

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

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Talk with Jawaharlal Nehru

SS. Hoegh Silvercrest  
Arabian Sea  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Shortly before our departure from New Delhi, in early August, my wife and I were privileged to spend twenty minutes in conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India. Many Americans will have this opportunity, perhaps with Nehru in a more relaxed mood, when he visits the United States this October. Let me describe him in his national setting, as we saw him.

Early August was a busy period for Nehru. In its last scheduled working session, India's Constituent Assembly and its Congress Party majority were thrashing out final decisions on major constitutional issues. Dr. Matthai, the Finance Minister, had just returned to New Delhi to report on the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' conference and the sterling balance talks in London. Mohammad Hatta, Prime Minister of Indonesia, stopped for two days on his way to The Hague. The United Nations Commission was broaching its proposals for round table talks on Kashmir. Nehru himself had recently inaugurated a determined nationwide food production drive, taking seat in a Ministry of Agriculture tractor to plow up his own lawns. As always, he was in active touch with political currents, for which he had more responsibility than usual owing to the continued illness of Sardar Patel. The day before we met him, he had conducted a strenuous two-hour press conference during which he gave to the combined foreign and Indian press his views on subjects ranging from the R.S.S.S. to the Communists.

Knowing these heavy responsibilities, we hesitated to ask for Pandit Nehru's time. I did wish, however, to learn his outlook on the rural situation to which I had devoted much of my attention in the past eighteen months. There would be no harm, I felt, in asking for an appointment through Nehru's private secretary, M.O. Mathai.

In my note asking to talk with Pandit Nehru, I mentioned my brief meeting with him at the Malakand Fort in October, 1946, and my stay in United Provinces villages during the past year. I also gave the name of Phillips Talbot, to identify the Institute and my work. I was surprised and excited when Romola

greeted me, on my return to our room one day, with the news that we had an appointment with Pandit Nehru at noon on Saturday.

Nehru, you will remember, is his own Minister for External Affairs. We met him at his Ministry office in the beehiving Government of India Secretariat. There he sits at a broad desk at the end of a long, open room, apparently a council room. Diagonally to his left front, a large southern window throws bright sunlight onto the floor in front of him. He is alone, his desk quite empty of files or trinkets, and in these simple surroundings he awaits his stream of callers.

How uncrowded and solitary is this desk, how remote from the millions who know their "Jawaharlal" best as a man of crowds! At close range I had seen Nehru facing huge audiences, sometimes partly hostile to him. In these moments of action I had seen his courage, never daunted, his instinctive loyalty to colleagues whom he would defend like brothers even at personal risk, his more considered but equally certain loyalty to moral and political ideals, his impetuous temper, sometimes a handicap, and - above all in recent months - the crescendo of his appeal to the Indian people for serious, honest facing of their problems. Since I had seen him, he had been on a trek to remote Ladakh and, in the opposite extreme, at close grips with the political ferment in West Bengal. More than once he had been in close danger of his life.

It was difficult to bring this pulsating India into his quiet office. Its irregular beats were certainly still in his veins, but we found no anger or impatience or alarm in his calm, tender eyes. Nehru was obviously weary and full of his burdens, yet his smooth, clear complexion showed no lines of age or cares.

I did not succeed in drawing very full discussion from Pandit Nehru on my subject, but I learned a trait which struck me as noteworthy. Despite his preoccupations, he gave the most careful attention to my remarks, asked for repetition when he had not caught my meaning, and continually carried the conversation forward by asking precise and observant questions on my experiences. He seemed to prefer such detailed questions to discussion in generalities about abstract situations. We felt him as observer and student.

As we entered his office, Nehru rose and turned to greet us with a warm, friendly smile and courteous handshake. His welcome put us at ease, and his kindly countenance drew from me what seemed a natural opening question, "How are you these days?"

"Oh, I am well except when I have a cold, as I do now."

I sympathized with him, having one myself. Pandit Nehru then carried things along by asking what I had been doing in the villages of - was it Gorakhpur District?

"No, Azamgarh," I replied, "adjoining Gorakhpur." I then told him of my village host, Mul Chand. As I mentioned that Mul Chand, a law graduate, found the ways of the legal profession in his country too devious for him to follow and had therefore not taken up practice, Pandit Nehru smiled appreciatively, then lapsed into thoughtful attention. I described Mul Chand's work in serving his village people, and then spoke of my own stays there. I said I had made no formal statistical studies, but rather had tried to understand the local dialect, make acquaintances among people of all groups in the countryside, with Mul Chand's help, and come to a personal feel for their problems and life routine. "In so doing, I became more keenly aware of social changes and conflicts than of economic facts or ways of economic improvement."

"What type of conflict?" he asked. "Between tenants and zemindars, or what?"

"Yes," I answered, "considerable activity among tenants and agricultural laborers, organizing in resistance to land policies which they consider oppressive. In places they have banded to destroy the crops of an unpopular landlord. In other instances, landlords have evicted tenants from Sir land which they have cultivated for many years. Such conflicts are numerous."

As I discussed his question, I noticed his eyes in a very, very deep gaze on my face, as if hoping to know me directly. It was an earnest, thoughtful appraisal, yet warm and not unfriendly.

I could discern no reaction to my account, nor did he comment further. I then asked, "Do you yourself have a chance to visit the interior at all?" (By "interior", in India, one means villages away from road and rail.)

"No," he replied, "it is now hardly appropriate for me to do so. And besides, when I go anywhere it becomes almost a mela," (crowded fair or festival). In these words and his manner, there seemed a sadness at his inability to meet his people anonymously or on natural terms.

"What is the reaction of the tenants to the Zemindari Abolition Bill?" he then asked.

"Most of the cultivators have not yet received accurate news of its details," I told him.

"No," he remarked, "in the interior of course not."

I took his remark as a lead. "In fact," I said, "this is one of the inadequacies that seems to me a serious problem: getting accurate news of government programs into the countryside. Particularly in the food and land reforms program this seems of importance. Neither government officials nor even Congressmen manage to get to the villagers' level. There is not the required change in outlook as yet."

As I ended this comment, he sat gazing soberly at his desk, acknowledging that he had heard my words but offering no reply. I could only guess from his attitude that he was perhaps finding this lack of sympathetic outlook toward villagers a troublesome hurdle.

I went on. The Etawah development team \*, I said, was achieving a more intimate relationship with the peasants, but such a relationship I had not found more generally.

"When were you last in Azamgarh?" he then asked.

"In April, at the time of panchayat elections."

"Where have you been since then?"

I told him of our Institute conference in France. "After return from Europe I have been mostly at Almora, where we were married."

"Oh, you were married only recently, about two months back, less than two months."

"Yes, just six weeks ago."

He addressed Romola. "Where is your home?"

"In Lucknow," she replied.

I think he might have enjoyed continuing this personal talk, especially as both Almora and Lucknow are well known to him, but he turned back to business with a waiting glance at me. I returned to his earlier question.

"Those tenants who did speak of the Zemindari Abolition Bill did so without much confidence in Government - the bill has been pending so long that they wonder Government's real intentions."

A rather quick, slightly defensive reply from him, correcting me: "The bill hasn't been pending long: the subject has been."

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\* See my next newsletter, # 34. Had I a second chance, I would ask Pandit Nehru directly at this point what his experience had been since Independence on villager-official relations, and what steps he was taking to bring about improvement. As an interviewer, I was not very alert.

"Yes," I agreed, "but the resolution calling for abolition of zemindari was passed by the Assembly (the United Provinces Legislature) three years ago - I believe three years ago today. Since then the tenants have known enough inconvenience to have lost trust in Government's intentions."

No further comment on his part.

It may seem from the above account that I talked where I should have listened. Perhaps I was overly diffident about asking him direct questions on this subject, one central in my interests. My diffidence was partly caused by realization that he was in those days giving agrarian questions personal consideration, and that policy was in a transitional and formative stage. \* Before conclusive policy decisions had been reached by him in consultation with party and official leaders, I felt he might be unwilling to discuss untimely questions.

Though failing to learn his position on these issues, I could feel in Pandit Nehru's close questions his mind seeking detailed information on conditions in the interior. He seemed to accept my account as supplementary to his own information on the eastern United Provinces area. It is worth noting that Pandit Nehru has since paid another visit to Lucknow in order to take direct part in talks on the developing food production and land reform programs in that province.

Leaving agrarian questions, Pandit Nehru then asked about my future program. I said we were soon to sail for the United States, perhaps via Calcutta. He remarked briefly on the West Bengal political situation.

Thinking to close soon, I then said I believed a good many Americans were looking forward with pleasure to his forthcoming visit. His face lighted with the appreciative smile that had already warmed us two or three times.

"What bonds do you particularly hope to strengthen on your visit?" I asked.

"Bonds?" he asked, musingly. "That's a difficult question."

"Yes," I went on, "of a moral and ideological nature, as your sister has apparently been attempting, or on economic lines?"

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\* A "Food Commissioner" had just been appointed at the Center to review and stimulate the lagging food production programs in the provinces. The constitutional issue of principles of "compensation" for nationalized or otherwise expropriated property, of overriding significance in land reforms programs, was, on the day before our talk with Pandit Nehru, the topic of heated and inconclusive discussions in the Constituent Assembly Congress Party caucus.

"That is difficult. Relations between nations take place on so many different planes that one can't say with exactness what bonds are there." He continued to muse aloud: "Peoples, through their governments, form alliances or join international organizations to promote peace. Then all of a sudden a change comes and we find peoples going to war against one another."

"How does that happen?" Romola asked. "Do you think that in emergencies people forget the moral values they have stood for?"

"It is a complex question. That is partly what happens. And then governments make appeal to the sentiments of their people, persuading them that they must rise and band together to defend their hearths and homes."

On these general lines we talked a moment or two longer. Then I realized we should not keep him longer. As we rose to leave, I expressed the hope that Americans would accord him hospitality equal to that I had received in India.

"Perhaps in the United States," I closed, "you may find an opportunity to go among the people or into the country without attracting a mela."

"Yes, it might be possible there," he replied wistfully, adding with some concern, "but my American schedule is already heavily crowded."

As we wished him goodbye, Romola said, "You set a high standard for any Indian going abroad." He seemed pleased, then once again became sober and engrossed with responsibilities, and turned back to walk to his desk.

As we passed through his secretary's outer room, five men with files rose to enter the Prime Minister's office.

Outside in the taxi, a sense of guilt came to me at having taken even twenty minutes of his time. After some thought, Romola consoled me by saying, "I suppose any considerate person, even Panditji's official consultants, feels guilty when he takes the time of such a man. I am sure this visit had helped to round out your impressions of India during these three years."

This was true. To sit in the office of a man with responsibility for such varied currents of national life as incessantly energize Pandit Nehru - and are energized by him - and to talk about situations and ideals close to him in a natural, friendly manner, to sense the tremendous burden of pressure felt by him yet be enriched repeatedly by the kindling warmth and sincere gentleness of his spontaneous smile - these make one aware of Jawaharlal Nehru as a

deeply human being, of vast range, grappling with forces and events now almost too large for any one man to comprehend dynamically. Fortified by an historical consciousness of his people's nature and an individualistic refusal to flinch or turn back from the threshold of action's demands, Pandit Nehru has managed to keep abreast of his nation's movements and to advance India's position in the world.

In 1949, one, two and three men, aided by long-established governmental and political organization, are able to lead forward the newborn India. Yet even today, Jawaharlal Nehru, personifying the combination of India's new national pride and that element in her past which looked out toward distant shores with generous friendliness, can hardly speak for all her people. As political, regional, scientific and technical consciousness extend more deeply into the body of citizenry, it will become less and less possible for one man or two to embody India's vital urges, capacities and weaknesses. After Nehru, it may be many years in India before it will be possible for one man to become such a dominant personality, so representative of his peoples in his own time.

Sincerely yours,

*Richard Morse*

Richard Morse

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