

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S VIEW ON CASTE-BASED SOCIAL EXCLUSION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Alok Prasad

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), the first Prime Minister of India, was a pragmatic modernizer whose intellectual and social gaze covered almost all aspect of Indian society. Born in a non-conformist Kashmiri Brahmin family and having a direct experience of the liberal West during his education in London, he was deeply impressed with the process of egalitarian nation-building in Soviet Russia in 1920s. But the most perennial influence on his life was Mahatma Gandhi who made the task of social reconstruction, including elimination of caste-based social exclusion, a vital part of the National Liberation Movement. Nehru's core belief in democratic socialism, thus, inevitably engaged with the question of caste-based social exclusion. As such this paper seeks to examine the views of Nehru on historicity, relevance (or irrelevance), and dysfunctions of caste system and caste-based social exclusion. It also examines his view on the various inclusive policies required to be adopted for removal of caste-based exclusion especially in the context of the Dalits. The paper seeks to argue that, unlike a *priori*, stereotypical and, ahistorical perception given by many scholars and writers, Nehru was neither blind to caste-based social exclusion or nor underplayed its dysfunctional impact on India's modernization project.

The Study of caste system and caste-based social exclusion have been the cynosure of the academic enquiry in the field of Social Sciences since the time of political Independence of India. Yet, there is no single analytical, far less comprehensive work on the views of Jawaharlal Nehru on the caste system or caste-based social exclusion in India. Perhaps, the greatest weakness is that of the 'Nehruvian scholars' and biographers of Nehru who have chosen to put his emphasis of removal of caste system or caste-based social exclusion in the larger project of 'modernization' into and oblivion. But, even as Nehru was the first Prime Minister and one of the most charismatic leader of his age, the obvious and inevitable question of

his views on caste system or caste-based social exclusion, in absence of any significant study, has engendered certain *a priori* perceptions and academic truisms. The most significant of these is the claim that Nehru's radical modernizing agenda, including removal of caste system or caste-based social exclusion, was often stymied by the conservative bloc of his age comprising the land-owning castes, the upper-caste bureaucracy, and the regional Congress satraps. Less convincing but certainly very diffused perception is that Nehru, being a Brahmin and an "outsider" or even worse a beneficiary of the privileges of caste system or caste-based social exclusion, probably lacked a political will to deal dismantling of caste inequalities in any real sense. And, still another perception is that Nehru, if at all, began to think about the caste system or caste-based social exclusion only when he became the Prime Minister of India and hence could not avoid dealing with problem face to face. This paper, therefore, seeks to make an inquiry into Nehru's ideas and thereby, hopes to test these *a priori* assumptions and perceptions.

Nehru was a Kashmiri Brahmin by birth but when he was born, there were already winds of change and rebellion against the caste system among the Kashmiri Brahmins of Allahabad where he was born and spent his early childhood. His own father Motilal Nehru had visited England in 1899 in direct contravention of Hindu norms of the time which meant loss of one's caste and religion and social ostracism if they crossed the seas. He refused to do the *prayaschita* (penance) rituals before his community when he came back from Europe and, instead, led a protest against outdated beliefs of the Hinduism with some like-minded persons through an organization called *Satya Sabha*¹. In his maiden public speech in 1907, Motilal called caste system and *purdah* system (the custom of veil) as the two greatest blots on the Hindu Society². Thus, Jawaharlal Nehru's foundational experience was characterized by non-conformism and rebellion against the orthodoxy and this was only further reinforced by the direct exposure to Theosophism and Western Liberalism in subsequent years. Perhaps, the other most significant formative influence in his adulthood apart from and before Gandhi was his visit to Soviet Russia in 1926 and, therefore, his first response to the issue of caste system or caste-based social exclusion was wrapped in the garb of traditional socialist analysis of economic determinism.

For Nehru, the socialist ideas, as expressed most tangibly in the form of social restructuring in Soviet Russia in the 1920s, were not merely of theoretical interest but rather should be seen as an answer to the problem of social disorganization due to the emergence of

modern industrialization. The first half of the twentieth century was a testing time not only for the Indian society but also Western societies. Globally, the modern capitalism was under deep crisis as evident from the World Wars and the breakdown of the traditional social order in many countries of Europe. In India, due to the distorted nature of colonial industrial capitalism and the colonial rule, the problem of social disorganization was even more acute. Quite naturally, the Congress nationalism under Gandhi could not remain oblivious to the social inequality and disorganization if it were to become a genuine mass movement; the struggle for political freedom could not be separated from the questions of social and economic reconstruction of India. And, thus, in Nehruvian discourse of caste system or caste-based social exclusion should be seen within the his larger concern to search for a stable, secure and dynamic basis of social organization for India. These concerns were only reinforced in 1940s and 1950s when there emerged the problems of Partition, economic scarcity, food shortages, etc.

For Nehru, the question of caste system or caste-based social exclusion till 1930s was still a side issue which did not excite his public concerns. Yet, he remained tenacious in his discussions with Gandhi about a direct assault at caste system as opposed to the latter's concern about removal of untouchability only. He repeatedly asked Gandhi about the removal of the caste system and eventually he could appreciate his position by focusing on the removal of untouchability. He was actually undermining the whole caste system as untouchability was the common denominator, the weakest link in the chain, the weakest point of the enemies' front³. Equally important, Nehru learned from Gandhi the non-confrontationist and indirect approaches for removal of caste system or caste-based social exclusion. By 1946, when his *Discovery of India* was published, Nehru had already developed his ideas on caste system or caste-based social exclusion in a comprehensive, mature form and, subsequently, the changes to them were more in tenor than in substance.

Any discussion about Nehru's views on caste system or caste-based social exclusion must first begin by his view on the origins of the caste system because unlike any other theory his theory emphasizes on the need of social inclusion as the fundamental motivation for emergence of the caste system. According to him, the Aryan invaders, after having conquered the non-Aryan indigenous population in North-West India, could have killed or enslaved the latter, but instead opted for a peaceful and inclusive solution—the caste system. They devised the caste system in a manner that they could ensure their purity and

superiority from the non-Aryan population and yet integrate them into their society. Thus, caste system in its original and pure form was an attempt, in the context of a multi-racial society, to build an inclusive social organization albeit marked by inequality between the two major races—the Aryan and the non-Aryans⁴. Here, he makes a special mention that though the initial difference was between the Aryan and non-Aryan but in the course of time Aryan attempt to claim superiority and the very non-egalitarian principle inherent in it infested them too and in the course of time the four-fold order of the society emerged.

According to Nehru, the caste system, with its four-fold division, in its ideal form is a very flexible and adaptive system. It was a system of division of labour in its most perfect sense, a multi-ethnic state where each caste was expected to specialize in its occupation and together all the castes engendered a harmonious society. In this system, there was normatively an injunction on the castes to avoid any conflict with the other. But what gave a stability and solidarity to it were evolution of a common and shared culture, traditions, customs, pilgrimage centres, etc. Also, as there was no concept of private property, the produce from the land was shared between the state, farmers, and various castes more or less equitably. Moreover, as the society was not materialistic and the guiding spirit behind the production was self-sufficiency, the system could normally remain stable and bereft of strains.

In the caste system, the Brahmin was at the top and usually strived to set it apart from the others by endogamy and by maintaining a relative distance from the mundane. Indeed, Nehru views the Brahmins as a class of persons held very high in esteem in a society erudition and learning were held in high esteem; so great was this esteem that Brahmins have continued to be respected even much later when there was a degradation of the system and deterioration in the contribution and commitment of many Brahmins to their normative occupations. According to Nehru the chief manner of integration and inclusion of the non-Hindus in the caste order was through open access to the second and the third rungs in the caste hierarchy. Thus, many social groups, after acquiring the military and political power would gain entry into the caste system as a Kshatriya; similarly many aboriginal tribes enter into the system as the Shudras. Finally, there were the Untouchables at the bottom of the hierarchy as they were enjoined to do menial jobs in the society.

According to Nehru, the caste system became increasingly rigid and degenerate in course of time and, in the classic Marxian sense,

he argues that the germs of degeneration of caste system were inherent in the contradictions in its very structure. What were these contradictions?

First, the concept of purity and pollution in the course of time led to the growth of exclusiveness, touch-me-not-ism, and not eating and drinking with people of the other castes⁵. This led to the development of narrow attitudes and exclusion; each class was excluded from the other caste. Thus, there developed thousands of mutually exclusive castes and not an inclusive social system.

Secondly, caste system, with the principle of subordination of the individual to the group, was inherently an inefficient system based on rejection of meritocracy. According to Nehru, it encouraged 'average type at the cost of the abnormal, bad, or gifted . . . individualism has less role in it'⁶.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the caste system systematically excluded the lower castes and untouchables educationally, culturally, economically and socially and thus a vast majority of its members were not allowed to develop their full potential. The caste system embodied aristocratic ideals and degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunities to get out of that condition. This degradation brought deterioration all along the line including in its scope even the upper castes.⁷

Lastly, even as the society and social values became more and more narrow and rigid, the caste system led to India's exclusion from the developments of the world outside.⁸

Within the context of caste-based exclusion, Nehru placed special emphasis on the exclusion of the untouchables. Nehru added many significant guiding principles on the issue of untouchability. First, like Ambedkar, he did not remain focused on the problem of untouchability alone and saw untouchability as only an extreme form of casteism. Like a good doctor he endeavoured to cure the root cause of the Dalit problem besides alleviating the symptoms. In a message drafted on 24 September 1955 and sent to the organizing secretary of a seminar on "Casteism and Removal of Untouchability" held in the Delhi School of Social Work in September 1955, he pointed out:

"The Complete removal of untouchability has been one of the principal planks of our programme in India for the last thirty five years and more. . . . Untouchability is only an extreme form of casteism. From removal of untouchability, it naturally follows that we should put an end to various aspects of casteism, which have weakened and divided our society for a long time. From any democratic or socialist point of view, it is an

anachronism and objectionable. From human point of view, it is also wholly undesirable.”⁹

Secondly, in order to ensure that the Dalits are compensated for the injustice done to them so that they can be a part of national mainstream in due course of time, he supported the policy of reservation (or positive discrimination) in the legislature, educational institutions, and government employment, etc. for the Dalits. It must be noted that Nehru was in principle against reservation based on caste and religion but he was ready to make an exception for the Dalits. During the Constituent Assembly debates on the reservation policy to be followed in the independent India, he made his views explicit in the following words:

“...Frankly...I would like to put end to such reservations as still remain. But again, speaking frankly, I realize that in the present state of affairs in India that would be not a desirable thing to do, that is to say, in regard to the Scheduled Castes. I try to look at it from the religious minority, but rather in the sense of helping backward groups in the country.”¹⁰

Thirdly, he took care that in the process of empowerment of the Dalits, we should take care that we do not dehumanize them for achieving some short-term gains for them. Addressing to the Backward Classes Commission on 18 March 1953, he said:

“If we were to go any people in this huge country with the feeling that they are inferior or downtrodden and that we are going to uplift them, I think we would have messed up the job right at the beginning, instead of doing any good, because the method is all wrong.... I prefer cooperation and working together as equals. We are all equals. We must be prepared to live with them as equals and to teach and to learn from them, as two brothers would teach each other. This is how we must reach out to them so that they may recognize us as their brethren and that we do not consider ourselves superior to them but treat them as equals. Only by cooperating in big tasks, can we reach out to them.”

Due to the commitment efforts of the state under Nehru to empower the Dalits, there was a steady increase of Dalit representation in the government services and the quota for them in the one of the most prestigious civil services—the Indian Administrative Service—was already filled by 1964 to its maximum. He regarded a Dalit—K.R. Narayanan—as ‘the brightest person in the Indian Foreign Service.’¹¹

To conclude, a perusal of Nehru’s view on caste-based social exclusion reveals that many of his ideas overlap with those of his far more radical contemporary Ambedkar though his attempt at finding the solutions to problem was in tune with Gandhi. Nehru sought to

build India on the basis of political, social and economic revolution and the central concern of the social revolution was annihilation of the caste system. Indeed, the central concern of Nehru's democratic socialism was equality of opportunity and the removal of the caste system. Without these principles it has no meaning.

Notes

1. B.R. Nanada, *The Nehrus: Motilal and Jawaharlal*, London, 1962, pp. 38-40.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
3. Tibor Mende, *Interview With Jawaharlal Nehru*, Paris, 1956, p. 33.
4. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, (henceforth *DI*) Calcutta, 1946, p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
9. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Second Series Vol.30* (henceforth *SWJN* (Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi), p. 228.
10. Speech in the Constituent Assembly, 26 May 1949. *Constituent Assembly on India Debates*, Vol. VIII, p. 331.
11. *SWJN*, Vol. 30, p. 303.