

India: The myth of Congress socialism

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Why Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi were never really on the Left to begin with.

Were India's early postcolonial leaders socialists? Yes, undeniably, goes the common reflex, both on the Left and Right. To most conservatives, following the economist Jagdish Bhagwati, it took a new generation weaned off older statist shibboleths – thanks to a balance of payments crisis in the early 1990s – for India to unfetter itself from the shackles of Congress socialism. To most left-liberals, on the other hand, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi's years in office – 1947-64; 1966-77 and 1980-84 – were a golden age of welfarism, a world removed from the neoliberal depredations of our time. As it happens, both views rest on a flawed premise. For both exaggerate the differences between early and late postcolonial India.

Indeed, a closer look reveals that continuities count for more than differences. Nehru and Gandhi may have been self-professed socialists, and their successors their equally self-styled critics. But for all that, their styles of rule, and the kinds of state apparatuses they presided over, were remarkably similar. The Nehruvian state, much like the contemporary Indian one, was an emaciated affair. The radical Left, then as now, was seen as an enemy of the state by Delhi's incumbents. If to prime ministers Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi, India's Maoists were, variously, 'the greatest internal security threat' and 'monsters' with 'evil mindsets', unworthy of dialogue and fit for elimination, to Nehru and Gandhi, their predecessors were no better. Happily, Nehru put down the communist insurgency in Telangana with brute military force in the late forties, rescuing landlords from the wrath of the peasantry, which was living in near-feudal conditions. Around the same time, disillusioned Congress socialists left for the Socialist Party when it became clear to them that Nehru's party was disinterested in land reform. Moreover, they sat out the writing of the Indian Constitution, tasked as it was to an indirectly elected body whose members were selected as representatives of their ethnic communities by a tiny, landed and elite electorate – unjustifiable to the Socialists but perfectly reasonable to Nehru. Later, when the Socialist Party courted a merger with the Congress, Nehru actively discouraged it; it never went through. Likewise, he kept at arm's length from the faction that tried pushing his party to the Left, the Congress Socialist Forum. Party unity trumped socialism proper. And famously, joining forces with the Muslim League and Christian groups, he threw out the world's first elected communist government in Kerala in 1959.

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The same was true of Indira Gandhi's regime. During her premiership, cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) were consigned to torture chambers in Kerala, and Bengali Maoists incarcerated wholesale. After riding on the coat tails of the Congress Forum for Socialist Action (CFSA), the pressure group that helped her cling onto power in 1969 after the party split, she unhesitatingly turned against it in the early 1970s, by which time it had become a liability: "Do these people want another split in the party?" It was disbanded soon after. In 1975, she carried out a self-coup by declaring a state of emergency, banning the Maoist Naxalite movement and arresting CPI(M) cadres, socialists, trade unionists, and even leaders of the Congress Left. For the period of the Emergency, all fundamental rights were suspended save one: the right to property. As for

promises to bring the commanding heights of the economy under public control, these were quickly forgotten: so much so that Gandhi announced a moratorium on nationalisation. Moreover, while Parliament was amending the Constitution to reflect that India was not only a 'sovereign' but also a 'socialist' republic, Gandhi was telling the press that education and welfare cuts were necessary to give tax breaks to the top one percent of Indian earners. A year into her final term, in 1981, she pushed through an amendment of the Essential Services Maintenance Act; aimed at disciplining labour, it made it easier to ban strikes, imprison workers, and use military personnel as blacklegs. She was also behind what was, perhaps, the most brutal suppression of the labour movement in Indian history: in 1982, the textile strike in Bombay was put down with the help of police and paramilitary forces, leaving 150,000 workers unemployed.

The elusive socialist leader

It may well be that the Indian socialist leader is as elusive as the true Scotsman. But even so, it is hard to sustain an image of the Nehru-Gandhis as socialists when both father and daughter presided over a period of growing inequality. And remarkably, neither of them were particularly interested in the business of redistribution. Both, for instance, favoured deeply regressive taxation. When power was transferred to him in 1947, Nehru was quick to institute a tax regime that reduced the burden on the rich. Indirect taxes accounted for 60 percent of total taxes in 1948. When he died in office in 1964, they amounted to 72 percent. His daughter followed in his footsteps. A decade into her rule, the figure stood at 84 percent. Similarly, the Nehru-Gandhis also presided over the steady devaluation of labour power. In the five years to 1955, for instance, the share of wages in gross value added was 63 percent. A secular decline ensued. Fast forward to 1972, when Gandhi's socialist rhetoric had never been shriller, it had fallen to 53 percent; in other words, surplus value had risen from 37 to 47 percent.

So much for socialism, even at its supposed early-1970s meridian - some two and a half decades into Nehru-Gandhi rule - the public sector remained a skeletal concern, accounting for a mere 16 percent of GDP. There was, then, not much to the Indian state: the railways, the usual monopolies in mass media and manufacturing, a presence in banking and insurance, a nearly non-existent bureaucracy, and a welfare state in extremis. Unsurprisingly, a mere 2.7 percent of Indians were in public employment in 1971. To put this into world-historical perspective, even the decidedly non-socialist polities of the advanced capitalist world boasted considerably larger public sectors. There, on average, some 12 to 15 percent of the workforce was in the employ of the state.

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What accounts for the chasm between progressive rhetoric and conservative praxis? In the main, idiosyncratic policy choices and a very cynical understanding of socialism, it appears. When Nehru assumed the premiership, a time when 83 percent of Indians lived in the countryside, he decided against taxing the gentry, setting a precedent that continues to this day. This, of course, worked to the benefit of the landed elite that formed the backbone of the Congress, and to the detriment of the landless poor.

As the decades rolled by, course correction became virtually impossible, what with Nehru's and later Gandhi's parasitical dependence on the gentry for capital formation. For their socialist five-year plans in no small measure banked on rural accumulation to fund industrial expansion. Keeping rural demand low - that is, poor peasants poor - was, in effect, a macroeconomic priority. Whereas India's landowning gentry - or bullock capitalists, to use the term coined by the political scientists Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph for those owning between 2.5 and 15 acres - were molycoddled with minimum support prices and subsidised fertilisers, the rest - mainly the landless and smallholders -

found themselves completely neglected. Wages stagnated. What is more, the Green Revolution widened the gap between the rich and poor. In 1961-1962, surplus land accounted for 24 percent of India's agricultural land. In 1971-1972, a decade into the Green Revolution, it had risen to 31 percent. Dispossession and land consolidation were the greatest in places like the Punjab, Ground Zero of the Green Revolution, where the tractor-owning gentry was quick to improve yields and price out smallholders.

Early on in his rule, Nehru ruled out expropriation. Consideration for large landholders, it appears, was foremost on his mind: "though equitably perhaps justifiable, it may lead to many cases of hardship". Likewise, he went to great lengths to declare against coercion in the implementation of the Avadi and Nagpur resolutions of 1955 and 1959, which, in any case, were never followed through. Promises of wholesale nationalisation and collectivisation remained just that: promises. But coercion against the landed classes was one thing, against the landless another. Agrarian uprisings were put down in Telangana in 1946-51, in Thanjavur in 1967-69, and in Srikakulam in 1967-70. In the Kilvenmani massacre of December 1968, 44 landless Dalit labourers were torched to death by their employers, all of whom were acquitted by the Madras High Court on grounds of insufficient evidence. In a similar episode, Santhal tribesmen were burnt alive in Bihar. Here, again, the socialist state looked the other way.

"The left has been given control of the rhetoric. The right has been granted most of the tangible benefits."

If non-violence got in the way of Nehru's socialism, indifference got in the way of Gandhi's. She, too, then, remained deeply sceptical of harnessing state power to progressive ends. "Removing poverty is not the responsibility of the government alone," she declared in 1975. As with Nehru and Gandhi, so with their inner circle. V K Krishna Menon, Nehru's defence minister, for instance, declared himself strongly opposed to land reform in his native Kerala. Govind Ballabh Pant, home minister, felt much the same. On his account, not all zamindars were rapacious rentiers. Similarly, C Subramaniam, darling of the Congress Left and Gandhi's finance minister, found strikes "deplorable" and the working classes contemptible for wanting "to imitate the rich". He thought about the landless in the same terms: "of course, we cannot expect everybody to own land. It is not necessary also." To another supporter of the CFSA, D K Barooah, too, the trade unions were the enemy, all-powerful and unruly. They were "trying to mislead the working class and sabotage production", he declared in 1975. The same year, the Ministry of Education, run by "a lifelong member of the Communist Party of India", Nurul Hasan, could be found inveighing against the abolition of child labour: it was not only "not feasible", but also "not desirable".

Congress Left or Right?

With friends like these, and a worldview like theirs, neither Nehru nor Gandhi really needed the countervailing influence of a Congress Right, let alone a rightwing opposition, to stifle their socialist commitments. These existed all the same. Led by figures such as Vallabhbhai Patel and later Purushottam Das Tandon and Morarji Desai in Nehru's time, and then Jagjivan Ram, Yashwantrao Chavan, and T A Pai in Gandhi's, the Congress Right was in many senses the stronger faction, even if fewer of its members were to be found in Parliament and government. Very briefly, the Congress Left and Right were rather different beasts. The former operated on a promissory plane, a world of ideas and utopian plans. The latter, instead, was firmly anchored in the real, in the realm of power and realities.

The Congress Left's writ ran in Rajpath and Janpath - Parliament House and the ministerial residences in central Delhi - and a few enclaves of radical and educated opinion, in the main wherever its few metropolitan allies in the press and unions commanded some influence, but

nowhere beyond. The Congress Right, on the hand, had the party organisation in its vice-like grip. This is because it enjoyed the support of the conservative landowning classes, whose ranks made up the building blocks of the Pradesh and District Congress Committees (PCCs and DCCs). While they were influential in the upper echelons of the party, lower down, they were invincible. Indeed, as the political scientist Francine Frankel has argued, they had a wide range of tools at their disposal – juridical; legislative; paramilitary and police; clerical – to bury the land reforms so dear to the Congress Left. Enforcing ceilings and redistributing surplus land hit upon all kinds of stumbling blocks. Many landowners challenged the legality of the transfers in courts. Others resorted to intimidation and violence. Yet others parcelled out their lands to distant relatives, repurposed them for ‘religious’ uses, and temporarily pledged them to charity.

Consequently, during their most concerted stabs at land redistribution – in Nehru’s case, his first term, 1947-1952; in Indira Gandhi’s, the Emergency of 1975-1977 – India’s first and third premiers redistributed a mere 14 and 1.1 million acres, respectively. Needless to say, these figures paled in comparison to those registered by Nehru and Gandhi’s East Asian counterparts. For his part, Mao transferred 100 million acres in the three years to 1952 alone. Proportionally speaking, land reform in India was nowhere comparable to what transpired in, say, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and China.

Industrial relations under the Nehru-Gandhis was much of a muchness. Periodic socialist declamations apart, Congressmen in early postcolonial India were very much in bed with big business. Less than a year into his first term, Nehru had already jettisoned his nationalising ambitions. Government would focus on developing rather than expropriating industries, the Industrial Policy of Resolution of April 1948 reassured Indian capitalists. Throughout his tenure, Nehru had little say in who served as his finance minister; it was the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the voice of capital, that had the final word. The Second Five-Year Plan, covering 1956-61, was geared towards stimulating private capital, as was the Third, for 1961-66, which, on FICCI’s recommendations, also opened a number of industries to the private sector. From the ranks of big business came the party’s big donors; in cities like Kanpur, local businessmen also happened to be local Congressmen. Capital, in a word, could not be alienated.

“What accounts for the chasm between progressive rhetoric and conservative praxis?”

But the bond between capitalist and Congressman was not merely party-political; often it was also personal. The Nehrus and Birlas, for instance, were family friends. The power generated by the wildly expensive Rihand Dam, built and funded by the state, was sold for a song to the Birlas in 1959, to the chagrin of Parliament and the public. Eleven years later, during Gandhi’s premiership, the Birlas once again found themselves the subject of public opprobrium when a license to build a fertiliser factory was handed to them. This at a time when the family firm was under investigation and the government committed to reining in monopolists. The premier’s son and effective sultan during the Emergency, Sanjay Gandhi, supported K K Birla’s run for the Rajya Sabha in 1976. One could go on.

If capital needed cossetting, labour needed co-opting, crippling even. First, Congressmen tried entryism en masse to weaken the communist-dominated All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in February 1947. When this failed – perhaps because Congressmen attempted, rather disingenuously and to no avail, to have the confederation permanently disavow strikes and submit to compulsory arbitration by the state – they set up a rival outfit, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), with the blessing of the party leadership and backing of state power. Patronage from the party in power and preferential legislation saw to it that the INTUC quickly became the largest trade union federation. Its hegemony served the party in good stead, but not so much the proletariat. Indeed, its primary business was to see to it that the working classes did not get ideas above their

station. The INTUC's "loyalties are to the Congress Party, then to the present government, to the nation, and last of all to the workers", Myron Weiner observed in 1962. At the time of Nehru's death in 1964, real wages for factory workers was lower than it had been in 1952 even as worker productivity was half as large again.

Gandhi was a chip off the old block. Wage suppression continued during her tenure. Through the early 1970s, strikes were routinely broken with the help of the police, army, navy, and paramilitary organisations. No sooner had the Emergency been declared than wages were slashed further, strikes forbidden, a portion of salaries indefinitely withheld as 'compulsory deposits', mutinous unionists sent packing to prison, and 500,000 workers made redundant. The four largest unions in the Republic were inveigled into forswearing industrial action for a period of four years. The traditional model of industrial relations, premised on a give-and-take between labour and management, was done away with. In its place came a new system centred on a raft of state-sanctioned 'apex bodies', headed by management and with an altogether different mandate: not labour welfare, but production and efficiency. The World Bank and the Economist heaped praise on the Emergency regime after the 1976 budget, while the ILO and AFL-CIO castigated it in no uncertain terms. As even Anthony Lukas, foreign correspondent of the impeccably liberal New York Times, understood perfectly in 1976, Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime was "profoundly schizoid. The left has been given control of the rhetoric. The right has been granted most of the tangible benefits".

Engines of privilege

But what of the socialist rhetoric itself? Here, the adjective is misplaced. For the Nehru-Gandhis' understanding of socialism was always rather suspect. Certainly, both father and daughter placed a greater premium on self-help than state action. It could be said that their common worldview bespoke, or betrayed, the limits of their intellectual formation - in Nehru's case, a journey from theosophy through Harrow to Cambridge; in Gandhi's, from Shantiniketan to Oxford. These places, after all, were engines of privilege. In such settings, radical pretensions were certainly imbibed, but never internalised with any degree of seriousness. Socialist posturing was mere talk, and talk was cheap. Or, as the political scientist Howard Erdman would later have it, "Nehru's bark was far worse than his bite." An exotic ideology, in short, told of worldliness. Not for nothing did Nehru's Socialist Book Club - based on London's Left Book Club that he was a part of - superciliously produce "'socialist classics' suitably 'abridged' for Indian readers". For its part, the colonial government did not take "Jawaharlal's socialist statements seriously", his biographer Benjamin Zachariah writes, and there is good reason to believe that Nehru himself wore his ideas rather lightly. Asseverating that he was a socialist was just another way of saying that he went to Cambridge.

But if autodidacticism and Oxbridge left much to be desired, there was another influence tempering their socialism: the Gandhian inheritance. For all their cosmopolitanism, they were nevertheless products of a singularly domestic milieu. Nehru and Indira Gandhi shared more with figures like Mohandas Gandhi, Rammanohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan than with, say, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, or even the social democratic Left in postwar Europe - and understandably so. Parochialism is not without its comforts. But what did this peculiarly Indian bequest look like? Gandhi's allergy to class conflict is well-known: in 1932, he had famously convinced the Congress Working Committee to formally issue a 'reassurance to zamindars' when it appeared to the latter that Congress radicals were toying with dangerous ideas. For Narayan, redistribution was repressive, plain and simple: a disciple of Gandhi's, he ultimately came to share in his vision of 'trusteeship', in which relations between worker and capitalist, peasant and landlord, mirrored that of sheep and shepherd, after having initially critiqued it. While a more radical and clear-headed thinker, Lohia, too, never managed to fully shake off the quaint aspects of Gandhianism: he was a votary of, as it were, small-state socialism, built on smallholdings and handicrafts. 'The Leviathan state' of big industry and big government was as distasteful to him as capitalism.

The thinking of Nehru and his team was, in the main, of a piece with the ideology of this constellation. As the historian Taylor Sherman has it, theirs was not socialism per se, but a singularly Indian declension of it. It departed from socialism proper by placing a greater emphasis on individual over state action; remaining sanguine about, even favourably disposed to, private property; and preferring peaceful, if glacial, to rapid, albeit violent, social change. For the historian Christopher Bayly, too, the eminent Nehruvians in power in the 1950s and 1960s betrayed a worldview that was distinctly their own, more imbued with the spirit of, as it were, communitarian liberalism' than socialism as such. Their hostility to statism; preference for small-scale and local, as opposed to colossal and national, solutions; for voluntarism and associationalism, power to the panchayats, cooperatives and sabhas of every stripe, not centralisation and concerted state action, incontrovertibly set them apart from their mid-20th century Western socialist peers.

Unease with diktat, then, came with the territory. Today, Nehru's name is associated with modernist hauteur and grandeur: the Indian Institutes of Technology, Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, and the city of Chandigarh spring to mind. But these urban marvels – few and far apart as they are – conceal more than they reveal. Truth be told, Nehru did not do monumental ambition. Symptomatic was his characteristically liberal response to those frustrated with the glacial pace of reform: yes, he would have preferred to move faster, but across-the-board expropriation and redistribution was not an option “because most Indians were not socialists”.

His daughter betrayed a similar impulse in 1976, when the Congress Left urged her to remove the right to property: “public opinion was not ready” for such a move, she argued. The concern with propriety and public sentiment, of course, was in no small part a function of the limited ability of the penniless Indian state to enact social reform. But structural constraints dovetailed with ideological inhibitions. To both Nehru and Gandhi, bottom-up initiative was preferable to top-down reform. Faced with acute food shortages throughout their terms in office, both fell back on discourses of self-sufficiency and charity. Why reorganise tenure when citizens could “grow vegetables and grain at home” and selfless Congress party workers could muck in with peasants, as Nehru felt was the way out of famine in 1949? Or, for that matter, why create state-run cooperatives and enforce ceiling legislation when families in cities could get their hands dirty doing a bit of kitchen gardening and school children in the countryside could be recruited to the cause of pest control, catching bugs and beetles by hand, as Gandhi believed was the solution to the food problem in 1974? The gist of it – ‘pull yourselves up by your bootstraps!’ – of course, was anything but socialist. If anything, it was a one-nation conservative vision. The poor could get by with some more encouragement, the rich could do more slumming.

Opportunism, not socialism

For all that, the question then remains: why did early postcolonial Congress leaders bother with socialism at all? There are two reasons for this. First, while it often meant nothing in practice, ‘socialism’ belonged to the postcolonial Indian lexicon. Everyone swore by it. Even the Swatantra Party, the vehicle of big business and the aristocracy, no less, fashioned itself as an outfit of “twentieth-century socialists” on the hustings. “We are all socialists now”, ran the Whig dictum of Britain at the turn of the century. Never was it truer, though, than in the self-image of early postcolonial Indian politicians. And second, in a country whose citizens were for the better part poor and illiterate, lip service to socialism was inevitable. So the key desiderata of any self-respecting socialism – expanding public ownership, ramping up public spending, making bigger and bolder five-year plans, facilitating redistribution – were subject to endless name-checking.

For Delhi's rulers, then, going through the motions was not without its uses. Nehru's ‘socialism’, in effect, was simply an exercise in skilful triangulation. Anyone more to the Left of him was a rabble-rousing troublemaker; to his Right, a hopeless and heartless monster incapable of commiserating

with the ordinary, immiserated Indian. It must be remembered that it was often against a backdrop of incipient radicalism that Nehru made many of his socialist pronouncements and policies. The all-too-real threat of communism in Nehru's first term prompted the most extensive land reforms witnessed in the republic. The Avadi resolution came in advance of the 1957 general election at a time when socialist parties were poised to make great strides at the expense of the Congress. The Nagpur resolution was announced ahead of the 1960 Kerala election, in which a second defeat at the hands of the Communists was a very real prospect.

For Nehru's daughter, too, feigning leftwing credentials made political sense, and she was candid about this. "We spoke of socialism because that was what went down well with the masses", Indira Gandhi said to the press in 1969. Economically, in the late 1960s India was in a hard place. Politically, the Congress Forum for Socialist Action was ascendant. So she unshackled herself from the clutches of the Syndicate, the oligarchic party bosses, by winning over the CFSA, consolidating power in the party on the back of its support, and winning elections in its name. Only a year before coming out as a socialist, she had opposed the nationalisation of banks. Even after her damascene conversion, she continued opposing the nationalisation of foreign trade, and briefly, even the abolition of 'privy purses', the pensions of the former aristocracy handed to them for their trouble integrating into the Union at Independence. But at a time of inflation, scarcity, and economic hardship, and fresh from a slew of electoral defeats at the state level, not to mention the hard left insurgency ripping through the countryside and growing stronger by the day, there was no alternative to socialism in 1969, she felt. On her desk was probably the alarming Home Ministry report on 'The Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tensions' that was published that year, which worried that "extremism" and the "widening gap" between proprietor and peasant were "lend[ing] to an explosive situation". The Green Revolution could potentially turn red. "Garibi hatao" was her answer: Get rid of poverty. Ahead of her landslide election victory of 1971 she had said to the journalist Kuldip Nayar: "I want to take the wind out of the sails of the Communists, and I can do that only by moving to the Left." Indisputably, this was opportunism, not socialism.

The Nehru-Gandhis, then, were not some of nature's socialists, numberless references to the "socialistic pattern of society" (a Nehruvian watchword) and Garibi Hatao (Gandhi's cri de cœur) notwithstanding. From the 1950s on, the Congress that they led was, as indeed it had been during the twilight years of the Raj, a party of the gentry, and to a lesser extent of capital and the bourgeoisie as well, masquerading as the voice of the proletariat, even as it brutally put down any semblance of collective action by them, placing police and union power at the behest of landlord and capitalist and obviating any juridical or parliamentary challenge to landed and monied interests. To put it less charitably, Nehru and Gandhi in particular, but also Congress socialists more generally, belonged to the same tendency that the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek caricatured in his circumspect, but alas only satirical, Party of Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of the Law.

Pratinav Anil, a Clarendon scholar, is completing his doctorate on Muslim politics in postcolonial India at St John's College, University of Oxford. Educated at Sciences Po and the LSE, he has between his degrees briefly worked at the Centre de recherches internationales in Paris and as a farmhand in the Val-d'Oise. His *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-1977* (Hurst), co-authored with Christophe Jaffrelot, is out now.

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