Nainita Madurai

SAGES: Imagining India

An Independent India – Nehru vs. Gandhi

06 March 2009

An Independent India – Jawaharlal Nehru vs. Mohandas Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru both emerged as the leaders of the revolution in India before and after independence. Gandhi was an iconic figure who captured the minds of the masses in the fight against the British with his moral truths and social convictions. On the other hand Nehru, guided by his political virtues, became the first Prime Minister of India and was respected immensely across the world. Both Gandhi and Nehru worked beside each other in the struggle for India’s independence. They had a strong friendship that spurred from their desire for a free and thriving India. Gandhi himself referred to Nehru as his “heir”, but they did not always agree with each other. Both of these men had ideas for a establishing a prosperous India, but in many ways they differed in their vision of how an independent India would come to fruition and flourish. Their many differences spawned from the key dissimilarity in their beliefs pertaining to the causes and effects of modernity and how progress should affect India.

Gandhi dogmatically opposed modernity. He believed that scientific progress was a corruption of tradition and culture and that it led to materialism and the emergence of superficial ideals. He wanted India to be independent and self-sufficient, which is why he encouraged people to sew their own clothing. He believed that those who are self-sufficient do not indulge. Gandhi often used his divine beliefs as justification of his morals, something very traditional and culturally centered. He believed only some aspects of religion, such as the caste system, were wrong, but not religion itself. Gandhi did not believe in a timeline of progression in which the West was ahead of the East. According to Gandhi, nations that were caught up in the traps of modernity had the problem of “civilisation”; Britain was his key example. Britain, because of its desire to possess and control, became an imperialistic nation. Gandhi did not want India to fall into this same trap. He says that it was the fault of India for letting the Britain imperialize and take over. A nation can be strong without having industrial and scientific advancements, and that it was Gandhi is aiming to prove with the Indian revolution. For Gandhi, history was not a representation of Truth. History was merely what happened. He defined as Truth as absolute, or unchanging. This means that it is completely unaffected by what happened in the past, therefore history is irrelevant.

Nehru, with a completely different perspective than Gandhi, was not opposed to modernity at all and even encouraged it. He believed the ideas of scientific progress allowed for achievements that would better social, political and economic aspects of India. He knew that industrialization was necessary for India, and that to flourish India needed to be interdependent with other nations. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru did not like involving God in his visions; he advocated secularism far more than Gandhi. He believed that religion was used as justification for practices that were backward and caused injustices, such as rigid social structures, and conflict among people. Nehru believed somewhat in a timeline of progression; he believed in cycles of progression or enlightenment. All nations go through cycles of prosperity. At the time that the British took over, Britain was at a time of prosperity and India was in a time of epistemological stagnation. Nehru believed that the British hindered India from progressing when they took over. He thought that modernity was vital for India but excesses of the progress would lead to faults, such as imperialism and social, economic and political inequality. Once the British were eradicated and India established its own legitimate state, Nehru believed it would go back into the cycle and prosper once again. Nehru believed that history could be used to define Truth. He believed in the scientific method that questioned and tested everything. History provided “empirically verifiable truths” and it is the quality of science that strives to discover and apply these truths.

Ultimately, Nehru’s beliefs were based on his political virtues and Gandhi’s were based on his moral virtues. The difference being that Nehru’s ideals were more practical and applicable, and even though Gandhi’s ideals were for the betterment of society, they were too idealistic. Although they differed in their views, both men had a great respect for and friendship with each other. Gandhi recognized that Nehru had more practical visions; he named him his “heir” because Gandhi believed that Nehru could politically lead India into prosperity with regards to a fundamental moral justice. Nehru reconciled Gandhi’s views of the ideal Truth with the reality of the state of the world. Together, the duo seemed unbeatable; Gandhi had the power to influence, inspire, and vitalize the population of India using his moral convictions and Nehru had the power to apply his political virtues to create a state based on the principles freedom and equality. Their goals and views were often different but they could both accept that there was justification in what the other believed, and that these beliefs were for the betterment of India as a whole, as its own nation.