

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU Centenary Volume 1989

NEHRU'S TRIBAL PHILOSOPHY

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU understood, expressed and shaped the forces which history unleashed in his time. He was one of those rare politicians and revolutionaries who comprehended the great issues of their time and had the ability to formulate answers to questions of their own and other people caught up in the historical drama of change. He made a significant contribution to India's Freedom Struggle in various capacities-as a fighter for freedom, as a leader of the Indian people, as a builder of modern India, as a champion of forces of justice, freedom and peace in the international arena, and as an author. His contributions have been many and varied in all these roles. This article seeks to deal with his sense of social justice and development which found expression in his attitude towards the tribals. There are some forty million tribal people in India today, inhabiting nucleated village systems all over the country. To tribals, life means living in harmony with one's environment. This has given them a deep sense of attachment for rivers, trees and hills. Nehru's own deep feeling for the mountains and forests of India made him specially sensitive to the interests of the people who inhabited them.

It has long been recognized that some of the traditional views of tribal people 'as tiresome savages who caused trouble' or 'as colorful and picturesque folk engaging themselves in sexual orgies, human sacrifice and head-hunting' or 'as backward, mired in superstition and squalor' were unjust and unreal and needed to be changed. In the age-old cultural fabric of India, the tribal population had come to acquire social divisions of language, religion and caste that characterized the majority Hindu population, in addition to their own inherent racial divisions and

weaknesses due to their being scattered over several small groups in disparate environments, except for some tribes with large populations. Nonetheless the tribes have continued to provide an admirable variety of colour and strength to India's culture. Tribal culture is known for its diversity and durability as well as its simple joys of life. Nehru realized that the latent energy of tribals could be harnessed to creative pursuits in a modern world.

Nehru's attitude towards tribals was a part of the wider framework of his philosophy of social justice and national reconstruction. The concept of social justice was an integral part of the Freedom Struggle and a hallmark of Gandhian philosophy. As a leader of the Indian National Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru was committed to this concept. His faith in equality and social justice was also influenced by his world-view that the neglected and oppressed peoples had a right to equality and freedom. His convictions and years of work in India's hills and plains made Jawaharlal Nehru a teacher of great moral authority, carrying on the tradition of Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi.

Nehru was fascinated by the spontaneity of tribals and their capacity for joy and heroism. At the same time he was aware of their appalling poverty, destitution and ignorance. To him, the protection of tribals from exploiters and the safeguarding of what was beautiful, free and enchanting in their societies and culture were important tasks. Nehru always tried to view opportunities and challenges in terms of what they meant to the tribes, apart from the nation as a whole. In his thinking, one of the signs of a civilized, democratic society was that the state system must be sensitive to the tribal way of life. The tribes had as much right to their own culture and religion as anyone else in India. An effort was necessary to protect the tribal languages and prevent the loss of the oral

literatures of the tribes which would have an adverse impact on tribal identity. The process of modernization, in Nehru's view, must not be taken as forcing a sudden break with the tribals' past but help them build upon it and grow by a natural process of evolution. This did not imply preserving everything of the past. As Nehru wrote in *An Autobiography*, 'We cannot stop the river of change or cut ourselves adrift from it and, psychologically, we who have eaten the apple of Eden cannot forget the taste and go back to primitiveness.' The implication is that while accelerating the processes of development and change, we must not forget that the pace of change or quality of change must suit the ability of tribals to acquire new skills in tune with their genius. Nehru built up a relationship with tribals based on sympathy, affection and sincerity. He urged them to acquire new tools of knowledge. Talking to a gathering in Bastar district in Madhya Pradesh in 1955, he declared: 'You should live in your own way. This is what I want you to decide yourselves....Your old customs and habits are good. We want that they should survive, but at the same time we want that you should be educated and should do your part in the welfare of our country.'

Nehru was deeply conscious of some of the conflicts inherent in the process of modernization and change, particularly the impact of rapid industrialization on tribal societies. He knew that the setting-up of modern industrial plants unleashed forces of economic opportunity, attracting persons of skill as well as wealth to descend upon these new centres. The setting-up of large-scale industrial units like steel plants in the tribal belts in Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh led to large-scale displacement of tribal populations. The monetary compensation did not always help. As a study recorded, 'With cash in hand and many attractions in the near-by industrial towns, their [tribal] funds were rapidly depleted and in course of time they were without

money as well as without land.’ These developments forced the tribals to join the ranks of landless labourers. They were left at the mercy of the new economic system, in which their want of skill and experience made them vulnerable to exploitation. Nehru’s sensitive mind did not fail to register the acute agony of the tribal population created by sudden industrialization. At public meetings and seminars he spoke of the issues facing tribal societies and encouraged scholars to delve into their heritage. He exhorted administrators and social and political workers to strive to understand their problems.

Assam had a special attraction for Nehru because of its location and history. He visited Assam in December 1945 immediately after the cessation of hostilities in the Second World War. On his return to Calcutta on 21 December 1945, he wrote:

‘Assam has the look of great reserves of strength and potential power....I have no doubt that great highways by road, air and rail, will go across her, connecting China with India, and ultimately connecting east Asia with Europe. Assam will then no longer be an isolated, faraway province but an important link between the East and the West.’ Earlier, Nehru had visited Shillong and other places in Assam as a part of his voyage with history that found expression in *The Discovery of India*.

The finest expression of Nehru’s tribal philosophy is recorded in his preface to Verrier Elwin’s treatise *A Philosophy for NEFA*. Nehru wrote:

We cannot allow matters to drift in the tribal areas or just not take interest in them. In the world of today that is not possible or desirable. At the same time we should avoid over-administering these areas and, in particular, sending too many outsiders into tribal territory. It is between these two extreme positions that we have to function. Development in

various ways there has to be such as communications, medical facilities, education and better agriculture. These avenues of development should, however, be pursued with the broad framework of the following five fundamental principles:

1. People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional arts and culture.
2. Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected.
3. We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will, no doubt, be needed especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.
4. We should not over-administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.
5. We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the quality of human character that is evolved.

The task of providing an institutional framework to translate this vision was entrusted to the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly viewed the problems of tribals from two broad perspectives: (1) those related to the tribals in general, and (2) those related to the tribal population concentrated in India's north-east. Special provisions were made in the Constitution to reserve seats for the Scheduled Tribes in the state legislatures and the national Parliament and in making appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union and the State.

The Constituent Assembly, under Nehru's influence, constituted a subcommittee styled the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Subcommittee. Gopinath Bardoloi was its chairman. J.J.M. Nichols Roy, a respected hill tribal leader from Shillong and Rup Nath Brahma, a plains' tribal from the Brahmaputra valley, were members. There were two other members on the subcommittee from outside the north-eastern region. The committee found that (1) 'the fact the hill people have not yet been assimilated with the people of the plains of Assam has to be taken into account;' (2) the assimilation process was least advanced in the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills and 'the policy of seclusion has tended to create a feeling of separateness;' and (3) the various tribes in the foothills under the administrative jurisdiction of one frontier tract or the other were closer to the plains' tribes through family as well as economic bonds. The committee wished to safeguard tribal institutions so that new political organizations could be built on the old foundations. The distinct features of the tribal way of life pertaining to land, forests, *jhuming* and settling disputes were sought to be preserved; changes would emanate 'as far as possible from the tribe itself'.

Keeping in view all these considerations, the Bardoloi Committee recommended that (1) the Khasi and Jaintia Hills (excluding Shillong town), the Garo Hills, the Lushai Hills, the Naga Hills, the North Cachar Hills and the Mikir Hills (excluding certain plains areas) be made autonomous districts with wide-ranging powers vested in the district councils for the administration and development of these areas; (2) the Sadiya and Balipara Frontier Tracts, the Tirap Frontier Tract and the Naga Tribal Area should be non-autonomous areas and responsibility for their all-round administration and development should be vested in the governor of Assam; and (3) the plains' tribals of Assam should be

recognized as a minority and be entitled to all the privileges of a minority, including representation in legislatures and in the services and that their land should be protected. The district council was an administrative innovation which found its place under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. It was a democratic framework in which seventy-five per cent of the councilors were directly elected. It was also significantly traditional, as twenty-five per cent of the councilors would be nominated by the government from among ex-tribal chiefs.

The debates in the Constituent Assembly and the inclusion of the Sixth Schedule in the Constitution bear testimony to Nehru's great love and affection for the tribes and to his vision of creating institutions to safeguard and promote the interests of the tribals in a fast-changing world.

Wide powers were earmarked for the district councils in the north-east and other tribal organizations functioning at the village level in other parts of India. The right to vote and the creation of economic opportunities were accorded high priority. At the same time it was advocated that the quality of tribal life, tribal culture and tribal freedom were to be maintained and promoted. The five-year plans allocated large sums of money to tribal development schemes throughout India, and the policy of isolation of the British days became a thing of the past. The new emphasis was on intensive development in the tribal areas to enable them to catch up with their neighbours in respect of education, health, agriculture, industry and communications. Nehru wanted India's democratic institutions and the bureaucracy to allow tribesmen to live their lives with the utmost possible happiness and freedom. With all these, the tribal people found a new place in the political system. Schemes of development in tribal areas made headlines in the media. It became clear that the tribals could no longer be neglected or ignored.

The system of planned and controlled contact with the tribes necessarily had innumerable shortcomings, but Nehru never wavered in gentleness and humility when approaching the problems.

The policy of large-heartedness that Nehru advocated towards the tribes was put to severe test in his lifetime in dealing with the Nagas. The Nagas have traditionally lived both in India and in Burma. Administration of the Naga Hills in India at the time of Independence was the responsibility of Assam of which it formed a part. From the days of the legendary Ahom rulers of Assam and the British, this tribe of tough people had received a great deal of autonomy and consideration. Soon after Independence, a demand was made by certain groups of Nagas for an independent country.

In the first general elections in February 1952, the electoral process could not take root in Nagaland as, at the instance of Zapu Phizo, the Nagas did not seek election either to the State Assembly or the Lok Sabha and none voted although arrangements were made by the Election Commission to hold elections. Similar was the fate of the first elections to the newly-formed district councils. Nehru combined a visit to Burma and Nagaland in March-April 1953. Both Nehru and the Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu, visited the Naga areas in Burma and Assam together. The visit gave Nehru a firsthand experience of the extent to which the Nagas were alienated from the state system.

The second half of the 1950s witnessed a fierce armed conflict between the underground Nagas and the security forces on the one hand, and a well-meaning search towards enlargement of their democratic rights by the Naga people on the other. Nehru visited Nagaland and made it clear that he was willing to accommodate the Nagas in every possible way, but not at the cost of national integrity. Violence would be met with

force. He would not interfere with the work of the missionaries provided they behaved and functioned as missionaries. Nehru was in favour of according a favoured treatment to the Nagas. Accordingly, Nagaland was carved out of Assam and made into a state on 11 December 1963 even though it then had a population of only 0.3 million.

The first elections to the Nagaland Legislative Assembly were held in January 1964 and candidates of the N.N.O. (a party close to the Indian National Congress) and the newly-formed Democratic Party competed for forty-six Assembly seats and one seat for the Lok Sabha; the N.N.C. led by Phizo boycotted the elections as before. The N.N.O., led by Shilu Ao, formed the first government in Nagaland. However, the elections and consequent formation of a government did not usher in either a fully participatory democracy or peace in Nagaland. The forces of insurgency continued to command a following among the proud and independent Nagas even as the forces of democracy had used the tradition of self-government in Naga society to make it participate in elections. The results were mixed. On the one hand, the new state administration charted out an ambitious plan for development. On the other, the underground Nagas organized more determined violence which made them clash with the security forces.

It was Kautilya, the legendary prime minister to Chandragupta Maurya and author of the *Arthashastra*, who had enjoined that 'the acquisition of the help of local communities is better than the acquisition of an army or profits.' Nehru never relied upon the state processes exclusively to deal with the Nagas. In 1964, with his approval, Jayaprakash Narayan, Michael Scott and B.P. Chaliha went to Nagaland as a peace Mission and signed an agreement with the underground leaders that led to a cessation of hostilities and a psychology of peace. The democratic processes have since taken root in Nagaland. India can be reasonably

proud of a stable constitutional culture in Nagaland. The idea that power can be turned to utilitarian goals in a democracy is well accepted. This has been possible because the policies enunciated by Nehru were pursued by successive Prime Ministers.

The happenings in Nagaland and the language policy of the Government of Assam led to demands for autonomy in other parts of north-east India. Nehru was receptive to the new wind blowing in the north-east. At his meeting with the Hill leaders on 5 October 1963 he suggested that a commission could go into the demands of the Hill people. In subsequent years, Indira Gandhi, as Prime Minister of India, pursued her father's sympathetic approach towards the tribal people. She reorganized the region into seven political units with a regional planning authority the North-Eastern Council. The reorganization of north-east India gave the tribals a sense of pride in their separate political status and faith in the ideals of democracy.

Nehru was a man of intellect as well as a man of action. He inspired ordinary persons to work for big causes. He possessed a rare capacity to put himself into the shoes of the tribal and he could visualize the implications of a proposal through the mind of a tribal. His sharp intellect, his empathy for the tribals, his lifelong contact with the oppressed people and his philosophical bent of mind enabled him to think and act in an effective manner. He was a person who never ceased to search. He operated on a large time-scale with a dedication which is legendary.

In the caste syndrome of Hindu society, there is a marked tendency to look down upon the untouchables and the tribals and adopt a moralizing posture. Nehru deprecated this attitude. His scientific mind found it irrational and totally wrong. Placing himself *vis-à-vis* a tribal he once

stated: 'If I may say so, in many ways they are far better as human beings than non-tribal people like me. Because they have not developed their economy in the conventional way, they are called tribals. They are a democratic people. They are fine men and women, and possess many cultural qualities which we do not possess.'

On another occasion, on 7 June 1952, talking about the tribals, Nehru observed: 'Above all they are a people who sing and dance and try to enjoy life; not people who sit in stock exchanges, shout at one another and think themselves to be civilized.'

In the traditional tribal way of living, the choices were extremely limited. Nehru wanted the range of choices to be widened by education and state intervention through the instrumentality of planning and Community Development programmes. He was also aware of the pitfalls. He wrote: 'It has often happened in other areas of the world that such contact has been disastrous to the primitive culture and gradually the primitive people thus affected die out... I am alarmed when I see not only in this country but in other great countries too how anxious people are to shape others according to their own image or likeness and to impose on them their particular way of living.'

Nehru's approach towards the Hill people is of relevance not only to India but also to others in the world whether in Australia, the United States, China or the Soviet Union, who are engaged in similar tasks of development of tribals located on the periphery of their society, who have led a sequestered life for centuries. The institutions of governance that emerged in Nehru's time or thereafter in India's north-east are of major interest and are models with a wider appeal. It is true that different societies have different social and cultural realities and face specific problems of harmony between social justice and economic development.

What methodology is to be adopted to strike a balance between conflicting claims of social justice and economic development would vary from one society to another. The basic approach that Nehru laid down is, however, of intrinsic value. As he put it:

It is obvious that the tribal areas have to progress. Nobody wants to keep them as museum specimens. It is equally obvious that they have to progress in their own way. They do not like something alien to be imposed upon them. No individual can grow in alien surroundings, habits or customs. How are we going to reconcile these two considerations? There are two extreme approaches. One is the museum approach, keeping them as interesting specimens for anthropologists to discuss. The other may be called the 'open door' approach.

Both are equally bad. The second approach attracts all the undesirables from outside who exploit these people economically and otherwise and take them out of their moorings. We have to find a middle course. That can succeed only if there is no element of compulsion about it . That attempt has in fact to be made through their own people.

The tribals had full faith in him. Nehru never betrayed this personal trust, leadership of the government of India for seventeen long years notwithstanding. In 1966, in a far-flung village, Hawajan in North Lakhimpur, Assam, I was deeply impressed when Numalia Gam, a prominent plains tribal elder of that area, told me in one of my numerous meetings with him that the equality with plainsmen that he was seeking in the fields of education, jobs and political representation was what he thought Nehru inspired him to do. Nehru helped create a new group of tribals along with other Indians: self-confident and capable engineers, scientists, military officers, civil servants and public leaders.

It is difficult to sum up Nehru's tribal philosophy and his contribution to tribal culture and progress, multifaceted as they are. But it can be safely asserted that it is impossible for the rights of the tribals to be snatched away in India. The constitutional provisions and institutions of democracy will prevent that. Equally important is the fact that ordinary people in tribal areas still remember and refer to Nehru's philosophy of allowing them to develop along the lines of their genius. Verrier Elwin, Nehru's friend and a person dedicated to the cause of the tribals, perhaps expressed Nehru's contribution to the tribal philosophy meaningfully when he wrote:

Into our thinking about the tribes he has brought science, humanity and respect; and I liked the man who once remarked to me that 'the whole of the Prime Minister's tribal policy can be summed up in one word-humility!'
