

## ***Socialists & the Legacy of Indian Freedom: Thoughts on Jawaharlalji's Birthday***

By Anil Nauriya

The historical juncture at which India finds itself requires redefinition and restructuring of the Socialist movement. The present-day Congress cannot entirely be separated from the legacy of the pre-freedom Indian National Congress, yet the former formation has distinct characteristics and must be organisationally distinguished from its historical predecessor. Moreover, with the current decline of the Congress, Socialists need to remind themselves that they are legatees of the space occupied by Indian nationalism since 1885. This includes the political legacy of, for example, early Indian nationalists like Badruddin Tyabji, Dadabhai Naoroji and Gopal Krishna Gokhale and the social legacy of Mahadev Govind Ranade that had inspired both Gokhale and Gandhi.

The split in the Indian National Congress in 1969 and the dissolution eight years later of the Congress (O), with its merger into the newly-formed Janata Party in 1977, had the undesirable consequence that the entire Congress space was ceded to Mrs Indira Gandhi's party, then known as Congress (I). It is this latter party which has in recent years been receding politically. In the circumstances, it should not have been difficult to foresee that unless Socialists re-asserted themselves as legatees of the Indian freedom struggle as represented by the pre-freedom Indian National Congress, into which they were born and from which they have sprung, the vacuum left by the decline of the Congress would inevitably be filled by other forces.

It would not be meaningful, of course, to claim this larger national legacy, while neglecting the Indian socialist space itself. So it is necessary for Socialists to reclaim also the entire Socialist spectrum and political ferment represented by the founders of the Congress Socialist Party in 1934. Socialists must not confine themselves to a limited part of the Socialist trajectory. They need to come out of the time warp of the post-independence Lohia-Nehru controversies, particularly of the 1960s, with which some of them have got near-permanently embroiled and over which they have also become immoderately embittered. Lohia helped re-focus attention on five important issues: civil liberties, gender and colour-related inequalities, mass poverty, social backwardness especially that entwined with caste, and linguistic iniquities. Many of these issues had engaged Indian nationalists earlier – for example, from Dadabhai Naoroji to Romesh Chandra Dutt on the economic aspects; to Gandhi, Abbas Tyabji, Motilal Nehru, C R Das and Tagore on civil liberties questions arising especially out of the 1919 events and after and Asaf Ali's inquiries on the NWFP and Bannu raids in 1938; to Narendra Deva and the language-related contradictions in the education system pointed out by the Education Committee headed by him in the United Provinces in 1938-39; to the Rashtriya Stree Sabha of the 1920s, Desh Sevika Sangh of the 1930s, Sarojini Naidu and socialists Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, Rama Devi and Malati Choudhury on questions of the relation between nationalism and gender; to the entire legacy of constructive work associated with the freedom movement, as represented for example, by Thakkar Bapa, Kaka Kalelkar, Ginwala, Mithu Petit, Jugatram Dave, Khurshed Naoroji, B F Bharucha, Bibi Amtussalam, Perin Captain, Walunjkar, Zakir Husain, Asha Devi and Aryanayakam, and countless others. Lohia's own attachment to India's freedom movement and its legacy was reflected in his refusal to let go of the struggles that had taken place in the areas that were later included in Pakistan and his concern for legendary figures like the Frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Baluch Gandhi, Khan Abdus Samad Khan and Punjab's Unionist leader Khizr Hayat Khan Tiwana, on all of whose post-partition years and days spent in Pakistani prisons Lohia maintained a vigilant watch.<sup>1</sup>

The issues Lohia identified after independence were real and unresolved and many still remain so. The salience that poverty measurement and poverty studies came to occupy in Indian economics and Indian planning undoubtedly received an impetus from the dramatic manner in which the question of the per capita per diem earning was highlighted by Lohia in the Lok Sabha in 1963. Similarly, the urgency of the need for affirmative action in favour of “Other Backward Classes” was, in an appreciable measure, inspired by the importance attached by Lohia to the advancement of these groups. Language policy questions also came to the fore, in part, because of Lohia’s emphasis on correcting the disadvantages attaching to a non-English-medium education, particularly in north India. Yet the triumphalism sometimes indulged in by a section of Socialists over the Lohia-Nehru debates and such passages-at-arms as the “3 anna versus 15 anna” controversies needs to be tempered with the understanding that the bonafides of the protagonists was not in question.

The answers Lohia provided to some of the social, linguistic and cultural issues he raised are not necessarily so complete or final that they cannot be supplemented, fine-tuned or re-thought.<sup>2</sup> On other issues too, remaining confined to some of the debates of the 1960s and the thinking that emerged then has constricted the intellectual growth of the socialist movement. A similar point was once made also by the late Kishan Patnaik in *Janata* in 1980.<sup>3</sup> It is useful to recall here also that the late Surendra Mohan, in an introspective article written for *Janata*, had once pointed to the connection between the negativities in the opposition politics of the late sixties and the negativities of the post-Shastri establishment.

Another aspect of the matter is worth appreciating. The *writings* of Lohia and the *politics* of Lohia need, to some extent, to be distinguished as these are not necessarily congruent. Speaking generally, I would rate the writings of both Lohia and JP considerably higher than their politics - especially Lohia’s politics in the 1960s and JP’s in the 1970s. [Incidentally, this is the reverse of what is true in the case of Mahatma Gandhi whose praxis would often race ahead of his writings, phenomenal though these themselves were; Gandhi himself recognized this when he said that his writings could be burnt for all he cared and that it was his life that was his message; in the same vein, Nehru too had once observed how much greater Gandhi was than his “little books”.]

Every movement requires periodic renewal; its dominant doctrines and practices need to be reconsidered in the light of experience. The political alliances Lohia forged and also the thinking associated with these alliances certainly need to be re-thought in the light of subsequent experience and also the changed circumstances in which the Congress is no longer the force that it used to be. The Socialist alliance with the Jana Sangh in the run-up to the General Elections of 1967 opened the route to further such unthinking linkages by Jayaprakash Narayan in the mid-1970s and by V P Singh in the late 1980s. The remedies sought by Lohia, JP and V P Singh, and especially the manner in which these were sought, may have proved worse than the disease. Few precautions were taken by them in the forging of their strategies and no adequate steps taken for the ideological training of cadres. Even if such precautions had been taken, it should have been obvious that aligning with reactionary forces, whether tacitly or otherwise, would have long-term deleterious ramifications for the country.

Similarly, Socialists critically must re-examine the caste-orientations that have come to be associated with some of them. This is so especially where they graduate to running governments. They need, to put it as mildly as possible, to nuance their approaches; religious sectarianism can perhaps be obstructed but not wholly countered through caste-centric politics. Caste is relevant as a social reality whose influence one must seek to reduce and counter-act; it is also relevant as a basis for hostile discrimination which one must seek to eliminate. Caste cannot become an organizing-principle in itself since such mobilization is both intellectually and practically self-defeating.<sup>4</sup> In an introspective article some decades ago, the late Kishan Patnaik had also deprecated attempts made by Socialists “to bolster the middle caste lobbies for electoral power politics”.<sup>5</sup> The Socialist movement needs to return to Narendra Deva’s insight that the institution of caste is essentially anti-democratic.

In their pursuit of democracy too, Socialists must not confine themselves to the civil liberties framework which tends to restrict them to pre-occupation with Constitutional and legal transgressions like the Emergency, while often neglecting the social changes that underpin such phenomena and also developments like the growth of fascist tendencies that sometimes skirt these phenomena. The civil liberties movement and the socialist movement are distinct though these may in certain respects overlap.

Socialists must positively re-engage with the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru in his role as a great fighter for Indian freedom and connect with him just as the founders of the Congress Socialist party had. The founders of the Socialist movement did not see themselves as being apart from Nehru. Narendra Deva in his presidential address at the first session of the of the All-India Congress Socialist Conference at Patna on 17 May 1934 had in his opening words referred to Nehru in the following terms : “My task is made all the more difficult by the absence of our beloved friend, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, whose absence today we all so keenly feel and whose valuable advice and guidance would have been of immense value to us on this occasion”. Twelve years later, Narendra Deva wrote a perceptive appraisal of Nehru. Narendra Deva recognized that “Jawaharlalji took great interest in class-organisation. He was elected President of the All-India Trade Union Congress in the year 1929 and it has been his constant endeavour to make the Congress interest itself in the economic struggles of the workers. He tried to bring economic questions to the forefront. The resolution of Fundamental Rights passed at the Karachi Congress in 1931 was his contribution. His activities brought about a general radicalization of political thought in the country.”<sup>6</sup>

On Nehru’s attitude toward religion, Narendra Deva reflected: “Religion in its institutional form is repugnant to him as it is the bulwark of reaction and the defender of *status quo*. Its function in society has been to make social inequalities less irksome to the lower classes. But he has no quarrel with that purer form of religious faith which inspires the conduct of individuals. He, however, believes in ethical social conduct and has a deep sense of human values.”<sup>7</sup>

It was Nehru who, as Congress President in 1936, had re-organised the Congress headquarters and given Lohia charge of its Foreign Department. Nearly 40 years younger to Gandhi and some 19 years to Nehru, Lohia wrote to the latter on 23 May 1946: “please don’t forget that you and another have influenced men like me so much that there never has been a place for a third nor ever shall be”. A photocopy of Lohia’s letter to Nehru was published by the socialist Bhola Chatterji (1922-1992) in an article in *Sunday* magazine some decades ago.

The socialist leader and intellectual, Madhu Limaye, who was close to Lohia and nearly three decades younger than Nehru, was conscious of the need “to take an objective view and keep out my personal likes and dislikes, prejudices and predilections”; he refers to Jawaharlalji as the “uncompromising sentinel of Independence” and acknowledges that he “gave a new orientation to (the) Congress policy and programme”; and that “he championed the cause of the peasantry” and “took up the case of the workers working in mines and the factories who were being treated as slaves”.

Jawaharlal Nehru is an intrinsic part of the nationalist legacy of Indian freedom; nor can the Indian socialist legacy be defined or recalled by excluding him. On inter-communal questions, which have a bearing on the very definition of India, Nehru’s record is par excellence and second only to that of Mahatma Gandhi.

Socialists must re-engage positively also with Jawaharlal Nehru as the builder of post-independence India. Madhu Limaye has fairly acknowledged Nehru’s initiative in bringing about reform in Hindu law in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> It was Nehru who got the Congress committed to a socialistic pattern of society in its session at Avadi in 1955. The building up of the public sector enabled India for long to hold its own in a world that various international powers sought to bend to their own image. Stupendous efforts were made under Nehru to reduce India’s external dependence on oil. How vital this effort was may be gauged from the lengths to which Western powers went in opposing similar Iranian efforts under Prime Minister Mossadegh against whom a successful coup was organized in the 1950s. [This latter story has been documented by Christopher de Bellaigue in his recent book, *Patriot of Persia: Muhammad Mossadegh and a Very British Coup*] The building up of an independent public sector tradition had other ramifications as well. The emphasis on research and development, 90 percent of which was done in the public sector, induced a tradition of self-reliance, partly squandered by later regimes. In the case of drugs, this tradition has enabled Indian firms today to be prime suppliers of relatively-low-priced vital medication to countries with similar problems as ours, such as countries in Africa.

Nehru respected Parliament and urged the judiciary, nurtured in colonial times, to recognize social concerns in a changing India. At least two rounds of land reform legislation, at the onset of the fifties and sixties, took place under Nehru’s leadership. Above all and in spite of the bitterness ensuing from the country’s partition in 1947, Nehru maintained inter-communal peace, with the first major riot occurring only in the early sixties. The extent to which Nehru moulded the post-independence Congress may be gauged from remarks that Jayaprakash Narayan made in July 1964, a few weeks after Jawaharlalji’s death. JP was reported to have said that leaving the Congress in 1948 to form the Socialist Party was a mistake committed on account of “the wrong assessment of the character of the Congress”.<sup>9</sup> According to JP, “most of his partymen thought at that time that the Congress would slowly develop into a conservative-cum-liberal party just like ‘what the Swatantra Party is today’. But history belied this assessment”.<sup>10</sup> [Ironically, the then assessment may have provided an accurate description of the *later* post-emergency Congress and especially towards the last two decades of the twentieth century.] Clearly, JP’s assessment of Nehru’s administration and Lohia’s understanding were quite different. This consideration too should induce Socialists to broaden their understanding of Nehru.

Socialists energetically must counter the maligning and attempted discrediting of Gandhi and of Nehru by the Hindu Mahasabha, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the RSS and their associate organizations and supporters. This tendency has been in evidence for several decades; but it has lately assumed a virulent character. The direct attacks on Gandhi which used to be made by the RSS and its associates in the Jana Sangh days have, since they proved ineffective for their purposes, been replaced with more subtle strategies that would seek to invoke Gandhi for such matters as cleaning-up while ignoring his pluralism and mocking his humanism. The *direct* attacks are now made mainly by the Mahasabha and its related organizations which have sought even to glorify Gandhi's assassins. In the case of Nehru, the *direct* attacks, combined with efforts to erase his memory, are made by the *entire* Mahasabha-RSS-BJP-continuum. At the recent Indo-African summit in New Delhi, the tendency referred to here was carried to the point where the African dignitaries had to remind the current Indian government of the shared vision and positive contributions of Gandhi and Nehru to Africa and its struggles.

It is incumbent for socialists in these times to defend not only Gandhi's but also Nehru's legacy against attacks from communal-sectarian forces; when Gandhi and Nehru are sought to be belittled, especially by forces unfriendly to the composite national struggle for freedom, it is the entire struggle that is sought to be traduced.

Socialists must seek to cultivate a scientific approach to the evaluation of Nehru. The currently dominant Socialist attitude toward Nehru induces some of them into making overt and covert arrangements with the BJP and its associates, just as they had in the past with BJP's predecessors. This predilection needs rectification. The Draft Platform of the Socialist Party in 1972 had ruled out any modus vivendi with the Jana Sangh. Yet this formulation was abandoned within a couple of years of it being advanced.

As inheritors of the heritage of the Indian freedom struggle, Socialists naturally speak of Gandhi, Narendra Deva, Jayaprakash, Yusuf Meherally and Lohia. They have no difficulty also in seeking bridges between the social struggles of Gandhi and of Ambedkar; although the latter was an outsider to the political struggle for Indian freedom, his social legacies are correctly seen by Socialists as being convergent with their own objectives, as Lohia himself recognized in the fifties. Why then the contemporary reluctance of a section of Socialists to recognize their obvious affinities and convergences with Jawaharlal Nehru? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Nehru is unjustly excluded for subjective and even irrational reasons connected with the Lohia-Nehru controversies and because family domination emerged within the Congress especially after the crisis of the emergency in 1975-77. Such exclusion is patently unfair to Jawaharlal Nehru, attacking whom has become a major organizing point for Hindutva. Besides, to remain silent in the face of such attacks has the effect of denying the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the Indian nation's strivings and aspirations, a denial which, of course, the Hindutva forces ardently desire.

The crucial issue before the country is the social fascism associated with the ascendancy of the currently ruling forces and their associate organizations. Though it is right in this context to focus on protection of civil liberties and on safeguards against a repeat of the Emergency, it is necessary to go beyond form and formalism. *There is an undeclared social emergency in the country.* Developments in rural western Uttar Pradesh in the run-up to the 2014 General Elections should have left no doubt on that score. The lives and property of members of minority communities, Dalits and poor peasants are endangered. These forces operate with the

support of elements within the Central and provincial state apparatus, the business world and affluent non-resident Indians. The fight against the malaise of corruption is only one part of the larger question of the *accountability of power*; the latter subsumes within itself struggles against governmental malfeasance and misfeasance in protecting citizens' lives and welfare. Such accountability and protection is a solemn obligation also on all political parties, a duty which Gandhi as well as Jawaharlal Nehru fully recognized.

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<sup>1</sup> *Lok Sabha Debates*, 24 September 1965, cited in *Lohia and Parliament*, New Delhi, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1991 p. 296

<sup>2</sup> For some possible ideas in this context, see my article, "Three Outstanding Linguistic Issues : Some Suggestions", *Janata*, 26 June 1994.

<sup>3</sup> How the composite insights of the socialist doer and thinker Karpooi Thakur and later of Kishan Patnaik were lost a decade or so later in the exclusively-caste-oriented framing of the reservation question in 1990-91 is pointed to in my article, "Moment of Truth for Janata Dal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 June 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Anil Nauriya, "Look Beyond Mandal", *The Times of India*, 19 December 2006

<sup>5</sup> Kishan Patnaik in *Janata*, 15 June 1980

<sup>6</sup> Acharya Narendra Deva, "Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru" in Acharya Narendra Deva, *Socialism and the National Revolution* [Yusuf Meherally (ed.)] Bombay, Padma Publications, 1946, pp. 203-4

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206

<sup>8</sup> Madhu Limaye, *Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru : A Historic Partnership, 1916-1948*, Vol IV, Delhi, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1991, p. 236.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Hindustan Times*, 4 July 1964, cited in Girja Shankar, *Socialist Trends in the Indian National Movement*, Meerut, Twenty-First Century Publishers, 1987, p. 294n .

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*