

FIRST BK NEHRU MEMORIAL LECTURE

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I compliment the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development for establishing a lecture in the memory of Mr BK Nehru who rendered outstanding service to the country both during the period of British rule and after independence. I feel privileged to have been asked to deliver the First BK Nehru Memorial Lecture to remember this eminent administrator.

Born in 1909, Nehru was educated at the Allahabad and Oxford Universities and the London School of Economics where he was a favourite student of Harold Laski. He took the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examination while studying at London and was second in the list when he made it in 1933. He joined the ICS in 1934 in the Punjab cadre. At about this time, he got married to Magdolna, a fellow student from Hungary. Renamed as Shobha Nehru, this elegant lady learnt to speak Hindi, wear Indian dresses and prepare Indian delicacies. She had a very large hand in her husband's successes throughout his life.

In 1939, with only five years service, he joined the Government of India on deputation. The excellent quality of his work in the Ministry of Finance, particularly in the management of foreign exchange and sterling balances, led to his being picked up to join the finance and commerce pool. When

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The lecture was delivered at the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, on June 10, 2017, as the First BK Nehru Memorial Lecture.

he had done twelve years of service, he was elevated as joint secretary and continued to deal with external finance related work for which he had already acquired the reputation of an expert.

In 1949, he was appointed as India's director on the World Bank and during this period, he established useful connections with influential personalities in the bank, US government, United Nations and with key ambassadors to the US from various countries. These relations proved invaluable in the coming years and enabled Nehru to advance India's interests on various fronts. Nehru's sustained initiatives in this period culminated in the Government of India being able to secure funding of US \$ 995 million, the entire foreign exchange requirement for the Second Five-Year Plan, without any national policy having to be compromised.

On his return from the World Bank, Nehru was again entrusted with the handling of important issues in the Finance Ministry. As the Second Plan period drew to its closure, concerns arose about how, and from where, the foreign exchange requirements for the Third Plan (1961-66) would be met. As it appeared that Nehru would again be asked to handle this important task, his seniors in the Ministry of External Affairs were not at all happy about his being preferred over their claims, and assigned him a challenging diplomatic assignment in the USA. Meanwhile, on the basis of his earlier experience of working in the World Bank, Nehru had made it known that he would need to be given an adequately impressive title to be able to deal effectively with the World Bank and also approach leaders of world governments at the highest level. Notwithstanding the varied objections raised by the Ministry of External Affairs, Nehru was appointed commissioner general for economic affairs and ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary and, for the next three years, his work in Washington earned rich results.

The US government was not agreeable to funding more than half of US \$ 5 billion, which was the foreign exchange requirement for the Third Plan, and the commissioner general was advised to find the remainder funds from other countries in the world. Nehru had a very successful round of negotiations with Soviet Russia which led to an Indo-USSR agreement under which Moscow agreed to provide a 12-year loan of Roubles 1,500 million at

two and a half percent interest. The vital element of this agreement was that the loan was repayable in Indian goods. In early 1961, when the Aid India Club met under the aegis of the World Bank, Nehru succeeded in securing a firm commitment that India would be provided US \$1 billion per year for the first two years and, thereafter, the foreign exchange deficit of the remaining US \$3 billion would be fully funded, till the end of the plan. This was truly an outstanding achievement, particularly as no unacceptable conditions were imposed by the Aid India Club.

Galbraith, who was among many who complimented the commissioner general for his notable achievement, is reported to have jestfully said that Nehru had succeeded in “moving more gold from one continent to another than anybody since Chengiz Khan”. While recalling Nehru’s successes, it may be mentioned that he had established excellent relations with President Kennedy and his wife. The president, who became strongly committed to supporting India’s advancement, respected Nehru’s views to the extent of seeking his suggestions, through Chester Bowles, about the kind of people he may include in his Cabinet!

After the Aid India Club’s decision had been announced, Nehru advised the Government of India to wind up the post of commissioner general and give him another job in Delhi. However, this did not happen as he was destined to stay on in the USA for the next many years.

Around this time, the UN Secretary General, Dag Hammarskjold, was finishing his tenure and discussions were ongoing to find an equally eminent successor. Nehru’s name was prominent among those who were being considered for this important post. For inexplicable reasons, India’s Defence Minister, VK Krishna Menon, was unhappy with the prospect of Nehru being selected for this post and was opposed to his candidature, allegedly for the reason that he was holding a far more important post as India’s ambassador to the USA and it would not be easy to find a replacement. Be the facts as they may, Nehru spurned this offer and, as he has recorded in his memoirs, never forgave himself for this foolish decision.

President Kennedy was assassinated in late 1963 and Lyndon Johnson became the next president. For the next five years, till 1968, Nehru remained

India's ambassador and served during the entire term of President Johnson. Among the many important events during this period, the Sino-Indian conflict took place in 1962. One of the consequences of India's humiliating defeat was that India's Defence Plan for 1963 and beyond had to be seen and cleared by the Americans before the US government agreed to supply some of the very large number of items listed in the pathetic telegram which Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru had sent to President Kennedy in December 1962. Yet another fallout was that India had to be visibly more friendly and supportive of the USA's desires and policies.

As head of the Indian Supply Mission, Nehru once again demonstrated his enormous skills and succeeded in persuading the US government for continuing to supply large quantities of food grains to India under the PL 480 Programme. As noted in Nehru's memoirs, the quantity of food grains being moved at that time was so large that ships carrying food grains to India were leaving American seaports every ten minutes! Meanwhile, back home in India, Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru passed away and was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri who, unfortunately, died early and was succeeded by Indira Gandhi. Nehru returned home in 1968 after enjoying a very successful stint as India's ambassador to the USA.

On return to Delhi, while still in service, Nehru was appointed governor of Assam and Nagaland where he served his full tenure till 1973. One of Nehru's significant achievements during this period was the success of his negotiations for restoring peace in Nagaland, for which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi thanked him personally.

After his work in the northeast, Nehru was appointed as high commissioner to the UK where he served during 1973-77. Thereafter, for the following four years, Nehru remained unemployed till, in early 1981, he was appointed governor of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). In Kashmir, from around the end of 1983, Nehru ran into difficulties with the Government of India for not being able to carry out New Delhi's behest that the incumbent National Conference chief minister be replaced by the chief minister's brother-in-law, also a legislator in the National Conference, who would be supported by some elements of the National Conference and a larger number of legislators

from the Congress Party. Nehru's resignation on this issue was not accepted for the stated reason that this would cause embarrassment to the prime minister! Allowing the Centre to have its way, Nehru accepted a transfer from J&K and took over as the governor of Gujarat where he served (1984-86) for the remainder period of his five-year tenure as governor.

To sum up Nehru's career, he served as India's man in Washington for nearly half of his entire career, successively as India's director on the World Bank, commissioner general for economic affairs and as ambassador to the United States; four years as our high commissioner in London and for ten years as governor of Assam and Nagaland, J&K, and Gujarat.

Having spoken about Nehru's long and illustrious career in the civil service, I shall devote the remainder part of this lecture to making some observations on governance — as it obtained during the British period, the challenges faced after independence and the situation which obtains today.

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, our first prime minister (for ease of reference hereinafter referred to as Pandit Nehru), was B K Nehru's uncle. Because of the constraint of time, I would not be able to comment on the numerous references in BK Nehru's memoirs which reflect on the personality, character, convictions, total commitment and high values of Pandit Nehru, who remained at the forefront of the struggle for freedom and, thereafter, served as the first prime minister of India for 17 years.

As BK Nehru has written, during India's prolonged struggle for freedom, Pandit Nehru remained deeply concerned that the aim of gaining independence should not be merely restricted to liberating the country from foreign rule. His vision was to also change the whole structure of Indian society for bettering the lot of the vast masses of the people of India. B K Nehru has said that Pandit Nehru, like Omar Khayyam's lover, was eternally seeking "to grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire" and "to shatter it to bits and then remould it nearer to the Heart's Desire".

Pandit Nehru's passing away in 1964 marked the end of an era which encompassed the entire period of struggle for freedom from the colonial rule and, thereafter, the very difficult years in which gigantic challenges were faced by the first national government. As BK Nehru has recorded, the death

of Lal Bahadur Shastri “laid the final seal on that era hardly anybody was available any longer who would insist on Gandhian values being observed and who, in his own life and behaviour, practised such values”.

Any talk about governance raises questions about the role and responsibilities of public servants. In this context, it would be interesting to recall that Ivan Jones, deputy commissioner of Hissar, advised Nehru, his trainee: “The duty of a civil servant is exclusively the pursuit of the public good with no attempt to take any credit for his work or to seek publicity for himself. The life of the civil servant was in some respects like that of a monk – devoid of all self-interests and serving not God but the people at large without any thought of aggrandisement”.

A high percentage of those who served in the ICS were known for their impartiality and incorruptibility. It was for this reason that the public, particularly the poorer and uneducated people in the villages, had faith and trust in the functioning of the district officers during the period of British rule.

During the period when the British governed India, the entire Central Secretariat comprised only six departments, each of which was headed by a secretary. Besides, there were two secretaries to the governor general, one of whom was in charge of the Political Department and the other was responsible for constitutional reforms and other matters.

Till 1947, the Central Secretariat was strictly a policy-making body which drafted laws required to implement policies which had been agreed to by the government. The Secretariat also approved the rules and regulations required for implementing the various laws which were enacted to govern the country. It is noteworthy that the Secretariat did not take decisions in regard to individual cases which were examined in accordance with the extant rules and regulations and decided by the offices below the Secretariat, which were designated as “attached” or “subordinate” offices, among which were the Central Board of Revenue, Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Railway Board and Post and Telegraph (P&T) Department.

Each of the six departments in the Government of India was serviced and run by limited staff as compared to the gigantic size of the present day

ministries at the Centre. The Department of Education, Health and Lands, in which Nehru initially served, was run by a total of seven officers comprising the secretary, one joint secretary, two deputy secretaries and three under secretaries. The work of the department was shared between the secretary and the joint secretary.

The creation of a new post during the British period was made so difficult that very few could muster the courage to moot a proposal which would be critically examined at various levels before it could be forwarded, if at all, for consideration by the secretary of state for India, who sat in England. The situation which has existed in the states and in the Government of India in the past decades has been totally the opposite: any number of new posts can be created for purely political considerations, even if the state government is facing severe financial problems.

Having spoken about the time during which Nehru served the Government of India, I shall comment briefly about the situation which has evolved since independence.

The British ruled India for nearly two centuries to promote their own interests and left behind a backward and feudal agrarian economy, huge regional imbalances, large scale unemployment and widespread poverty. It was the unflinching commitment of the founding fathers and the front ranking political leaders of that time which enabled the first national government, led by Pandit Nehru, to bring under control the prevailing communal violence, arson, loot and killings and restore law and order. Millions of refugees were re-settled, food grains were efficiently distributed through thousands of ration shops, droughts and floods were faced and, in the midst of troubles on various fronts, the country rose to also deal with Pakistan's aggression in Kashmir. It would not be out of place to observe that these various challenges were successfully tackled because of the devoted hard work put in by the limited cadres of the civil, police, defence and other services which had been splintered and dislocated after the partition.

After the partition of the country was announced, some of the best minds in the country sat together and engaged in intensive debates to draft the Constitution of India which provides a framework of cooperative federalism

for the governance of free India. The Constitution, founded on four pillars of JUSTICE, LIBERTY, EQUALITY and FRATERNITY, contains specific provisions and the Directive Principles of the State Policy which provide the direction of the tasks to be carried out for building a strong and vibrant nation. The Constitution perceives a strong Centre for guiding and supporting the states in the collective endeavour of nation building and provides a uniform set of inter-related institutions which are envisaged to lay the basis for a common framework of governance.

During the debates in the Constituent Assembly, Sardar Patel had repeatedly stressed that the effective governance of free India and the harmonious working of Centre-State relations was crucially dependent on the collective pursuit of a national perspective. He strongly believed that the unity and integrity of India could be safeguarded by a federal administrative system in which the All India Services would be required to play a vital role.

It was realised, right in the beginning, that success in securing orderly change and stability would act as a bulwark against social unrest and violence. It is for this reason that the task of tackling the problems of poverty and unemployment was among the government's foremost priorities.

Looking back over the years past, it could be said that during the first two decades, notwithstanding the innumerable difficulties faced, the Government of India achieved reasonable success in several arenas. The foundations of the country's future growth were laid during this period, particularly in regard to the enlargement of the educational and health systems, establishment of universities and institutions for the promotion of science, technology and research, expansion of civil aviation, sea ports, highways, railways and public transport; implementation of land reforms, consolidation of holdings and provision of security of tenure to the actual tillers; construction of large dams and expansion of irrigation systems which enabled the phenomenal success of the Green Revolution; enhancement of power generation and steel and cement production; establishment of the Space and Atomic Energy Commissions and many other visionary initiatives which paved the way for the growth and advancement which we have achieved in recent years. During this period, the country faced external aggression on three occasions:

while we had to accept humiliation in the 1962 conflict with China, our armed forces acquitted themselves most creditably in the 1965 and 1971 Wars.

Around the end of the 1960s, the Congress Party, which had continuously ruled at the Centre and in most of the states since independence, was beset with internal feuds. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's resolve to cling to authority at any cost led to the enforcement of the Emergency (1975-77) which severely fractured the rule of law and the Constitution, and damaged the functioning of the Parliamentary and Cabinet systems.

While there was corruption and maladministration in the earlier years, the period of the Emergency saw the emergence of an unwholesome nexus between unprincipled politicians and the brand new breed of the so-called "committed civil servants". This led to the emergence of extra-constitutional elements playing an unlawful role in governmental functioning at the Centre and in the states.

The post Emergency years witnessed the growth of political instability and the exposure of a series of corruption scandals which involved allegations against the seniormost echelons in the government, including the prime minister. This period also witnessed the unearthing of alarming cases of gross abuse of authority in the states which involved high ranking civil and police officers, ministers and chief ministers.

Insofar as the evolution of the polity is concerned, there has been an over hundred-fold increase in the number of political parties which are registered with the Election Commission of India. Another worrying development is related to the unwholesome role which has continued to be played by money and muscle power in elections at all levels, none of which is contested on the basis of issues or ideologies.

Among the factors which have contributed to the failures of governance in the past years, the foremost is corruption which has spread unchecked, and presently permeates all levels of functioning. The continuation of corrupt and unlawful practices has resulted in seriously damaging the capability and credibility of the institutions of governance. It is a matter for grave concern that in many states, it has virtually become a practice for pliant officers of doubtful integrity being handpicked on considerations of

caste, community or political affiliations, and assigned to lucrative posts for gathering funds for their political masters. Resultantly, the best available public servants are perhaps not even considered for manning important posts in the administrative system. This phenomenon has bred frustration and demotivation among the competent and upright elements in the various cadres, all over the country.

Day-to-day political interference in the functioning of the governmental machinery has generated indiscipline and lack of accountability. Resultantly, it has become increasingly difficult for the common man to get any work done without paying bribes and this has led to the common man losing trust in the functioning of the administrative system.

The incessant interference in the functioning of police organisations has led to serious damage being caused to the morale, discipline and professionalism of the constabularies. A grave consequence of this situation has been the progressive deterioration in the maintenance of public order, open defiance of the law, and increase in incidents of varied serious crimes.

The past decades have witnessed the growing phenomenon of criminal elements enjoying the protection of politicians in power and a threatening nexus developing among unprincipled public servants, corrupt politicians and organised crime and mafia networks in the country. Side by side, while several major scams and scandals have been under investigation for decades, none of the alleged offenders has so far been brought to book. This is perhaps because the Central Bureau of Intelligence (CBI) and Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), the apex central agencies responsible for dealing with corruption among public servants, are no longer looked upon as professional agencies which are capable of resisting political pressures and extra-legal influences. This has rightly led to the general belief that the rich and those who hold high positions are not answerable to the laws of the land.

It is indeed a sad failure that successive governments at the Centre have not as yet succeeded in establishing an effective law to curb corruption in the highest echelons, including at the level of the prime minister. After decades of discussion, the country is still awaiting the appointment of the first lok pal.

The time has come for leaders of all political parties, particularly those who wield power at the Centre and in the states, to recognise that the continuance of corruption shall damage and weaken the administrative and legal framework to the extent of threatening the very foundations of our polity and society and, thus, endangering the unity and integrity of the country.

The rule of law cannot be enforced unless the criminal justice system functions with speed, efficiency and fairness. Unfortunately, we have failed on this front. It has been reported that well over three crore cases are pending trials, of which nearly two crore relate to criminal offences. Because of the virtual collapse of the justice system, the offenders get discharged for want of evidence, after awaiting trial for years, and there has been a worrisome decline in the conviction rates of the criminal cases put to trial. It is a matter for even greater concern that, besides the failures arising from infrastructural deficiencies, the judicial apparatus has also been facing complaints which reflect on its competence and integrity and, in the past years, members of the superior judiciary, even up to the level of the chief justice of India, have been the subject of serious allegations.

We also face serious challenges in regard to the management of national security. For the past several decades now, adversary external agencies and international terrorist groups have been continuing with their determined activities to subvert and destabilise India by spreading religious fundamentalism, inciting conflicts and perpetrating violence and killings. It is important that the highest attention is paid to ensure that there is no gap or deficiency whatsoever in the effective preservation of the country's territorial integrity.

Even after the terror attacks in Mumbai, on our Parliament and, more recently, on the air force base in Pathankot, we are still in the process of establishing the required country-wide apparatus which would have the capability of effectively safeguarding national security. Also, the required steps have still to be taken for securing firm and clear understandings between the Centre and the states for enacting a comprehensive federal law for establishing a fully empowered central agency which can take immediate

cognisance of, and promptly investigate, a terror attack which may take place at any time, anywhere in the country, without precious time being lost in securing multiple clearances.

It is of crucial importance, particularly at the current juncture, for the Centre and the states to join hands for working most closely together and tackling all major pending tasks for building a strong and vibrant India. In working towards such a goal, the very first steps required would relate to speedily de-politicising the entire administrative apparatus, curbing corruption, fearlessly enforcing the rule of law, ensuring impregnable national security management and creating a country-wide environment for re-energising, enlarging and strengthening the vital institutions of governance.

While the poverty ratios in our country have been progressively declining, about one-fifth of our population is still living below the international poverty line and, considering the large size of our population, the current level of unemployment is cause for serious concern. Even when the per capita incomes have marked a near ten-fold increase, we have still not achieved the requisite headway in securing meaningful reduction in inequality. As reported, 1 percent of the richest in our country are reported to own nearly 60 percent of the total national wealth of which only 2 percent is owned by the entire bottom half of the population.

It is, however, a matter for great pride that today we are amongst the leading exporters of food commodities while, in the earlier years, we were almost entirely dependent on imported food grains. The corpus of our scientific and technical manpower is the second largest in the world and India is among the top in the arena of nuclear power and space technology. As an industrial power, we do not stand very high, but India has the distinction of achieving the fastest growth among the major world economies. Another of our notable achievements is that in the past seven decades, democracy has got deeply rooted in our country and despite adverse geopolitical factors and influences in our neighbourhood and beyond, our democratic institutions are firmly established. In our last general elections in 2014, no less than 66 percent of the country's 834 million voters turned out to participate in the polls.

In looking towards the future, we need to recognise that among the most daunting challenges facing us is reduction in inequality, without losing any more time. The continuance of social and economic inequalities could unleash confrontations and conflicts which could trigger chaos and disorder across the country. For this reason alone, it is of vital importance to ensure that the administrative system, all over the country, functions in a manner which ensures against any injustice being done to our people, particularly to those who belong to the disadvantaged segments of our society and are already suffering.

Another cause for concern relates to the wanton manner in which rights and liberties are sought to be exercised in our country. This trend must not continue. It is also essential that our citizenry remains duly conscious of its obligations and duties to the nation. Side by side, it would be beneficial for the central and state governments to take sustained initiatives for promoting an environment which imbues our people with values founded in equality and secularism, and respect for the diversity of our numerous and far spread communities. For this purpose, we shall need to make conscious efforts to learn, understand and appreciate the diversities of our various communities in regard to their views, beliefs, cultural practices, customs and habits.

Already, in several parts of the country, community relations are being disturbed and disrupted by growing caste and religious divisiveness. This is resulting in time honoured socio-cultural traditions and practices being questioned with unjustifiable belligerence, leading to inter-community clashes and violence. While we may be rightly proud of our civilisational past and repeatedly keep reminding the world that the people of India are multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual, it is cause for considerable anxiety that our tolerance levels and traditional sensitivity to differing views and beliefs are witnessing erosion.

It is also necessary to devote due and timely attention to the upcoming generation. If we are to benefit from the youthful demographic profile of our large population, it is essential that gainful opportunities are provided to our youth and all the required steps are taken to ensure against their energies being exploited for generating disharmony or causing disruption.

For this reason alone, it is essential to ensure against there being any failure in providing clean, prompt and efficient governance which is aimed at achieving inclusive and equitable human, social and economic development to rapidly promote the welfare of all our people, in every part of the country.

It would be useful to keep in mind that meaningful governance can be provided if all the public services cadres, across the entire country, ensure efficient delivery of services and secure timely implementation of the nation-wide schemes and programmes which are aimed at poverty alleviation, removal of illiteracy and provision of employment, safe water, food, shelter and health care to all our people. These crucial goals cannot be achieved unless the entire administrative machinery functions with total commitment, efficiency and visible accountability.

If the country has to be liberated from corruption, maladministration and misgovernance, the political executive shall need to accept their responsibility, assume leadership and play a visibly proactive role in promoting productive governance. It would no longer do to attribute all our failures, on various fronts, merely to the deficiencies of the bureaucracy.

In conclusion, I would reiterate that we do not have the luxury of waiting endlessly for reforming the governance of the country. If we have to move forward and achieve the goal of eradicating inequality and discrimination and for all our people to become free from want and fear of any kind, then the entire administrative apparatus, effectively and honestly led by the political executive, shall need to perform with efficiency, speed and accountability, all over the country.