

Review Article: Nehru

Review Number:

429

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 December, 2004

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ISBN:

415250161X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

299pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Place of Publication:

London

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ISBN:

3000938553

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

407pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Reviewer:

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Forty years after his death, much of Nehru's world has been lost, its certainties eroded, its structures demolished. The European empires which Nehru challenged have long since disappeared. The Cold War, from which he fought hard to insulate the Third World, has come to an end, replaced by an unipolar world in which the neo-imperialist superpower, the uncovenanted legatee of earlier empires, presents dangerous new challenges to the sovereignty of nations. The model of state-led socialism, which Nehru and a generation of nation-builders saw as the key to development and the fight against poverty and inequality, has failed. Many of the new nations whose independence Nehru championed are now in deep crisis, a painful commentary on the failures of Nehru's dreams of a new world order.

In India itself, Nehru's legacy has come under sustained attack. One government after another – whether his own successors or other alliances – has dismantled the state-planned 'mixed' economy he worked so hard to put into place. The Congress, which he had led and which was the lynchpin of the system of governance, has disintegrated. The party itself – its recent pyrrhic victory at the polls notwithstanding – is a shadow of its former self. Nehru's commitment to a secular India has been openly challenged by increasingly strident Hindu nationalists; and his old faith in progress, liberalism and inductive rationalism is no longer in fashion with India's intelligentsia, once his natural allies but now influenced by post-modernism and flirting dangerously with *Hindutva*. Ironically, many of Nehru's erstwhile critics on the left, who used to attack his middle-of-the-way compromises, today rally to defend his 'legacy', and the debate about its relevance is arguably the big issue of contemporary India.

So it is timely to have two new works on Nehru, one by an old hand with a lifetime of research and writing on Gandhi and modern India behind her; the other by a Young Turk eager to win his spurs. These add to a not inconsiderable existing body of biographical literature, but avoid some of its pitfalls. Both Judith Brown and Benjamin Zachariah avoid sensationalism. Neither are hagiographers. Both have avoided the prurience of tabloid history.

For her part, Brown has set her sights ambitiously high. Her aim is to write a definitive biography of Nehru, intended to displace Gopal's comprehensive three volumes as the standard work. She brings to this task new sources (in the main, Nehru's private papers between 1947 and 1964, to some of which she alone has had access) and an historian's perspective. For some parts of Nehru's political life, she has achieved what she set out to do.

The point, however, is that Nehru's long career in Indian politics was divided into several different phases. For much of the time before independence, the young Nehru was used by others, whether by Gandhi and his lieutenants in the High Command or by Jawaharlal's own co-adjutors on the left. He was more often a figurehead than his own man, whose charisma and enthusiasms were convenient ways of disguising the hard facts of machine politics. In the endgame before transfer and partition, his role was more visible and substantial than it had been in the 1930s, but others still called the shots. In post-independence India, Vallabhbhai Patel, the Bismarck of modern India (or, in a bathetic key, the Gordon Brown to Nehru's Blair), was the leading architect of India's constitution, the guardian of its unitary system of governance and the iron statesman who integrated the princely states. Only after Patel's death in 1952 was Nehru his own man.

Brown is best on Nehru before 1947. Here, her knowledge of the workings of nationalist politics enables her to situate Nehru's political life securely within the constraints within which he operated. Paradoxically for an historian of Gandhi, Brown displays a greater natural empathy with Nehru. In consequence, her finely drawn and multi-faceted portrait of Jawaharlal gets the measure of the man: his integrity and the passion he brought to the causes he espoused but his tendency to shy away from confrontation; his concern for the disadvantaged and the under-privileged but his lofty and often impatient paternalism; his capacity to work long hours but his convenient reliance upon his father's financial support; his curiosity – wide ranging and eclectic – but which was not matched by depth of understanding or mastery of detail; his inclination to worship heroes but his arrogant and unjustified contempt for those he deemed to be lesser beings; and, significantly, his capacity more or less to realise what the problems were but, as Brown perspicaciously observes, his lack of tenacity of mind and purpose to impose solutions upon them. For these insights alone,

this book deserves to be read.

However, for the period in Nehru's life when he had the most influence and authority, where least is known and where judgements call to be made, Brown is less sure-footed. After the Great Divide, Indian politics were shaped by a new constitution, a different balance between a centre and increasingly demanding states (soon to be organised on the basis of language), all within a context of full adult franchise, superintended by an Election Commission with unprecedented powers (with huge implications for the survival of democracy in India). This too was a time when the Congress, adapting to new conditions, dominated the political scene through a system which effectively managed both the party and the government, and when Nehru and his pet advisers embarked on experiments with state-led development.

On none of these matters does Brown display the flair and confidence she has when she is in familiar territory. Instead of teasing out Nehru's particular contribution to these essential structures of the new India, she gives a long and exhausting list of the many trials and tribulations which this embattled Prime Minister faced as a daily diet: opposition and intrigues inside the Congress, Hindu communalism, demands by linguistic communities, and – somewhat bizarrely – even the relatively minor controversies about Christian missionaries. A chronicle of how Nehru reacted to these problems (or 'dealt' with them) is no substitute for analysis. We need to know why and when these problems emerged, how they were connected with each other. Nehru's mainly *ad hoc* 'responses' to these problems played a significant role in changing the balance of power within the ruling party, both inside parliament and in the country as a whole, in ways Brown does not fully assess. Nehru's idiosyncratic style of leadership – however much it may have fudged the issues – has left a deep mark on the office of Prime Minister, and has given it an overweening role in the Indian political system, something which Brown has failed to bring out. Given Brown's contribution to understanding of the huge significance of the Congress constitution which Gandhi imposed in 1920, her failure to analyse and assess Nehru's role in the framing and the working of India's constitution of 1950, with the crucially important consequences it had for relations between centre and provinces and for the competing regional elites, is another glaring omission.

Zachariah's *Nehru* is a very different kettle of fish. Neither a conventional biography, nor a systematic analysis of Nehru's ideas, the book falls rather between two stools. Zachariah's approach, refreshingly irreverent if somewhat idiosyncratic, is to discuss those aspects of Nehru and those of his predicaments that interest him, regardless of their relative import in the wider scheme of things. For instance, the reader is treated to a long disquisition on Iqbal's poem (and the song for which it provided the lyrics) '*Sare Jahan se achchha*', but only the briefest mention of Nehru's role in the failure of the Cabinet Mission. The Socialists and Communists, close to the author's heart, get more space than such players on the Indian stage as Gandhi or Patel (who is caricatured as a representative of the Hindu right in favour of a Hindu state, which he was not). On everything that bores him Zachariah is glib and facile. What he writes, for instance, on the constitution of 1950 and Nehru's part in it is short, sloppy and simply incorrect.

But nonetheless Nehru is fun to read: lively, provocative, sometimes stimulating even when it is palpably off the rails. What saves the book is that Zachariah cares deeply about his subject and has many good ideas. Primarily interested in Nehruvian thought and its genealogy, he recognises the constraints in practice on these experiments with ideology. He is sceptical about the extent to which Nehru's early flirtations with Fabianism and socialism explain his 'later engagement with a gradualist and top-down socialism', and rightly so. Such an interpretation attributes, as he argues, 'too much reasoned choice and too little *Realpolitik* to the phenomenon of Nehruvian governance, and too much freedom of choice to Nehru himself' (p. 25). Zachariah is particularly good on 'planning' under Nehru and the origins, both pragmatic and intellectual, of state-led development. Planning was a way by which Nehru was able to circumvent the party bosses in the states and their powers under the constitution. That these plans were not 'socialistic', either in origin or aim, is another of Zachariah's better points, albeit one which has been made before by others.

Zachariah's critique of Nehru's views about Indian identity and secularism, as set out in *The Discovery of India*, is convincing. So also is his characterisation of Nehru's 'solution to the problems of Indian cultural unity' as accretive and synthetic, relying on crude and often paternalistic stereotypes. Nehru's contribution

here, as Zachariah argues, was to ‘disarm the view of Indian culture as ‘Hindu’, thus allowing ‘a Hindu majoritarian ethic’ to ‘hide behind a secular view of an overarching Indian culture’ (p. 147).

Sadly, Zachariah is more interested in how Nehru came to have his sometimes muddled and less-than-rigorous ideas than in how and to what extent they were implemented. Did planning fail because it was ill-conceived or did it fail because it was refracted and broken by India’s social circumstances? Did ‘Indian secularism’ falter because it was a half-baked intellectual compromise with Hindu majoritarianism or because its achievement depended on institutions – whether the Congress party, the bureaucracy or the police – in which high-caste Hindus, whose commitment to secularism was often equivocal, were overwhelmingly dominant?

Neither Zachariah nor Brown provides full answers to these important questions about Nehru’s project and its legacy. However, in their very different ways, both these works will encourage historians and political scientists in the future to pose these questions in a more informed and rigorous way. For a definitive assessment, Nehru still awaits his historian.

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