Nehru and today's politics

By Gitanjali Surendran, December 30, 2018

There are many ghosts that haunt the republic. The ghost of peasant rebels in Tebhaga and Telangana that we have lost the battle for equality in society. The ghost of Nehru reminds us that there are no shortcuts to building lasting institutions. At best the ghosts of our republic reveal to us how far we are from realising the social utopias our ancestors envisioned. At worst, they reveal our insecurities and divisions, and no longer serve any productive purpose for social or political discourse. The ghost of Nehru has become an example of the latter type. We have come to hate him (though I dare say we continue to desire to be him).

The Prime Minister's recent statement that the signature rose in Nehru’s jacket is evidence that he was an elite who knew nothing of the farmers and their lives, has only illustrated how unproductive the image of Nehru has become in public discourse. For the truth is that Nehru was the first to admit that he knew nothing about farmers till he encountered Gandhi and began his journeys among them in the early 1920s. Thereafter he found their company and the potential of their politics exhilarating and was closely involved in the Kisan Sabha movement for farmer’s rights. It’s also true that Nehru knew something about gardening. His family home in Allahabad, Anand Bhawan, had beautiful gardens. His daughter wrote to him about the flowers she and Feroze were planting on the grounds in the 1940s. And yet, when the 1943 Bengal famine struck, Nehru wrote to his family from his jail cell that the gardens ought to be replaced with vegetables to distribute among the hungry. For Nehru, gardens were dispensable if fields were the need of the hour.

The reason we can’t put the ghost of Nehru to rest is, of course, because his descendants continue to dominate a party that at this point only loosely shares a name with Nehru’s. Be that as it may, it is time we give Nehru a proper public appraisal, not as a hero on a pedestal nor as a villainous politician, but as a man of his times, a man of ideas, a leader of people, a skilled orator, a maker of modern India, and a human being who had his faults and who made mistakes. We must either critique him as a historical figure from whom we can learn and grow as a society or we must bury him once and for all. The internet and social media rumours that he was a descendent of Muslims, that his son-in-law was Muslim, that he sired illegitimate children, that he was born in a brothel, that he died of syphilis, all meant to be insulting toward him, are in fact all untrue. There is, however, more truth to the accusations that he neglected India’s Defence, that he misunderstood China’s intentions, that the Planning Commission was his personal instrument of extra constitutional control, and he failed to make a success of the mixed economy model. An assessment of his ideas and actions might still be useful if carried out in historical terms rather than empty vitriol.
Every year, my students inform me of a new rumour about Nehru. My contention to them is that we carry out a critique of Nehru where we first try to understand him in the context of his time. I ask them to set aside their moral judgment with the guarantee that if they actually probe history and historical personalities, they would uncover the roots of a self-understanding that could propel us forward rather than leave us stagnant. Unfortunately, history has rarely served this purpose in our public discourse. Instead, it has ended up as ammunition for identity politics or political mobilization.

Imagine if we lifted Nehru out of the hero-villain spectrum? Imagine if we thought of him in terms of his ideas, his innovations, his mistakes, his humour, his blind spots, his patriotism, his nationalism (the two are not quite the same thing), his jail time, his statesmanship, his style, his ethical code and so much more. How we remember and how we forget a person like Nehru is a barometer of the quality of our public discourse and of the introspection we are willing to carry out. At the moment, neither looks too promising.

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