

'COMMENTARAO' IN "THE TELEGRAPH"

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"Rewriting History-others who contributed to the making of India"

by S L Rao

___ Political history often has different points of view. The same event might be depicted differently by different people at different times. Ideological predilections colour perceptions of people and events. Winners tend to depict themselves in a favourable light. Sometimes ethnic, religious and racial groups are given short shrift. This is evident in Indian post-independence political history. Gandhiji was the supreme leader during the independence movement. His followers swore by many ideologies but were united by Gandhiji for India's swaraj. They do not dominate political history as do the Nehru-Indira Gandhi dynasty.

When the BJP came to power for the first time, the Congress party had ruled India, except for short breaks, almost continuously from 1946. Its leaders in independent India belonged to the Nehru-Gandhi family. Narasimha Rao was the exception and the party has ever since tried to delete him from party and national memory. Rajiv's widow Sonia exercised power as the remote control over Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for ten years.

Vajpayee was the first non-Congressman to be Prime Minister for a full term (and more). He had been a RSS pracharak, but was also a lifelong Parliamentarian. He approached national issues with an open mind and carefully considered contrary points of view. He was highly regarded by Pandit Nehru and other national leaders.

His policies were a continuation of the past. Despite his years in the RSS he was a tolerant Hindu and accepted the diversity of India. He did not press an extreme Hindu ideology, and was not against other religions and their practices. Preservation of India's diversity was essential to India's wellbeing. His rhetoric was cerebral and poetic, never offensive. He did not question the deification of the Nehru family nor the relatively poor place given to other Leaders of the independence movement.

Modi was never a Parliamentarian. He is not a follower of Nehru. He had been Chief Minister of Gujarat, a relatively cohesive state culturally, pro-business, and was not a believer in the Welfare state. He is clearly the boss of his party and cabinet and very watchful of the behaviour of his ministers and others in government. Modi has been a lifelong RSS pracharak. He accepts RSS ideas and needs their foot soldiers to fight elections. Modi's rhetoric is about development and good governance, and a belief in pro-market reforms. His legislative ability has not matched his ambitions. He does not condemn communal incidents when fomented by BJP's sister organizations. Nor does he correct

communal statements by his Ministers and legislators. His attitude to Opposition parties has been superior and arrogant. He does not negotiate with them. He does not seem to have built any bridges to get his legislation through Parliament. While he is careful not to publicly express support for Hindu revivalism, his public postures never harshly criticize his party men's public displays of intolerance. His accession was bound to rewrite the place of Nehru and his family, and of the Congress, in India's political history.

Almost sixty years after Nehru died there are new reports that besmirch his reputation. They are not about his economic policies and central control over resources, his admiration for Soviet style central planning, nor British Labour Party's ideas of creating a Welfare state. Till 1962 his policy was to keep a distance from the West (USA, UK and Europe). "Non-alignment" was a result of his desire not to be pro-West and be closer to the Communist countries. He was determined to keep India united in its diversity and he built and respected the institutions that would ensure this (Parliament and legislatures, judiciary, etc). As a corollary he was afraid that India might follow the trend of Asian countries and especially Pakistan and go under military rule. He tried to ensure that this would never happen in India by making the defence forces fully subservient to the civil service and the elected politicians.

This must have made him particularly concerned about the possible return to an independent India of the one political leader who had a similar family and educational background and immense nationwide admiration. This was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose who had broken away from the non-violence preached by Gandhij and followed by all other leaders. He tied up with the Germans and the Japanese to create an Indian National Army that fought the British in the II World War.

Netaji Boase and his fate were “official secrets” that Nehru and his daughter (and their successors) successfully hid from the Indian public. Netaji was perhaps the only possible competitor to Nehru for leading independent India. Papers declassified by the West Bengal government, to be followed by the larger cache of secret papers with the government of India and other governments, have resulted in much speculation about the role of Nehru in Bose’s disappearance of after an alleged air crash in 1945. Nehru and the Congress governments kept a close watch on member of the Bose family (old and young) till 1972. It may have been to discover his whereabouts if alive, and his possible return, or whether anyone knew what really happened to Bose after his disappearance in 1945. There is even speculations that Bose was detained (possibly at India’s request) by the Soviets in a Siberian gulag for many years till he died.

As must be expected when there is such a towering leader like Nehru, questions about Nehru relate to political

events and decisions. They are not confined to criticism of his economic policies. These policies required state ownership and control of resources. They were much enlarged by Indira Gandhi, to the supposed detriment of India's economic development.

Apart from the sudden disappearance of Bose in 1945, other doubts have surfaced about Nehru's judgement and mistakes. There are reports that India was offered a permanent seat in the Security Council of the United Nations in 1946 but that Nehru instead proposed that China get it. India has yet to get it. Ironically, China opposes India getting a permanent seat in the Security Council.

Nehru took the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan to the United Nations which ordered withdrawal of Pakistan and Indian forces and a plebiscite among the people of Jammu and Kashmir. This decision of Nehru set in motion the continuous confrontation between Pakistan and India for almost 70 years, with three Wars and many battles.

The 1962 war with China was lost by India. It has left a deep scar on the psyche of Indians and their attitude to China. Leaked reports of the high level investigation into that lost War suggest that the war was a result of Nehru's mistakes and was not initiated by China as has been taught in Indian political history.

None of these mistakes can diminish Nehru's basic contributions to making India a strong nation. He created a

united democratic India. He built and nurtured the institutions that kept it so. But the described episodes if confirmed will certainly diminish him as an infallible Leader, and as a human being.

At the same time it is essential that Indian history recognizes and honours the many other Great Leaders who joined together to fight for India's independence. The understanding that Nehru was a mortal Leader who made mistakes, will make it easier to reposition the forgotten Leaders of India. They have always deserved recognition of their roles in making India independent, and a democracy. The Congress party and its Leaders have denied them this recognition for almost seventy years. Irrespective of Nehru's mistakes and other actions, this repositioning is essential for a truer political history of India.

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