Ideas, Strategy, and Structures

Born in 1889 to a family of Kashmiri Brahmans, Jawaharlal Nehru was the eldest of three children. His father Motilal Nehru was an immensely successful and ambitious lawyer in the city of Allahabad. Like many of his contemporaries, Motilal was active in the Indian National Congress in its early avatar as a loyalist organization. Socially, he was more venturesome and sought to recast his family in Western mores. At the age of 15 Jawaharlal was sent to England for an education at Harrow followed by Trinity College, Cambridge; his subsequent intellectual development owed more to yet another British institution—His Majesty’s Prisons, where he virtually inhaled books during long periods of enforced leisure.

Jawaharlal returned to India in 1912 and, somewhat lackadaisically, began a legal practice in Allahabad. Four years later he was married. After his wife Kamala’s death in 1936 he did not marry again. By 1919 he was pulled into the ruck of nationalist politics under the inspiration of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. From the age of about 30, Nehru’s life was consumed by politics. Well before India attained independence, Gandhi had anointed him his chosen successor. In August 1947 Nehru took over as independent India’s prime minister. Re-elected thrice, he remained in office for the next seventeen years until he succumbed to a stroke in May 1964.

Over his lifetime Nehru sought to sequester his public and private lives. But the links between them have engendered much interest. On the one hand there has been ceaseless speculation about his relationship
with Edwina Mountbatten and its influence on his political choices. Stanley Wolpert in his frequently speculative biography claims, for instance, that at the height of the Bengal crisis in 1950 Nehru contemplated eloping with Edwina.\(^1\) Little evidence has emerged to substantiate such assertions. On the other hand, a straight line is often drawn from Nehru’s Kashmiri origins to his apparently intransigent handling of the dispute with Pakistan. Nehru, we are told, was obsessed with his ancestral homeland.\(^2\) These contentions, too, are difficult to evaluate. Nehru himself agreed that he was “attached to Kashmir for a large variety of reasons. It may be that many of them are sentimental.” But he was equally clear that he was “not moved by sentiment” and that his policy was actuated by strategic and domestic political concerns.\(^3\)

Indeed, the one aspect of Nehru’s character that is germane to a political assessment is his conscious sense of restraint: a tendency to avoid plunging headlong into a situation or succumbing to the emotions it aroused.\(^4\) As he explained to his daughter, Indira Priyadarshini, it was “impossible for me to lay bare my heart before anybody,” a trait that afforded “self-protection against a fear I always had of being swept away by too much emotion.” This facet of his personality was shaped in important ways by Motilal. Jawaharlal’s sisters were much younger, and in consequence he was the prime object of paternal hopes and ambitions. His inclination to shy away from full-blown confrontations owed something to a powerful father. During the years in England he acquired a further integument of reserve and a pronounced aversion to intimacy. As Sunil Khilnani perceptively observes, there was “a connection between this self-restraint and his judgements about the use of power in the public realm.”

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\(^3\) Nehru to Roy Bucher, 7 August 1949, 7901-87-30, Bucher Papers, National Army Museum (NAM), London.