

Nehru, Congress and Socialism

Bashir Ahmad Bhat *, Nadeem Nisar **, Professor Usha Bhasin***

*Research Scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior (M.P.)

** Research Scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior (M.P.)

*** Professor and Head, Department of History, S.L.P College, Morar, Gwalior (M.P.)

Abstract: *Socialism, a global movement for bringing an end to the exploitation of one human being by another, started gaining ascendancy in the world after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The success of this Revolution inspired many other countries of the world to adopt the same path. In India, Socialism acquired roots in 1930s and became the accepted creed of the Indian youth whose urges came to be symbolised by Jawaharlal Nehru, the most important leader of the national movement after the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi. Being influenced by the Socialist ideology, Nehru imparted a socialist vision to the national movement, represented by Indian National Congress and became a symbol of socialism and socialist ideas in the country.*

Key words: Congress, Ideology, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Marxism, Russian Revolution, Socialism.

Socialism, a global movement, aims at ending the exploitation of vast majority of

hapless humanity by a small, powerful minority. It seeks to remove the consequent injustices and inequalities from the society and envisages the establishment of a society where all individuals enjoy equality in different walks of life i.e. economic, political, social etc. The people, particularly those belonging to the lower strata of the society – especially the neglected, downtrodden and distressed, welcomed it whole heartedly while the people of the affluent classes, landlords, zamindars, etc., opposed it tooth and nail. The journey of socialism, despite thorny resistance and hard opposition, did not stop and continued to attract millions of poor people around the globe, emboldening them to fight for their legitimate rights. As a result, Socialism became a universal slogan of the poor and distressed sections of the people.

The growth of the Socialist thought took, in India, took place mainly in the 20th century. Its emergence in India was primarily the result of the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution over the Indian revolutionaries.



Socialist ideas, however, acquired roots in Indian soil during 1930s and became the accepted creed of the Indian youth whose urges came to be symbolised by Jawaharlal Nehru, the most popular leader of the national movement after Gandhiji.

Being influenced by socialism, Jawaharlal Nehru imparted a socialist vision to the Indian national movement and became the symbol of socialism and socialist ideas in India particularly after 1929. The notion that freedom must have a socio-economic content began increasingly to be associated with his name.

Nehru became the president of the historic Lahore Session of the Congress held in 1929. He was again, elected to the post in 1936 and 1937. As the president of the Indian National Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru repeatedly toured the country and propagated the ideas of socialism and declared that political freedom would become meaningful only if it led to economic emancipation of the masses which, according to him, was only possible with the establishment of a society based on socialist ideas. Nehru, thus, moulded a whole generation of young nationalists and helped them accept a socialist orientation.

Nehru developed an interest in economic questions when he came in touch with the peasants movements in eastern U.P. in 1920-21. He then used his enforced leisure in jail, during 1922-23, to read widely on the history of the Russian and other revolutions. Nehru, in 1927, was invited to help in organising and also to participate, as a representative of the Indian National Congress, in the International Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, to be held in Brussels. There he came in contact with communists and anti-colonial fighters from all over the world. This, according to the Nehru's biographer, S. Gopal, was "the turning point in Jawaharlal Nehru's mental development" and he realised that the objectives of the conference were to bring together the forces of anti-colonialism and organise a labour movement against the imperialism especially British imperialism.

Brussels conference helped Nehru to understand some of the problems of the colonial and dependent countries much more perceptibly besides giving him an insight into the problems of the Western labour world. In his speech at Brussels, Nehru stated that economic exploitation was worse than shootings, hangings, and massacres etc.

which were occasionally being highlighted through press or through any other platform. In India, according to him, one could find a wonderful instance of every phase of imperialism that one wishes to study. The British has applied most ruthless and systematic methods of exploitation and drainage of wealth out of India. By now Nehru had begun to accept Marxism in its broad contours. The same year he visited the Soviet Union, along with his father, and was deeply impressed by the new socialist society there.

In 1928, Jawaharlal joined Subhas Chandra Bose, another Congress stalwart who was influenced by the Socialist ideology, and organised the 'Independence for India League', a powerful fraction within the Congress, that demanded complete independence for India rather than dominion status as suggested by the Nehru Committee. While elucidating the difference between dominion status and independence, Nehru stated that the dominion status 'envisages the same old structure, with many bonds visible and invisible tying us to the British economic system, complete independence gives or ought to give us, freedom to erect a new structure to suit our circumstances.' Nehru

thus stood for complete independence and 'a socialist revision of the economic structure of society.' At the Lahore session of the Congress in 1929, Nehru proclaimed:

"I must frankly confess that I am a socialist and a republican, and I am no believer in kings and princes, or in the order which produces the modern kings of industry, who have greater power over the lives and fortunes of men than even the kings of old, and whose methods are as predatory as those of the old feudal aristocracy....The Congress, it is said, must hold the balance fairly between capital and labour, and zamindar and tenant. But the balance has been and is terribly weighed to one side, and to maintain the status quo is to maintain injustice and exploitation. The only way to do right is to do away with the domination of one class over another"

Nehru was of the opinion that no ideology other than Socialism could fit in the democratic pattern of India. He was convinced that no democracy could succeed without imbibing socialist pattern. The essence of socialism, Nehru used to say, lies in ‘the control of the means of production by the state and the idea of inspiring socialism was the prevention of the exploitation of the poor by the rich. The socialist way, to Nehru, was that of ‘ending the poverty, vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjugation’. Nehru’s concept of was not the abolition of private property, but the replacement of the present profit system by the higher ideal of cooperative service. His socialism was not the state ownership of the means of production, but was their societal and cooperative ownership. He said:

“India would have to adopt a full ‘socialist programme’ if she was ‘to end her poverty and inequality.’ It was also not possible for the Congress to hold the balance between capital and labour and landlord and tenant, for the existing balance was ‘terribly

weighted’ in favour of the capitalists and landlords”.

Nehru’s commitment to socialism found a clearer and sharper expression during his presidential address to the Lucknow Congress in April 1936, when he said:

“I am convinced that only key to the solution of the world problems and of India’s problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in a scientific, economic sense.....I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation, and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structure”.

Although his observation on classless society was hailed by the many communists yet Nehru admitted that he was not a communist and that his roots were still in the 19th century liberalism and democracy. He never became

a champion of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He criticized Gandhi for advocating harmony among the exploiters and the exploited and refusing to recognise the conflict of classes, but at the same time praised him for his revolutionary role in the national movement. Nehru, thus, had unique relationship with Gandhi. He often used to shock socialists by preaching Gandhism and bewildered Gandhites by seeking to convert them to socialism.

Nehru's socialism was within the framework that accepted the primacy of the political anti-imperialistic struggle so long as India was ruled by Britishers. As he wrote, "the two basic urges that moved him were nationalism and political freedom as represented by the Congress and social freedom as represented by the socialism." He did not support the creation of an organisation independent or separate from Congress and making a break with the Gandhi and the right wing nationalists. The task was to influence and transform the Congress as a whole in a Socialist direction. And this could be best achieved by working under its banner and bringing in it workers and peasants to play a greater role in its organisation. For him, it was sheer blindness

if the socialists kept harping on the reformist character of the national movement instead of trying to speed up and make stronger the emerging mass orientation of the national movement favouring socialism. In spite of being a convinced socialist, Nehru could not stem the drift towards the right. Though skilful manoeuvres, combining pressures with concessions, the Right was able to preserve its hegemony over the national movement. As was later revealed, the presidential addresses, programmes and speeches were more a part of the assembly elections rather than any serious turn towards socialism.

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