

Indian elite no longer shares Nehru's secular and scientific passion

Had Nehru not been its first prime minister, India would have been a dump for crackpot science

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Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru would never have won a popularity contest in Pakistan quite simply because he did his best to oppose the country's creation. But nowhere is he reviled more than in India's current ruling circles and among those whose loyalty they command. Pakistani scientist Pervez Hoodbhoy asks why.

The accusations against Nehru are often breathtaking: that he was degenerate and dissolute; born in a brothel and eventually died of syphilis; impregnated a Catholic nun; claimed to be a Kashmiri Pandit but secretly ate onions; and from age 19 onwards would be drunk every day starting at 9 am. As with America's alt-right which insists that Barack Obama is a closet Muslim, Hindutva activists allege that Nehru's grandfather was Ghayas-uddin Ghazi, a Muslim kotwal serving the Mughal court.

If only anonymous internet nutters were making such attacks, they wouldn't matter. But a concentrated attack by BJP-RSS sarsangchalaks is leading to the steady purge of Nehru from India's history books. Betwa Sharma reported in 2016 that students of Class VIII in BJP-ruled Rajasthan are no longer learning that Nehru was India's first prime minister or that Nathuram Godse, a Hindu nationalist, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru's iconic tryst-with-destiny speech has already been removed from school syllabi and textbooks in some states, reminding one of how Jinnah's famous Aug 11, 1947, speech was 'disappeared' in the Ziaul Haq era.

This campaign of personal vilification against Nehru is, in fact, a proxy war against the concept of India as a secular entity. Of course, here in Pakistan we never for a moment believed Nehru when he declared India's intent to become a pluralistic, liberal, syncretic state whose strength would lie in diversity. For us, all these were just fine words justifying Hindu majoritarianism under the cloak of democracy. Only now that the BJP controls India with a viciously communal agenda have some Pakistanis realised what loss of secularism — even imperfect secularism — actually means.

But irrespective of what Muslims and Pakistanis may have thought in the past, or perhaps still think, the RSS always took Nehru at his word. It both feared and hated him for it. In particular, it has never forgiven him for banning the RSS after Gandhi's murder and for fiercely opposing a Hindu rashtra (state). One Hindutva activist wistfully writes that had Nehru handed over charge of India after Independence to the deserving sanghis, India would have "attained ram rajya by now, with a hundred crore people chanting 'hanuman chalisa' a dozen times a day".

Nevertheless, there are paradoxes and contradictions that Hindutva cannot escape as it seeks to banish Nehru. All Indians, including right-wingers, take great pride in their country's scientific achievements. But imagine for a moment that Narendra Modi, not Jawaharlal Nehru, had been India's prime minister in 1947. What might have today's India looked like in scientific terms?

Instead of being noted for its exceptional space programme (Mangalyaan!) and brilliant string

theorists (Ashoke Sen!), India would have become a garbage dump for every kind of crackpot science. Medical research would have concentrated on medicines made from cow urine and cow dung, the celibacy of peacocks would be under intense scrutiny, astrology would be taught in place of astronomy, and instead of teaching actual mathematics there would be Vedic mathematics. As in Pakistan, Darwinian evolution would be considered heretical and destructive of religious faith.

Nehru's stamp upon Indian science can be seen across the length and breadth of India in the form of dozens of scientific institutes and universities that owe to him. India is probably the world's only country whose constitution explicitly declares commitment to the "scientific temper" — a quintessential Nehruvian notion formulated during his years in prison. Briefly: only reason and science, not holy scriptures, provide us reliable knowledge of the physical world.

I was able to see the huge difference that Nehru had made to his country while on a speaking tour in 2005 before audiences in about 40 Indian schools, colleges, and universities in seven cities. Without Nehru there could never have been the huge and palpable mass enthusiasm for science. This was manifested in the many science museums within a single city, and countless scientific societies working to spread understanding of basic science among ordinary Indians. I do not know how much of this has changed under Hindutva. But most definitely not even a fraction of such enthusiasm was visible then, or can be seen now, in Pakistan.

Nehru must also be credited with keeping a lid on his generals. In a democracy the army should be subordinate and answerable to civilian authority, not the other way around. And so, immediately after Partition, Nehru ordered the grand residence of the army chief to be vacated and instead assigned to the prime minister. This move carried huge symbolism — it said clearly who was boss.

When Ayub Khan's coup across the border happened in 1958, it led to rules that further diminished the role of the Indian army in national affairs. Gen Cariappa, who had retired but praised the coup, was told to shut up. Officers, serving or retired, were strongly discouraged from commenting on matters related to public affairs and economics — and particularly their pensions and retirement benefits. There was no concept of army owned enterprises and businesses.

All this could now be changing. Army chief Gen Bipin Rawat, known for his bellicosity, has broken with the army's tradition by freely commenting on many foreign policy matters — the Rohingya refugee problem, how India should deal with the Doklam crisis with China, and the need to call "Pakistan's nuclear bluff". Time will tell whether Rawat is an exception or, instead, the new rule characterising an interventionist army. Ominously for Indian democracy, criticising the army chief is being described by its media as anti-national.

How much of Nehru's India will be undone by Modi and his cronies remains to be seen. A demoralised and broken Congress opposition means that they are here to stay for long.

Meanwhile, it is becoming easier by the day for Pakistan to recognise its mirror reflection across the border.

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