

NEHRU'S CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM: An Analysis

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Abstract

Many scholars of philosophy apprehend that Nehru has a significant contribution to the field of socio-political philosophy. To find out an answer to such an apprehension Nehru's view on socialism, democracy and Indian society has been taken into account. Nehru has felt that technical philosophy or metaphysics is of no help to society. There is the necessity of practical notions of democracy and socialism for which he has differed from the existing views of these two concepts. He has attached importance that both the concepts are complementary and in a joint form it will be very helpful in Indian society.

Keywords

Socialistic society, political democracy, scientific humanism.

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It is a fact that at an early stage Nehru was highly influenced by Marx and his socialism. But later on when it was dogmatically followed by his followers without taking the human situation into account he changed his opinion. He has said 'I dislike dogmatism and treatment of Karl Marx's writing or any other books as revealed scripture which cannot be challenged, and the regimentation and here as huts which seem to be a feature of modern communism.'¹ It is clear that Nehru has realized that British rule and the previous rulers had ruined the Indian, culture, economy, and spiritual atmosphere in such a manner that there was a huge necessity of reformation for the welfare of Indian citizens. There was a conspicuous increase in human suffering and a notable decrease in human values. To overcome such a situation there was the necessity of a balanced ideology to be followed. Gandhi has indeed shown more concern for this cause. But it is also clear that the Gandhian approach is so idealistic that it can be stretched to a utopian level and in that way it may turn out to be less effective. But Nehru's approach was very much pragmatic in the sense he has tried to achieve his mission through democratic socialism. His emphasis is on the 'welfare state' instead of '*Rama Rajya*', which makes his approach pragmatic.

In this regard Nehru feels that technical philosophy or metaphysics is of no help. Because for him metaphysical outlooks are very often fail to link man with human affairs. He considers that neither religion, nor metaphysical, not even both are sufficient to explain or mold the modern life because modern man has reached such a stage where he cannot remain away from scientific attitude and methodology. He held the view that about human reality being supported by science would be more convincing and less controversial than it is being supported either by religion or metaphysics. This shows that his scientific and pragmatic approach to the solution of problems of human society helps him to establish his humanism rather than opting for any form of idealism.

Socialism and Socialistic Society

Socialism as a concept has a long history and various understandings. Nehru was not satisfied with any of the existing understandings of Socialism. His understanding of socialism is "a growing dynamic conception, as something is not rigid. As something which must fit with changing conditions of human life and activity in every country."² He has clearly said that "I am convinced that the only key to the solution of world's problem and India's problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word, I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense, socialism, however, something even more than an economic doctrine, is philosophy of life and as much also it appeals to me." In his opinion

socialism aims at dividing the existing wealth among the common mass. But in the case of India there is no wealth to divide, “there is only poverty to divide. It is not a question of distributing the wealth of the few rich men here and there. That is not going to make any difference in our national income.”⁴ His aim was to develop a ‘socialistic society’, instead of a ‘socialistic state’ (communism adopted nation), he feels that democracy can only become effective in a socialistic society. His socialistic society aims at ‘a classless society with equal economic justice and opportunity for all, a society organized on a planned basis for the raising of mankind to higher material and cultural levels, to a cultivation of spiritual values of co-operation, un-selfishness, spirit of service, the desire to do right, goodwill and love, ultimately a world order.’⁵

Democratic Socialism

In respect of looking to conceptual consistency hardly there is any doubt that democratic socialism would act as a stepping stone for the socialistic state. But due to practical constraints socialistic society is far away in most of the countries having democratic government. The country where the democratic form of government has been found to be for more than centuries still has failed to provide proper justice in front of caste discrimination. The country where there is for several decades many sections of the people still are being deprived of many democracy. In the process of substitution of worse elements in place of bad elements creep in. In the present day, democracy is ‘the virtue of justice’, a ‘fair place’. ‘Rule of law’ is rarely seen to be in operation. So also is the case with socialism that it is not less utopian ideal before the common mass. Nothing can be achieved until and unless the values of democracy and socialism become integral parts of the majority of individuals of the society.

It is important to point out that democracy assures the liberty, freedom and rights of individuals. In a democratic setup up a man is free to plan out his lifestyle, to choose his profession, and utilize his creativity in a constructive manner. Democracy provides economic empowerment to its citizens. Freedom of thought expression speech and writing happens to be an important advantage of democracy. Though it was conspicuous at the early stage, now the write-to information has been accommodated within a democratic framework. A lot of corruption, and scams are coming to the limelight because of this right to information. Thus in a democratic setup man remains at the centre and finds enough scope to promote his interest.

In the above understanding of democracy, what is crystal clear is that in the sphere of politics the power is in the hands of the people, who can do and undo according to their needs and satisfaction. But practically what has happened in those

countries where democracy has been in operation for several decades? Is it the case that no one is deprived of his human rights, or no one is affected due to the caste system, or no one is exposed to the exploitations either by the politicians or by some other powerful groups, under a democratic setup? Unfortunately under a mere democratic setup up human dignity has not been preserved and appears that it can't be preserved.

It seems that Nehru was aware of such limitations of political democracy for which he does not seem to have advocated in support of this so-called political democracy. That's why he has said that 'Democracy is a dynamic not static and as it changes, it may be that its domain will become wider and wider. Ultimately it is a mental approach applied to our political and economic problems.' The economic, moral and social dimensions associated with this notion need to be exposed before common man who will use it for their own benefit.

With respect to the notion of democracy he opines that in his mind the ideas of Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, J.S Mill and Karl Marx are in the background to have faith and confidence in the vast mass of people. In 1935 he has said that 'my roots are still perhaps partly in the nineteenth century and I have been too much influenced by the humanist liberal tradition to get out of it completely.' "It involves the freedom of individual to grow and make the best of his capacities and ability." Smith, a scholar on political thought, says that Nehru has defined democracy in terms of freedom where human values can be realized and in terms of a structure of society in which economic and social equality can gradually be acquired. According to Nehru, "In a democratic society, the concept of individual freedom has to be balanced with social freedom and the relation of the individual with the social group. The individual must not infringe on the freedom of other individuals."

Nehru has also emphasized on political equality through the right to vote for every adult citizen of the country without discrimination based on wealth or any other consideration. Referring to the newly framed constitution of India he has said that the Directive principles of state policy are meant to pave path towards a castles and classless society. He says that the achievement of social and economic equality is a gradual process. For him democracy proper constitutes social self discipline. He has opined that "democracy involves self-discipline of the community. Self-discipline requires acceptance of the minority of what is agreed upon by the majority after discussion". Nehru writes:- democracy was the way of self-discipline. Democracy as such must have a background and basis in the mass of the people in their education". He considers democracy to be tolerance and the adoption of peaceful methods in every sphere of social living and development. For him democracy and

peaceful ways of change are mutually complementary which is why he had unshakable faith in peace. This shows that the parliamentary democracy Nehru wanted is based on virtues like devotion to work, self-discipline restrain and consciousness of social living. The last one is very important in the sense it will grow and dogmatic secular attitude in man. Patnaik clearly mentions that “it should be always kept in mind that for Nehru ‘democracy’ is not merely a name, signifying a form of political order. He views it as a way of life which can permeate into all the levels of human activity.”⁶

Democratic socialism as a theory is quite sound. But are the values of democratic socialism are reflected properly in the functioning of the state/nation? Once again here I remind Nehru’s suggestion that there is the need for a democratic society rather than a democratic state. For that purpose the individuals have to come up to adopt democratic values to be the values of their way of living. One individual has to take pain to influence his neighboring individual to proceed on that path. Let us be optimistic about achieving the goal of scientific humanism through the rigorous practice of value-based education at every level (Science, Arts or Commerce) lower or higher education. It shows that through for independent India democracy was the only choice for the freedom fighters [of India] but Nehru’s interest in democracy was not a forced choice. Rather his inclination for democracy was to have a wider interest i.e. to meet the expectations of scientific humanism.

It is the reason Nehru wanted democracy besides being political should have social, economic and moral dimensions. It requires the self-discipline of citizens, it should be taken as a societal value, it should be able to dispel gross economic inequality, and above all there should be the ability to choose the representatives to be the part of the government all these are possible only when the humanistic temper prevails. For Nehru democracy is essential because in this form the interest of the mankind is expected to be safer. It is needed because here alone the preservation of human values is possible. Mere voting rights cannot bring peace in life. But political democracy is useless without its economic and moral dimensions. Without the removal of economic inequality, and preservation of human values the political democracy would be a strong failure in safeguarding human interest. So his emphasis is on the development of a moral attitude towards democratic goals. He says; you may define democracy in a hundred ways but surely one of its definitions is self-discipline of the community. The less the imposed discipline, the more the self-discipline the higher is the development of democracy.

Nehru’s joint emphasis on socialism and democracy became so conspicuous that it gave scope to the scholars to name those as democratic socialism. Democracy

and socialism are worked as to postulates for his doctrine of scientific humanism. Nehru considers that 'Democracy without socialism will be mockery and socialism without democracy will lead to authoritarianism and regimentation.....Hence Nehru became the progenitor of the idea of 'democratic socialism'.' ⁷ The special feature of his democratic socialism is here emphasis would be given to individual initiative, property rights to a limited extent and the state as the controlling authority. All these three go together to achieve the goal of democracy and socialism. That is how there is enough justification to consider it as democratic socialism.

Nehru believed that neither revolutionary socialism nor a capitalist system could preserve human values. Nehru aimed at socialistic goals through a democratic setup. Democracy will help development through planning. For this reason for some scholars of political science, Nehru is considered to be the father of 'Indian planning'. He has been influenced by the success achieved by Soviet Russia through planning. He tried to make proper utilization of available resources through planning. Author Mohanty mentions that "Nehru viewed that planning has a philosophical and ideological foundations. According to Nehru 'planning does not mean collection of projects and schemes but a thought out approach of how to strengthen the base and pace of progress so that community advances on all fronts.' So at the root of planning lies Nehru's vision of an egalitarian socialist order. Under such an order there should be adequate means of livelihood for all equal opportunities for all for self-expression and self-fulfillment." ⁸ It is almost a fact of common agreement among the scholars of political science that Nehru's approach to political thought is highly humanistic. Though Gandhi's approach was much more humanistic but scholars have considered it to be highly idealistic and metaphysical. Pattnaik mentions that "Gandhian conception of democracy is metaphysical one, as it is based on the idea of service and sacrifice." ⁹ But Nehru's approach is invariably considered to be pragmatic. Here, Brecher's comment is worth noting that "India by birth yet western by education, modern in outlook yet influenced by the heritage of his native land, a staunch patriot yet a man with international vision, he was the symbol of a new society- liberal humanist and egalitarian." ¹⁰ His emphasis on a socialistic pattern of the society where the dignity of the individual is reconciled with the economic and social justice leading to democratic socialism depicts the humanistic elements present in his approach. His view is 'socialism is not something more than an economic doctrine, it is a philosophy of life and such also it appeals to me' shows to what extent he has shown his concern for the causes of humanistic living and society.

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