

**THE TENTH JAWAHARLAL NEHRU MEMORIAL LECTURE ON
“NEHRU AND PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY”
DELIVERED BY THE HON’BLE PRESIDENT OF INDIA
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UNIVERSITY,
New Delhi On January 18, 2014**

Abstract

The establishment of Parliamentary Democracy in India at independence was a momentous step in the history of the new nation emerging from a long period of colonialism. Although Parliamentary Democracy in a newly independent nation was thought to be of great risk, Nehru played a central role in making the process a success. His vision transformed the limited representative government given by the British into a vibrant and powerful institutionalised structure suited for the citizens of India. Nehru was a firm believer in freedom of thought and expression and participation of the people in the governance of the country. For Nehru, democracy and civil liberties were not merely a means for bringing about economic and social development, but, absolute values and ends in themselves.

In Nehru’s understanding, only a democratic structure which gave space to various cultural, political, and socio-economic trends to express themselves could hold India together. He also believed that the establishment of a strong and stable parliamentary system during the difficult formative years of nation-building in our country was also very essential. It was due to the strong leadership and liberal values provided by Nehru, that Parliamentary Democracy has taken root and survived in India. The enduring rules, values and conventions laid down by him enabled the democratic institution in India to shape and function. Over the years, Parliament as an institution has constantly introduced changes and new rules which have allowed it to move ahead, but the strong legacy of functioning in democratic and scientific temperament laid down by Nehru at independence has made this institution unique.

I am happy to visit the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) of New Delhi today and I deem it an honour to have been invited to deliver the Tenth Nehru Memorial Lecture.

44 year old JNU is well known in India and abroad as a University with a 'difference'. It is recognised as the home of the intellectually restless, insatiably curious and mentally rigorous. It is most appropriate that JNU's guiding philosophy is Nehru's famous description of the role of a University, namely, "*A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for the adventure of ideas and for the search of truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the Universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people*"¹.

JNU is amongst the first Universities in the country to emphasize the interdisciplinary approach in teaching and research and introduce the semester system, credit and grading system, 100 per cent internal examination and evaluation system as well as a dynamic admission policy. Its research and extra curricular life has been always imbued with social purpose and been of relevance to the problems of

society. Moreover, the JNU Act states that the University shall endeavour to “*promote the study of the principles for which Jawaharlal Nehru worked during his life-time, namely national integration, social justice, secularism, a democratic way of life, international understanding and a scientific approach to the problems of society*”².

It is keeping in mind the high quality and reputation of the faculty and students of this University as well as the objectives of its founding that I decided to choose the topic of ‘Nehru and Parliamentary Democracy’ for my lecture.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was the prime architect of modern India and her system of Parliamentary Democracy. Nehru had an abiding faith in the parliamentary process which for him meant a responsible and responsive political system which governs through consultation and discussion.

Nehru was a firm believer in freedom of thought and expression. Democracy and civil liberties were for him absolute values, ends in themselves, and not merely a means for bringing about economic and social

development. There was in him what his biographer Prof. S Gopal calls “*a granite core of intellectual and moral commitment to democratic values*”. “*I would not,*” Nehru said, “*give up the democratic system for anything*”³.

The establishment of full Parliamentary Democracy in India was thus a momentous step in the history of a new nation emerging from a long period of colonialism. Nehru played a central role in shaping the process by which the limited representative government given by the British was transformed into vibrant and powerful institutions that suited the genius of the Indian people. Moreover, as the leader of the House-Provisional Parliament (1950-1952) First Lok Sabha (1952-1957), Second Lok Sabha (1957-1962) and Third Lok Sabha (1962-1964) – Nehru played the most important role in building our parliamentary institutions and establishing healthy practices and precedents.

The road to the Constitution

Long before freedom from foreign rule became a reality, Jawaharlal Nehru as President of the Indian National Congress in 1936 declared that India’s ultimate objective was the establishment of “*a*

democratic state, “*full democracy*” and a “*new social and economic order*”⁴.

Nehru popularized the demand for a Constituent Assembly to draft India’s Constitution and made it a central issue in the 1937 elections. Unlike in many other countries, the Constitution of India was not made by the departing colonial power. Instead, Indian leaders sat in the Constituent Assembly from December 1946 to January 1950 and after careful discussion and deliberation gave unto themselves the new nation’s Basic Law.

Interestingly, the ‘Objectives’ Resolution moved by Nehru in the Assembly on 13 December 1946, did not at all mention the parliamentary form of government. In the Constituent Assembly, many speakers argued for adoption of the parliamentary system pointing out that several generations of Indians were schooled in it and this collective experience could not be ignored. But others had doubts and voiced them stridently. Some feared a majoritarian electoral dispensation in a polity that was deeply divided and preferred a fixed-term executive. Others equated adoption of a parliamentary model with a “*slavish surrender to the West*”⁵. The Gandhians in the Assembly were keen that an

indigenous system based on Village Republics be adopted, but their ideas were sought to be accommodated in other parts of the Constitution. Nehru was however not swayed by these arguments and believed that Parliamentary Democracy conformed to our history and traditions and was best suited to enable India build a united and integrated nation from a highly pluralistic society with divisive pulls of different kinds.

The democratic ethos of the people of India

Nehru tried to visualise and evolve the most appropriate structure of governance for India keeping in mind the nature of Indian society and its long history, spread over several millennia. The process of nation-formation, Nehru said, could be strengthened by recognising the urges and aspirations of Indian people inhabiting different parts of the country with their rich, diverse culture and linguistic heritage. While moving the 'Objectives' Resolution in the Constituent Assembly, Nehru observed "*Whatever system of Government we may establish here must fit in with the temper of our people and be acceptable to them*"⁶. In his words: "*all our institutions, including parliamentary institutions, are ultimately the projections*

of a people's character, thinking and aims. They are strong and lasting in the measure that they are in accordance with the people's character and thinking. Otherwise, they tend to break up"⁷.

In Nehru's understanding, Parliamentary Democracy was necessary for keeping India united as a nation. Given its diversity and differences only a democratic structure which gives freedom to various cultural, political, and socio-economic tendencies to express themselves could hold India together. He said "*this is too large a country with too many legitimate diversities to permit any so-called 'strong man' to trample over people and their ideas.*"⁸

The need to educate people in democracy

At the same time, Nehru was realistic and recognized that Parliamentary Democracy was not something which could be consolidated overnight. It had to evolve and grow. It had to be absorbed by the people and demanded a great deal of investment in their political education. Nehru took pains to explain to the masses the implications of various forces working within and outside the country and international developments. He explained the logic

behind important decisions through his speeches and addresses both inside and outside Parliament.

Nehru believed that all programmes and policies of the Government must be properly debated, understood, evaluated and then accepted. He sought to create a consensus on major issues so that people felt motivated and involved in the task of building the nation and in safeguarding its freedom and democratic institutions. He firmly believed that individuals had the best opportunity for self-growth as well as to serve others only in a democratic polity. Democracy promoted self-discipline and social responsibility. Nehru elaborated this point further as follows: “*creative energy and a sense of freedom do not develop merely by giving a person the right to vote*”⁹.

System which is responsible and responsive

Nehru believed that Parliamentary Democracy had the ability to mobilize the masses and involve them in the task of development and nation-building. The government remains both responsible to the people 24/7 and is also responsive to their wishes and demands at all times. An intimate relationship is forged between government and the people through Parliament. In Nehru’s words: “*It is a method of*

argument, discussion and decision, and of accepting that decision even though one may not agree with it” ¹⁰.

Nehru also believed Parliamentary Democracy would best contribute to the establishment of economic democracy and the achieving of the goals set out in the Preamble to the Constitution, namely justice-social, economic and political.

Respect for Parliamentary Etiquette

Nehru treated Parliament with great respect and was often seen sitting patiently through long and often boring debates as an example to his colleagues and young parliamentarians. He spoke frequently in Parliament, and used it as a forum to disseminate his views to the public. Despite the majority enjoyed by the Congress Party, he ensured that the Parliament always reflected the will of the entire people. Even when he was quite ill during the last few months of his life, he did not miss any session and would even insist on rising to his feet whenever he had to speak, to maintain the decorum of the house.

Nehru's relations with Members of Parliament was most cordial. Letters from Members of Parliament was invariably replied personally and promptly. When

Parliamentary delegations led by the Speaker had to visit countries abroad, he would come to the Speaker's Chamber and address them. He had high respect for the Office of the Speaker and observed "*The Speaker has to abstain from active participation in all controversial topics in politics. The essence of the matter is that a Speaker has to place himself in the position of a judge.*"¹¹ In one of his addresses to the House when the Presiding Officer came under attack, Nehru cautioned against undermining the office. He said: "*The point is not the legal right but the propriety, the desirability of doing it*"¹².

Nehru laid down some conventions of lasting value by upholding the Speaker's position in the House. Once when Speaker Mavalankar wanted to see Prime Minister in his office, Nehru emphatically pointed out that it was he who would go to the Speaker's Chamber and not the other way round. The incident demonstrates Nehru's humility and adherence to parliamentary conventions and respect for institutions.

Providing information to the Parliament

Nehru promoted frank discussions on subjects of importance in the Houses of Parliament. He did not appreciate the use of public interest as a reason to

deny information to the Parliament and sometimes intervened to give information which the concerned Minister may have denied. He was willing to share a great deal of information even on matters like defence and foreign policy. As Foreign Minister, he made it a point to have discussions from time to time on the international situation and he would often himself move motions in the House that a particular international development be taken into consideration. The result was that foreign policy debates in the Indian Parliament attracted wide attention not just in India but also in the world outside. In Delhi, foreign affairs debates were eagerly awaited and large number of diplomats and media would throng the galleries on the day of such debates.

The importance of the 'Opposition'

Nehru was aware that the lack of an established Opposition meant significant weakness in the system. He also felt that the lack of experience and independent thinking among the large majority of backbenchers required remedial action.

Nehru opposed the banning of the Communist Party even though he was against its policies. He wanted that it should be countered by normal legal

processes. He said *“I do not want India to be a country in which millions of people say “yes” to one man, I want a strong opposition.”*¹³

Nehru frequently met Opposition leaders to exchange ideas on crucial issues. He would compliment those who made good speeches and raised important issues. He maintained good personal relations with many Opposition members and never failed in showing them courtesy and consideration.

Nehru constantly asked his Ministers to welcome probing questions and debates. In the words of Prof. N.G. Ranga, eminent Parliamentarian, Nehru treated Parliament as a *“comrade”* and a *“necessary aid to Ministers”*¹⁴. Mrs. Violet Alva once observed that Nehru spoke *“with the spirit of the rebel but he left no wounds behind”*¹⁵.

Rights and Privileges and Question Hour

Nehru was attentive to the need to preserve and protect the rights and privileges of members. He was particular that the dignity and prestige of the House should be maintained at all times. He said, *“I am jealous of the powers of this House and I should not like anyone to limit those powers”*¹⁶. He took keen interest

in the Question Hour and was almost always present during the Hour. He also sat through most of the debates on major issues and listened to members with attention. He would intervene and answer any difficult question and conclude or sum up a debate at any point with effortless ease.

Critical role of Elections

Nehru had tremendous faith in the capacity of poor, unlettered people to understand issues and exercise reasoned choices. He did not use the excuse of the partition of the country and the consequent communal violence or influx of refugees to postpone elections. On the contrary, he was impatient to go to the people and unhappy that elections could not be held earlier. In the election campaign for the first General Elections of 1951-52, Nehru travelled some 25,000 miles and addressed around 35 million people or a tenth of India's then population. He constantly educated the people about the value of adult suffrage and their duty to discharge their right to vote with responsibility.

In the first general elections, over a million officials were involved. 173 million voters were registered through a house-to-house survey. Three-quarters of

those eligible were illiterate. Elections were spread out over 6 months, from October 1951 to March 1952, and candidates of 77 political parties, apart from some independents, contested in 3,772 candidates in 489 constituencies. The Manchester Guardian wrote on 2 February 1952, “*If ever a country took a leap in the dark towards democracy it was India*”¹⁷. It was largely due to the faith people had in Nehru that such large numbers voted in the first election.

Challenges of Parliamentary Democracy

It is well known that despite the solid foundation laid by Nehru, Parliamentary Democracy in India faces numerous challenges. In recent years, questions have been raised about the Parliament’s effectiveness. There has been widespread criticism of constant disruption of proceedings, low level of attendance and debate, unruly behaviour, shrinking in the number of days that the Parliament meets and the irresponsible manner in which important legislation including the Budget gets passed with hardly any discussion.

Over the years, the single-party dominant system has shifted to a multi-party coalition system and hung parliaments, unstable coalitions as well as deep political divisions characterise the scene in centre as

well as in many states. The entry of criminal elements into politics and corruption have also caused major concern. Further, the proliferation of the media with its constant quest for sensational news and the role played by influential civil society organizations, as in the case of the Lokpal Bill, show that many new forces are at work in Indian politics.

Let me add some thoughts on the Lokpal Bill and the run up to its adoption by Parliament. The Lokpal Bill has a chequered history. It was introduced as many as eight times in the Lok Sabha and considered at various stages. It was passed many times and referred to various committees. Finally, during the NDA Government, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs headed by me scrutinized and recommended the Bill to Home Ministry for consideration of passage.

From the 1970s, the people of India have wanted the Lokpal to become a reality. When Shri Anna Hazare started his agitation for a strong Lokpal, he received support from a wide spectrum of society. No responsible and responsive government could ignore the huge public upsurge in support of the Lokpal Bill.

That is why the Government decided to depute five senior ministers to sit down with five representatives chosen by Shri Anna Hazare and finalize a draft bill for introduction in Parliament.

The agitation for the Lokpal Bill thus showed that civil society can also take the lead in initiating legislation. For the first time in Indian politics, legislation ceased to be the exclusive prerogative of federal or state legislatures. Civil society demonstrated that they play an important and effective role in the legislative process and a new dimension was added to parliamentary politics.

Lessons from Nehru

Friends, what are the lessons we should learn from Nehru ?

For Nehru, people were always at the heart of our political system. Leaders and the political class exist to serve people and not the other way around. In a democracy, the Parliament is the primary instrument of good governance and social economic transformation. Parliamentarians should treat it with the deference it deserves and at the same time, recognize its potential. Our Parliamentarians and

legislators must see the opportunity provided to represent the people as a great privilege and honour. Parliamentarians must at all times be sensitive and responsive to the problems and concerns of the people.

In a letter to Lady Mountbatten on December 3, 1951, Nehru revealed his passion for people and modern day Parliamentarians would do well to learn from it. He wrote *“Wherever I have been, vast multitudes gather at my meetings and I love to compare them, their faces, their dresses, their reactions to me and what I say. Scenes from past history of that very part of India rise up before me and my mind becomes a picture gallery of past events. But, more than the past, the present fills my mind and I try to probe into the minds and hearts of these multitudes. Having long been imprisoned in the Secretariat of Delhi, I rather enjoy these fresh contacts with the Indian People. It all becomes an exciting adventure....”*¹⁸

Secondly, disruption of proceedings cannot and should not be tolerated under any circumstance. Dissent should be expressed with decency and within the contours and parameters of parliamentary devices. Democracy should comprise of the three ‘D’s – ‘Debate’, ‘Dissent’ and ‘Decision’ not ‘Disruption’.

Figures are available for the time lost due to interruptions/adjournments from the Tenth Lok Sabha (1991-96) onwards. 9.95% of total time was lost due to interruptions in the Tenth Lok Sabha, 5.28% in the Eleventh Lok Sabha, 11.93% in the Twelfth Lok Sabha, 18.95% in the Thirteenth Lok Sabha, 19.58% in the Fourteenth and a shocking 37.77% in the Fifteenth Lok Sabha (upto the Fourteenth Session)¹⁹. It is most unfortunate that time wasted as result of disruptions has been steadily going up over the last two decades.

Thirdly, discipline and decorum must be always maintained and rules, conventions and etiquette observed. Parliamentary practices, procedures and conventions are meant to provide for orderly and expeditious transaction of business of the House. Once when a Member of Parliament indulged in conduct unbecoming of the House, Nehru himself moved a motion for the appointment of a parliamentary committee to look into the matter, even though the Member belonged to the Congress.

Nehru said *“I would submit to you, Sir, and to the House, that the least we can do is to accept this and*

thereby given an indication to this House, to the country and to other Assemblies in India that we shall adhere strongly to behaviour that is expected of such a high Assembly as Parliament and other representative bodies in India"²⁰. The Committee eventually recommended the expulsion of the Member from the House.

Fourthly, there has to be mutual respect and cooperation across political boundaries. The minority must accept with grace the decisions of the majority. The majority in turn must respect and to the best extent, accommodate the views of the minority. The cardinal principle of effective functioning of the Parliamentary system is that majority will rule and minority will oppose, expose and if possible, depose. But, this process must take place within the ambit of Parliamentary conventions and procedure.

Every legislator should ensure that the content and the quality of debates that take place in the chambers are of the highest order. As members of different political Parties, individual Parliamentarians would be guided by the policies of their respective Parties. Competitive politics should not however result in slowing down the progress of the country or enhancing the suffering of its people. Most issues of

development and public welfare transcend political barriers. It should not be difficult to forge consensus on such issues.

Finally, Parliamentarians must see legislation as their first and foremost responsibility. It is most unfortunate that time devoted towards legislation has been gradually declining across the country. To illustrate, the first Lok Sabha from 1952-57 had 677 sittings in which 319 bills were passed. In comparison, the fourteenth Lok Sabha from 2004-2009 had only 332 sittings and passed just 247 bills. There is, in particular, need for utmost caution in matters of legislation, money and finance. It must be kept in mind that no expenditure can be incurred by the Executive without approval of the Parliament. No tax can be levied except by a law passed by the Parliament and no money can be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund of the State without the approval of the Parliament.

No one who holds any elected office, including me, has been invited by the voters to occupy that office. Each one has gone to the voters and pleaded for their votes and support. The trust placed by the people in

the political system and those elected should not be betrayed.

Conclusion

Parliamentary Democracy in the Nehruvian era had many distinct features. There was stability and legitimacy in the polity due to the tall leadership of Nehru and the dominant position of the Congress party. The House had many members from the national movement who shared with Nehru a common vision of nation-building and the role of Parliament in this venture. There was a shared political culture among not only among Congressmen but also the Opposition as many groups had emerged from within the Congress. Due to this political culture, it was easy to consolidate Parliamentary Democracy in the early years.

Nehru believed that democracy was something deeper than voting, elections or a political form of government. He said “*In the ultimate analysis, it is a manner of thinking, a manner of action, a manner of behaviour to your neighbour and to your adversary and opponent.*”²¹

Through Parliamentary Democracy, Nehru forged us into a nation and made us strong and self-reliant in our thinking. Nehru wrote *“it is not good enough to work for the people, the only way is to work with the people and go ahead, and to give them a sense of working for themselves.”*²²

The Parliament for Nehru, was relevant only as long as it remained a dynamic institution evolving in accordance with the changing needs of the times. In Nehru’s words: *“In a period of dynamic change, the institution of Parliament has to function with speed”*²³. He was candid enough to admit that the *“problems of government have grown so enormously that sometimes one begins to doubt whether normal parliamentary procedures are adequate to deal with them”*²⁴. There is need for collective thinking by political parties and leaders of our country on how to ensure smooth running of our Parliament and Legislative Assemblies and whether some of the existing rules need to be amended for the purpose.

Nehru had the fullest faith in Parliament as the Supreme representative institution of the people and the *“grand inquest of the nation”*²⁵. Nehru knew that Parliamentary Democracy imposed on members of

Parliament formidable obligations and was the most difficult system of governance as well as one of the most exacting applied sciences. It could be said without any doubt that the parliamentary system has succeeded in India “*because of the background in our country, and because our people have the spirit of democracy in them*”²⁶.

The establishment of a strong and stable parliamentary system by Nehru enabled India consolidate itself in the difficult formative years of nation-building in our country. The success of Parliamentary Democracy in India, which we tend to take for granted, was the exception and not the rule in many newly independent nations. The experience of other ex-colonial countries where first generation nationalist leaders over time concentrated all power in their own hands, or were succeeded by military rulers throws into sharp relief Nehru’s achievement in the above regard.

India inherited institutions from the British period, adapted it to her own needs and firmly established functioning and effective parliamentary institutions as a way of life. Parliamentary Democracy taking firm root and flourishing in India was to a large

extent due to the strong leadership provided by Nehru. To quote Prof. S Gopal, “*Achieved against daunting odds, democracy in India - Adult suffrage, a sovereign Parliament, a free press, an independent judiciary - is Nehru’s most lasting monument.*”²⁷ Once, when he was asked what his legacy to India would be, Nehru replied: “*Hopefully, it is four hundred million people capable of governing themselves*”²⁸.

The question that confront us however is how we modern day Indians can live up to that legacy and make it a reality. I believe scholars such as the faculty and students of this remarkable University can play a major role in bringing back into the centre of debate Nehru’s ideals as well as practice with regard to Parliamentary Democracy. As the elections to the Parliament approaches us, this University can lead the way in building intellectual opinion that creates a congenial climate for a return to the spirit and practice of the Nehruvian days.

As I said in my address to the nation on the eve of last Independence Day, every election must become a crucial milestone in our nation’s journey towards greater social harmony, peace and prosperity. Democracy has given us an opportunity to re-create

another golden age. Let us not squander this extraordinary opportunity.

Thank you,

Jai Hind.