

Fading footprint?



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India's journey as an independent nation has been guided by the principles of universal suffrage and constitutional commitment since its inception. Jawaharlal Nehru's nation-building project prioritised socialism, secularism, agrarian revolution, planned economy, rapid industrialisation and non-alignment. Notably, Nehruvian socialism embodied democratic socialism, incorporating Gandhian principles and methods, as evident in the 1928 Constitutional Draft and 1931 Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights. The Industrial Policy Resolution of 1956 further solidified this vision, embracing a "socialistic" rather than "socialist" pattern of society.

Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned a post-colonial Indian state as a welfare state, prioritising healthcare, education, and basic necessities for the poor. His socialist ideals drove this vision, aiming to foster economic development, social reforms, and national unity within a democratic and secular framework.

However, several factors hindered Nehru's dream from becoming a reality. The persistence of colonial attitudes and the continuation of Britain's administrative system were major obstacles, as argued by scholars like Alavi and Bettelheim. This imperfect transfer of power, described as "passive revolution" by Gramsci, prevented effective governance instruments from being established.

Marxist critics argue that India's capitalist state structure was the primary barrier to achieving Nehru's welfare state ambitions. This assessment underscores the inherent contradictions between capitalist systems and social welfare priorities. Gunnar Myrdal characterised India as a "soft state" in the late 1960s, citing deficiencies in rule enforcement, widespread

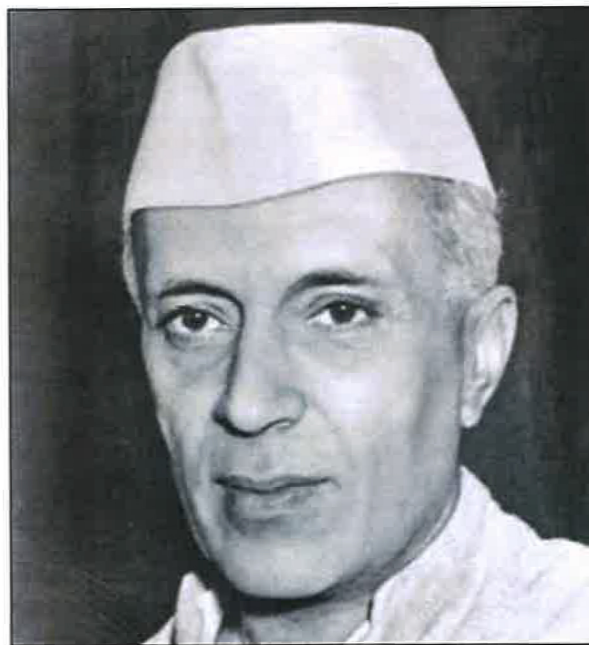
corruption and disregard for the law. This concept describes a state lacking social discipline, leading to disobedience, corruption and exploitation.

Nehru's ideas failed to ignite necessary political movement for social revolution and economic transformation. Instead, it contributed to India's soft state characteristics. Leaders' reluctance to impose obligations, prioritising popularity over enforcement, exacerbated the issue. He believed that democracy should not only be political but also economic, ensuring that everyone has equal opportunities and access to resources.

Nehru perceived the parliamentary system as the only system that could effectively manage India's diversity. He shared his views with the Chief Ministers on policies and administrative issues through as many as 5000 letters and sought their responses. Nehru valued dissent as the heart of democracy and recognised the importance of a strong, enlightened opposition in maintaining a vibrant democracy.

During his era, the Nehruvian consensus drove the system, but it faced significant challenges after his death. The paradigmatic shift in politics in 1967 led to changes in the nature, character, and dynamics of politics, testing the resilience of India's democratic institutions. For the first time, the Congress party faced elections without Jawaharlal Nehru, and the results were startling. The party suffered major losses, with many prominent leaders defeated. This election marked the beginning of a shift away from the dominant Congress party and towards regional parties.

The rise of regional parties was a key factor contributing to this shift. These parties represented the interests of the poor, agricultural workers, backward castes, and regions. As a result, the Congress party's strength in many state leg-



The Nehruvian ideas of secularism and acceptance of dissent are slowly disappearing from the political space

islatures began to wane, paving the way for regional parties to fill the power vacuum.

Indira Gandhi's shift towards populism and authoritarianism, culminating in the Emergency of 1975, was seen as an attempt to appeal to and control the emerging regional parties. However, this move further eroded the institutional strength of the Congress party. The party's consensual character was destroyed, leading to its deinstitutionalisation. Indira Gandhi's centralisation of power and resort to direct, populist appeals also contributed to this decline.

The Indira era, spanning from 1965-66 to 1983-84, marked a significant shift in India's democratic politics. Indira Gandhi's over-centralisation agenda led to the alienation and politicisation of social groups who felt their voices were being ignored. This phenomenon was aptly described by Rudolph as a "weak-strong state", where the state struggled to balance its dominant position with its vulnerability to centrif-

ugal forces.

As a result, democratic politics gave way to electoral compulsions driven by emotive slogans and populist promises rather than policies and performance. This change of focus led to the decline of the one dominant party system, which eventually came to an end in 1989. Post-1989, India's political landscape witnessed brinkmanship of the lowest order. The Vohra Committee Report of 1993 exposed the shocking reality of a criminal network running a parallel government in India. This led to the rise of criminalisation in politics, a scourge that continues to tarnish Indian democracy to this day.

India's political landscape underwent significant changes from the 1970s to 2014. After Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980, she initiated market-friendly economic reforms, which gained momentum during Rajiv Gandhi's era from 1984 to 1989. This approach continued until the introduction of neo-liberal economic reforms

in 1991 which led virtually to complete reversal of the policy.

The 1990s saw India's transition into a multiparty coalition phase, with two dominant coalitions emerging: the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). However, the weak ideological bonds and personal ambitions of a few leaders led to the decline of this phase. The present opposition coalition called Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A.) suffer from the same constraints.

In 2014, the BJP broke the 25-year trend of coalition governments by securing a majority in the Lok Sabha. This led to a significant decline of the Congress party and disarray among opposition parties. Moreover, the BJP's rule marked a departure from India's tradition of secularism, allowing dormant primordial loyalties to resurface.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) roots and ideology are deeply embedded in Hindutva, which significantly influences its economic policies. The party's aggressive push for economic development through increased privatisation, technology, and digitisation is a testament to this. This approach has essentially fuelled the engine of neo-liberalisation in India.

Historically, the concept of Hindutva emerged in the 19th century, but it wasn't until the 1920s that it took shape as a concrete political ideology, thanks to the efforts of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. The decline of the Indian National Congress in the 1980s paved the way for Hindu nationalism to gain momentum. The Rashtriya SwayamSevak Sangh (RSS) played a crucial role in this resurgence, leveraging the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to rekindle ethno-religious political activism, which ultimately found expression through the Ayodhya movement in the mid-1980s.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP has attempted to strike a balance

between promoting Hinduism and ensuring the welfare of the people. This "new welfarism," involves providing subsidised public access to essential private goods and services like bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets, electricity, and housing. This strategy has yielded significant electoral dividends for the party.

The BJP's vision of India as a Hindu nation has been a big threat to the minorities. The new citizenship law and the NRC capture how a legal measure and an administrative exercise can further the rise of the ethnic state.

Scholars like Suhas Palshikar have argued that the binaries like democracy vs. nationalism and nationalism vs. diversity have led to the emergence of a new political elite and political culture in India. He apprehends that BJP's Ram Rajya would exclude Dalits, Adivasis and the like. Telumbde argues that Gandhi articulated the idea of Ram Rajya but delinked it from religion. The Nehruvian ideas of secularism, acceptance of dissent and strong opposition are slowly disappearing from the political space.

The growing centralising tendencies which continue unabated, weakened India as a union of states and put a brake on decentralised governance mandated by the Constitutional amendment. Thus it contradicts the basic premises of neoliberal policy in which decentralisation figures prominently. Pritchett calls it a 'flailing state'. Added to it is the increase in the repressive capacity of state through legislations and policies which might erode the democratic basis of the state dreamt of by the nationalist leaders and the first Prime Minister of India.

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