

## THE DANGER OF DEMONIZING THE BOATMAN



Every country that broke free of the colonial shackles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has its fables intertwined with the account of an iconic figure who occupied the central position in the struggle for freedom. In large parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America the legends of such national heroes have saturated the collective imagination of peoples. Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela, Bogyoke Aung San, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – their journeys at one point became inseparable from the chronicles of the nationalist struggles in Congo, South Africa, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Though he preceded these larger-than-life figures by more than a century, Simón Bolívar had defined the role with his reckless bravery across Latin America beginning with Venezuela. But then, he was more of a swashbuckling military genius than a leader of the masses.

The Indian equivalent of such stalwarts is indisputably Jawaharlal Nehru, who strode across the country's political landscape like an unchallenged hero for almost half a century. More importantly, he cast a spell on his people with his magical words, avant-garde ideas and patrician good looks. India's Prince Charming. Quite appropriately American historian Stanley Wolpert calls Nehru 'India's royal figure, its matinee idol, its most gifted prime minister'.

Gandhi was more of a saint, a *yatri* on the rough terrain seeking truth, challenging the Empire from the standpoint of dharma, testing the moral fibre of the British Raj. Politics was the road he travelled but he resided on a more exalted plane. It's significant that in his long innings of 33 years in Indian politics (since his return from South Africa in 1915) he held the post of Congress president only once – in 1924, for a single-year term.

With his exposure to international politics, insights into the future, radical ideas in the context of the time and his phenomenal mass appeal, Nehru was the foremost leader of the freedom struggle and well-suited to interpret his country's gloom and aspirations. Of all his acolytes, Gandhi had the uncanny sense to know, that the India emerging out of the debris of colonialism and the feudal stranglehold would be speaking of its tomorrow through Jawaharlal. In the opinion of Judith Brown, a professor at Oxford and author of several books on Gandhi and Nehru, the reasons Gandhi had groomed Nehru for the leadership role were strong:

Nehru was a far more international figure, and a pan-Indian rather than a regional figure, and someone able to fashion dialogue across more of the political spectrum. This had been a strong element in Gandhi's nurturing of Nehru for leadership since the 1920s.

Things, however, were not that simple. Quite contrary to the prevailing impression, there were moments when Nehru's differences with his mentor sharpened. He, in fact, sought

to distance himself from Gandhi at one point. And the older man was aware of this disenchantment. In a letter from Sabarmati Ashram dated 17 January 1928, Gandhi raised the matter:

The differences between you and me appear to me to be so vast and radical that there seems to be no meeting ground between us. I can't conceal from you my grief that I should lose a comrade so valiant, so faithful, so able and so honest as you have always been; but in serving a cause, comradeships have got to be sacrificed.

Of course the two did not part way but stayed close till Gandhi breathed his last. Nehru's moving speech after Gandhi's assassination counts among one of his best:

Friends and Comrades,

The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere. I do not know what to tell you and how to say it. Our beloved leader, Bapu as we called him, the Father of the Nation, is no more. Perhaps I am wrong to say that. Nevertheless, we will never see him again as we have seen him for these many years. We will not run to him for advice and seek solace from him, and that is a terrible blow, not to me only, but to millions and millions in this country. And it is a little difficult to soften the blow by any other advice that I or anyone else can give you.

He spoke these poignant lines, like the Tryst with Destiny speech, extempore.

Looking at the men and women who preferred police brutalities and British prison to more profitable propositions of life from the prism of our pygmy times is fraught with dangers. We tend to misconstrue their words and actions, for they were guided by an altogether different set of values. They did not live for the media nor did they put a very high premium on publicity.

In a letter from prison to his daughter, Nehru's admiration for the Mahatma acquired a rare poignancy:

My Dear Indira,

... In India a great leader, full of love for all who suffer and eager to help them, has inspired our people to great actions and noble sacrifices. He has helped to make the starving, the poor and the oppressed free and happy.

Bapuji is in prison, but the magic of his message has stolen the hearts of India's millions. Men and women, and even little children, come out of their little shells and become India's soldiers of freedom. In India today we are making history, and you and I are fortunate to see this happening

before our eyes...

This assessment of Gandhi's role in the freedom struggle, an appropriate tribute, was intended to let his little girl know about the situation in the country, not meant to be publicized. Going through the letter now one feels the deep bond of compassion and camaraderie that made them confront the world's biggest imperial power determinedly.

What lends lustre to the enduring Nehru mystique was the smooth transition he essayed from his role as the charismatic leader of the nationalist movement to the Prime Minister of a truncated, bleeding country. This is a crossover that trips many fiery leaders of nationalist movements. Think of Mao, think of Robert Mugabe. In the devastating Chinese famine during 1959-61 following the failure of Mao's ill-conceived Great Leap Forward, 15 million people died of starvation, overwork and state-sponsored repression. However, historian Frank Dikötter put the figures at 45 million. Mugabe who had challenged the minority white rule in British-controlled Rhodesia in his youth, ended up as a high-handed dictator responsible for atrocities against his opponents and Zimbabwe's economic ruination. Ousted in a military coup, the lonely despot died far away from home in a Singapore hospital in 2019.

As Prime Minister of a newly independent country Nehru had the choice of turning to the West and borrowing their technology which in the shorter term would have been easy and smooth.

But he went the whole hog of building India's industrial base manufacturing trucks, tractors, pumping machines and HMT watches as well. Within years India started exporting some of these items to other countries.

A close look at India's neighbourhood by the mid-eighties would convince any observer that this massive landmass, despite poverty, illiteracy and awfully poor infrastructure, was a robust democracy surrounded by a cluster of failed States. In India, the hungry millions could vote out the most powerful of rulers and vote in the most unexpected. A court had the power to deliver a sensational judgement upsetting a redoubtable politician. Institutions like the Election Commission, Comptroller and Auditor General and some powerful parliamentary committees could censure the most powerful. In contrast, China was an irredeemably close and opaque society and a suffocating dictatorship. And the other countries on the Indian rim saw a hide and seek between democracy and dictatorship. Some of them were buffeted by civil war, state violence and popular unrest. India's success as a democracy could be entirely ascribed to Nehru's visionary leadership of this inchoate land for 17 long years after Independence.

When one looks at Nehru's durable achievements what stands out is a plural, composite society, and a fair, democratic system committed to improving the lot of the masses at the base of the pyramid. He strengthened the institutions so they could intervene in the event of the government or its agencies making mistakes. Brown faulted him for not according the priority that critical areas like literacy and health deserved and also overlooking governmental corruption.

Today, more than ever before, we realize we have survived as a nation because he ferried us across a turbulent river. Do we also know the danger of demonizing the boatman who rowed us to safety?

**Bhaskar Roy**