹⁰ Freedom brings responsibilities with it and 'irresponsibility itself means lack of freedom.'¹¹ Thus freedom, to serve its own purpose, requires 'certain standards of behaviour and self discipline. A social organization must have some disciplines to provide its unity and stability. These disciplines can also be imposed from outside, but Nehru believed that 'in a proper

democracy, discipline is self-imposed.¹² Democracy itself could be defined as self-discipline for 'the less the imposed discipline and the more the self-discipline. The higher is the development of democracy.

For Nehru democracy essentially required a higher type of human being and that could be brought about only by self-discipline which meant that 'even people who do not agree-the minority-accept solutions because it is better to accept them than to have conflict. Decisions are to be changed peacefully, and no society can tolerate utter lack of discipline for long, because it creates chaotic conditions which would endanger freedom itself. Self-discipline involves another virtue and that is tolerance. 'Democracy means tolerance, tolerance not merely of those who agree with us, but of those who do not agree with us. Democracy gives opportunity to people for discussion and persuasion, for free expression of their opinions and for free argumentation. But this mutual exchange of ideas can take place only if people are tolerant of other's opinions and views. 'Democracy demands discipline, tolerance and mutual regard. Freedom demands respects for the freedom of others. In a democracy changes are made by mutual discussion and persuasion and not by violent means.

FREEDOM AND CENTRALIZATION

Nehru was well aware of the growing trend of centralization in modern states where people are depending more and more on the state for the fulfillment of their needs. 'The state becomes supreme in everything or groups of individuals have so much concentrated power at their disposal, that individual freedom tends to fade away.¹³ The most important factor, according to Nehru, was the existence of different and sometimes hostile ideologies which encouraged 'this concentration of power in the state or group. This must ultimately result not only in human unhappiness but also in a lessening of that creative genius which is so essential for the growth of humanity.

And so one of the greatest problems that confronts the modern democratic states is 'to find some balance between the centralized authority of the state and the assurance of freedom and opportunity to each individual. It is difficult to escape the centralized authority, whether it is of the state, of the big corporation, of the trade union or of any other group Nehru regarded all centralization as a slight encroachment upon the freedom of the individual. The dilemma is : 'we want to preserve the freedom of the individual, and at the same time we cannot escape centralization in society. How to balance the two?

Nehru felt that to some extent this was inevitable as the modern state could not be able to perform its functions without considerable amount of centralization. The state has

to organize various activities and consequently the administration of the state has become so complex and technical that elected representatives of the people have to depend upon the advice of experts. He stated in the Constituent Assembly : 'So the civil servants or the technical establishment became progressively more and more independent because no body could understand or control them.'¹⁴

Although the intervention by the state in individual's life has become so significant today, yet Nehru felt that there should not be so much outside imposition on the individual that he starts losing his initiative and his free will for achieving his own welfare consistent with the welfare of the whole social organism.

EQUALITY

In his presidential address to the Indian National Congress at Lahore in 1929, Nehru declared : 'Today politics have ceased to have much meaning, and the most vital question is that of social and economic equality. Laying stress on the importance of equality he wrote in 1933: "Democracy means equality, and democracy can only flourish in an equal society."¹⁵ From that point of view equality in a democratic society does not mean equality of possessing a vote, but economic and social equality.

By equality Nehru did not mean equalizing all persons and groups. 'What is essential is that they should be given equal opportunities to develop. If a nation, or a group, or an individual has the capacity in him to develop, well, he should have that opportunity?' Nehru believed that democracy is, on the whole, a great leveler and yet people differ educationally, economically and otherwise also. All human beings are not equal in the sense of ability or capacity. It depends upon individual human beings as to what extent they can develop their faculties: but it cannot be denied that there must be 'a society in which there is equality of opportunity and the possibility of everyone to lead a good life. Obviously this cannot be attained unless we produce to have the standards that a good life implies. We have, therefore, to lay great stress on equality and the removal of disparities. A social structure which "denies him this opportunity stands self condemned and must be changed."¹⁶

For Nehru equality included all the aspects of life political, social, economic, cultural, etc. Life is a complete whole and a society must try to remove disparities in all spheres. His ideal was 'social equality in the widest sense and equality of opportunity for everyone.'¹⁷ He broadened the meaning of equality on the social plan when he explained his point of view: 'Every man and woman must have the opportunity to develop to the best of his or her ability. Honour and merit come from ability and hard work and not because of caste or birth or riches.'¹⁸ Although while saying this he had the Indian

social structure in his mind, yet he believed fundamentally in the social equality of man without and distinctions of caste, race, colour and social status. Only such social equality would develop the sense of fraternity among the members of a social group where each would 'consider the other as his brother, not higher or lower', and people would feel that none is 'to be worshipped nor despised, but treated as equal with rights to share'. Thus he believed in the removal of special privileges, because 'democracy must mean removal of disparities,'¹⁹ if it is to be real democracy for the masses.

Political and social freedom and equality must be lead to economic freedom and equality. Indeed, there is nor such thing as freedom for a man who is starving or for a country which is poor'. Democracy cannot last long with out a just economic structure ensuring good standard of living for the common masses. Freedom and poverty are incompatible. 'Freedom becomes unimportant where there is absolute poverty prevailing. If through poverty and for other reasons you do not have even the capacity to live worthily, all other freedom do not count.' And so the ultimate aim of democratic society is 'to put an end to the differences between the rich and the poor, between the people who have opportunities, and those who have very few and none'. He came to the final conclusion" "True freedom is not merely political but must also be economic and spiritual. Only then can man grow and fulfill his destiny.'

FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

If both political freedom and social economic equality are essential for the fullest development of an individual, then an important question arises: What is the relationship between the two? Which one of the two should be given greater importance? Replying to a question at a press conference in New Delhi, Nehru realized the possibility of conflict between political freedom and economic freedom on practical considerations. He observed : 'Real freedom ultimately comes from political freedom and economic freedom ... But the point is this. There is a conflict between the economic aspect and political freedom... in various countries which are under bondage and underdeveloped, where there is starvations and want of millions of people; those people are more interested in a good meal or a certain economic betterment than in some theoretical political freedom.'²⁰ Therefore, this problem is to be met on the economic plan as well as the political plan. Apart from practical considerations, even from a theoretical point of view, Nehru accepted the difficulty in harmonizing the two concepts. He noted that 'freedom carried to the extreme is anarchy,'²¹ and 'liberty and democracy have no meaning without equality.' On the other hand, he doubted if ultimately the concept of equality could be co-ordinated with freedom, 'because when you bring equality it may interfere with somebody's freedom'. so there is a slight conflict between the two.

Nehru did not believe that such a conflict was an inherent one. The conflict can be resolved to some extent by balancing the two 'untill you balance the two ideas of freedom and equality, both of which are important, and each of which has to be limited to some extent in order to co-ordinate with the other you will not solve the problem of Today'. And yet the question remains: which one is more fundamental and basic freedom or equality? Nehru was deeply impressed by both liberal democratic ideas emphasizing freedom, and socialistic ideas emphasizing equality. He noted that the freedom had been the dominating idea of the 19th Century, but the twentieth century demanded equality as well. He was unable to provide any definite answer, but he basically believed that 'political freedom or political equality is the very basis on which you build up other equalities. At the same time political equality may cease to have meaning if there is gross economic inequality... But ... political equality is the basis for other qualitieis.

CONCLUSIONS

It is observed from the above discussion that Nehru had democratic outlook as it is evident from his actions, speeches and propaganda. He laid foundations for democratic socialism in India. it paved way for development of mixed economy. It consists of both public sector and private sector and both sectors importance had been realized by Nehru. When he launched first five year plant the introduced the concept of democratic socialism. Even today he find the relevance of Nehru's idea of democracy and democratic way of functioning Indian government system.

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