

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA-12
India: Nehru

25-A Nizamuddin West
New Delhi.

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366 Madison Avenue
New York, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

"The light is out," a cabinet minister announced in Parliament. Nehru was dead the moment that everyone knew must come, but that no one really could believe would come, had arrived. Nehru was dead.

He died in the afternoon shortly after two o'clock after having been unconscious since near dawn. Parliament adjourned shortly after the announcement, shops clanged down their iron shutters, and the streets filled with government employees whose offices had been closed. Some cycled toward home, many streamed toward the Prime Minister's residence. In Connaught Circus a crowd stood looking at the news board of the Hindustan Times. The flash, "Prime Minister Nehru passes away," was being changed. As the new letters were slid into the frame, the people guessed each word after the first letters had been put up. "N - E, Nehru's," and the man with the letters put the 's' in upside down and had to right it; Nehru's funeral procession begins at 8 a.m."

The first edition of the Hindustan Times's Evening News came out a few minutes later. Copies were snatched up and groups of people read them on traffic islands, on sidewalks, in the middle of the streets. It was quiet; there were no outward signs of grief. An approaching thunderstorm blackened the sky.

Outside the Prime Minister's residence the crowd thickened. Delhi police with their iron-shod lathis stood shoulder to shoulder keeping people on the grass and sidewalks; traffic moved slowly but without much hindrance. Municipal Council trucks rolled up and unloaded empty asphalt drums for barricades. The crowd was orderly and not noisy. A few younger men climbed part way up the tall iron fence surrounding the gardens. All wanted to go in, but they were prepared to wait. In front of the main gate, diplomatic cars pulled up, and diplomats descended to enter and pay their respects. Members of Parliament and cabinet ministers came, were greeted by a member of the Prime Minister's secretariat, and were ushered through the small group of eager mourners that had managed to partly block their entry. All wore sober expressions, some grave. Dr. Syed Mahmud, a friend of Nehru's at Cambridge, his prison-fellow during the freedom movement, and a leader of the Congress sobbed and had to be supported through the garden by Jagvian Ram, a former cabinet minister, labour leader and Congressman -- a scene symbolic of Nehru's India: a Muslim aided by an Untouchable coming to the home of a caste Hindu.

In the Residence those who came to pay their respects removed their shoes and climbed the stairs to the Prime Minister's bedroom. Inside, they walked toward the body and made their namaste, placing their hands, palms together, before their faces; then they left. Nehru lay on a bed, his body shrouded in white. Gladiolas stood at his feet and over his head hung a painting of snow-covered mountains reflected in a tarn. On the floor against the wall to the right sat the women of the family, among them Nehru's two sisters, Mrs. Pandit and Mrs. Hutheesingh, and his only child, his daughter, Indira Gandhi. On a bookcase by the door, among several leather framed photographs, stood one of his wife Kamala, who died in a sanatorium in Lausanne in 1936. To her he had dedicated his Autobiography: "To Kamala who is no more."

Outside on the terrace pressmen lounged, waiting for no one knew what. Workmen banged together a bier on which the body would lie for viewing by the public, which was making a clamour beyond the fence. The sky was even darker now and there were spatters of rain. A gusty wind parched the mouth and stung the eyes with dust.

About eight o'clock, after a howling dust storm and drenching showers, Nehru's body was brought to the portico of the Residence and placed on the bier. The gates were opened to the public, and the long, packed queues inched forward. Quiet once inside the gates, the crowd became noisy and excited again in front of the bier. Some individuals brought bouquets of flowers or had their hands full of petals and tossed them at Nehru's feet. Pairs carried large wreaths. Children were hoisted on shoulders to see. Thousands passed by during the night.

Meanwhile, the senior member of the cabinet, the Home Minister, G.L. Nanda, had been sworn in by President Radhakrishnan as the Prime Minister of a caretaker government. All the other ministers continued to hold their portfolios. Today it is reported that the Congress Parliamentary Party will during the next few days elect its new leader, who will then almost certainly be asked by the President to form a government. The Executive Committee of the Parliamentary Party will present suggested names and, it is also reported in the press, the Working Committee of the Congress Party as a whole may take a hand in the decision. This would not be surprising in view of the increasing role played by the organizational wing of the party in recent months. Four of the likely candidates for the Prime Ministership were by Nehru's side when he died: G.L. Nanda, Lal Bahadur Shastri, T.T. Krishnamachari, all three cabinet ministers, and Indira Gandhi. It seems doubtful to most observers that Mrs. Gandhi is likely to get the post at this time. If the situation should greatly deteriorate under the person chosen, however, her name, her influence, and her ability might bring her to the foreground. Even today, though one hears little talk of the future, despite the existence of an underlying anxiety. The sorrow of the moment fills all minds.

The funeral today, originally planned earlier, was finally scheduled to take place late in the afternoon to allow representatives, like Dean Rusk, to arrive from distant countries. The cortege left the Residence at one o'clock and followed a six-mile route through New Delhi to the cremation ground on the banks of the Jumna River near Rajghat where Gandhi was cremated sixteen years ago. A million persons from babes in arms to tottering old men lined the route, the banks of a channel through which flowed the slow current of the guard of honour, the chief mourners, and the bier pulled by sixty men -- twenty from each of the three

military services. As the cortege passed, the crowd filled the street behind and followed. The bier was raised high so that Nehru was clearly visible over the heads of the crowd. At the silent form, men threw garlands and handfuls of marigold and rose petals. All along the route swelled the chant of "Jawa-har-lal, Jawa-har-lal, Jawa-har-lal." In our time, in India or elsewhere, no man besides Gandhi has been so beloved.

The cortege reached the burning ground soon after four o'clock, and the generals, air marshalls, and admirals who were the pall-bearers lifted Nehru to the pyre. Dignitaries piled flowers and wreaths high about the body and laid sandalwood logs upon it until the face and the form were no longer visible. An old lady came from the crowd and gave a bit of sandalwood to Mrs. Gandhi to put on the pyre. Priests chanted, and the sound of the multitude rose and fell. By the side of the ghat watched Sanjay Gandhi, Indira's son and Nehru's youngest grandson. His was the duty customarily reserved for the eldest son. At 4:30 a priest tied a white cloth around his head, and then the youth, after a short prayer, lit the pyre. The end of end had come; it was true; he was not asleep; he was dead. Nehru was dead. The flames climbed toward the burning sun, and the wind tore the smoke away.

What manner of man was being turned to ashes on the banks of the sacred river? He had stood so tall for so long that India had grown too accustomed to his stature and the rest of the world seemed frequently to have forgotten it. Nehru was of that breed of statesmen that the world sees rarely and may, as the pattern of history changes, see still less: the thinker, risen to greatness during a life devoted to his people. In 1920, at the age of thirty, a life of tutors, Harrow, and Cambridge, and near opulence behind him, he dedicated his life to the Congress and to the Indian freedom movement. "...Giving myself utterly to the cause I had espoused...I worked to the utmost of my capacity and my mind was filled to the brim with the subject that engrossed me. I gave all my energy to that cause and had little left to spare." Of the next twenty-seven years -- those before independence -- he spent one-third in jail -- a blessing in disguise, perhaps, for in this seclusion he wrote and thought. Many letters and four notable books came from these nine years: Glimpses of World History, The Discovery of India, The Unity of India (essays written in and out of prison), and An Auto-biography.

Nehru, Gandhi, and the other leaders of the Congress pursued the dream of independence with a patience, a tenacity, and a spirit of compromise among themselves that forever marked their characters. Although their pressure on the British was relentless, they negotiated their way ahead; they were not terrorists. And during these long years their equal aim was to raise up their people, to rejuvenate Indian society. The national and the social revolutions were waters of the same stream. The national revolution itself aimed not only at the largely negative goal of expelling the British; it aimed at establishing parliamentary democracy in India. During these years Nehru also brought the freedom movement to the attention of the world, and, of greater importance, he brought to the Con- a sense of relationship to anti-colonial and social movements in other countries. This perception of India's relationship and responsibility to the rest of humanity caused him to lead India after independence to a central position in world affairs.

Once in power after August 1947, Nehru, Patel, and other Congress leaders used -- but did not misuse -- their immense popularity and power, their almost god-like status, to set moving the slow wheels of social reform, to give the nation stable government, and to set the people on the path to democracy. After 1950 and Sardar Patel's death, little stood in the way of arbitrary rule by Nehru other than Nehru's liberalism itself. Since that time three mammoth general elections have sustained and furthered India's parliamentary democracy.

Nehru had his faults, and they were a paradoxical mixture. He liked to do everything himself and thus inhibited the growth of initiative in his government. Yet his "reluctance to impose his will on others," as a reporter here has commented, "was proverbial." This "Hamletian indecision," as it has been called, resulted perhaps in part from a lack of strength, but more likely from his long training: compromise and accommodation had been the policy within the Congress. His own noble aims could lead him to misjudgement and error -- as they did with China. But he had the honesty and courage to admit publicly that he had made a mistake and to take full blame for it. Nehru could be arrogant, vain, and wrathful. Yet his distinguishing characteristics were justness and human sympathy. "Nehru had this of the god-like in him: he inspired both hope and trust," said an editorial in the Statesman. "Why else did the needy, the hopeless, the downtrodden flock to him for succour? The belief persisted throughout the sixteen years of the Prime Ministership that if your cause was good and fair, Panditji had only to hear about it to be at once concerned .. Never again will there be his devastating personal intervention to right a wrong or to halt an evil trend."

Nehru's greatest contribution to India, however, has been an intellectual one. Throughout his forty-four years of political life he tried to create in his countrymen a rational approach to politics and to government and even to life itself. In the years prior to independence, he wrote and preached that Indians must think about their future and themselves in rational and scientific, not in traditional terms. He taught that man is the instrument of his own destiny and not a toy in the hands of fate. After independence, once he and others of like mind were in power, Nehru embodied his creed in national institutions. He established a Planning Commission to design programs of national development and social reform. In the Constitution -- for whose spirit he was chiefly responsible -- he provided for institutions that would further his liberal aims even after his death: Parliamentary government with direct elections and adult suffrage is an attack on the bonds of caste, parochialism, and apathy. And he continued to teach the (to India) revolutionary doctrine of "seeking truth by trial and error and by experiment, of never saying that this must be so but trying to understand why it is so ... of having the capacity to change one's notions ... of having an open mind, which tries to imbibe truth wherever it is found." As President Radhakrishnan said in a speech to the nation mourning the Prime Minister's death, "His life and work have had a profound influence on our mental makeup, social structure, and intellectual development ... As a maker of modern India his services were unparalleled."

Nehru was thus a man of many ingredients. He was a thinker and a modernizer, a statesman and a politician, a fighter and a compromiser. He was wise but fallible, disagreed with yet trusted. Although loving and loved, he was sometimes disliked and occasionally hated. But above all he was a leader of rare magnetism whose people looked to him because he was concerned for them. He continuously advocated the 'human approach' to India's problems. "The moment we forget the human approach," he said, "somehow the foundation of our thinking is removed." Infusing both his attributes and failings was a great warmth and zest for life. In a letter to Indira, written in 1933 from prison when he was forty-four and his daughter sixteen, Nehru wrote:

"...life is rich and varied, and though it has many swamps and marshes and muddy places, it also has great seas, and the mountains, and snow and glaciers, and wonderful starlit nights, and and the love of family and friends, and the comradeship of workers in a common cause, and music and books, and the Empire of Ideas..."

But Nehru, the last of the giants, is gone. "An epoch in our country's history has come to a close," said the President. And now India faces its greatest test. There have been other tests in the past, great and small. But whether it was the holocaust of Partition or a squabble in a Provincial Congress Committee, the people could, and often did, turn to the giants for advice, arbitration, or decision: "Panditji is good; let Panditji decide." Indians have depended on their leaders too much. Now the question is, do they trust themselves? Nehru's successor, no matter how able, will not command the allegiance he did. Indians must in the future rely on the democratic institutions in their Constitution, rely, in fact, upon themselves. Both the new leaders and the mass of the people will be tested. One knew that Nehru would die, but the lifespan of the nation he helped to build is still uncertain.

Yet the reverence in which Nehru was held, and also the principles he taught, may be compelling. The love of four hundred and fifty million persons may bear fruit. Today, along with a million others in the hot sun and dust, with the children on our shoulders, watching the slow progress of Nehru to his pyre, we felt some hope through our sadness as we said goodbye.

Yours sincerely,



Granville S. Austin

Received in New York June 4, 1964.