

A Nuanced Study on the Contribution of Jawaharlal Nehru in the Indian Freedom Struggle

Roshani Rai

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Tripura University

Abstract

Jawaharlal Nehru, an outstanding leader, a leading figure of the twentieth century and a great statesman was an accredited political visionary with a brilliant record of struggle and sacrifice for the country's liberation from foreign rule. His contribution to the national freedom struggle forms an illustrious chapter in the history of this nation. For his glorious contribution and outstanding service to the freedom struggle of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's name "is known throughout Asia and Africa where he is not only revered as a distinguished Indian patriot but looked upon as an uncompromising champion of the struggle of colonial peoples for their independence and self-determination" (Padmore 1960:193). Although a lot of fascinating and perceptive studies have been undertaken regarding Nehru's personality, his contribution to the nation building process, his achievements as a Prime Minister, and his enormous contribution in the sphere of national and international relations, yet not much attention has been given to his role in India's freedom struggle movement. Therefore, the present study is an endeavour to highlight the crucial role and contribution of Jawaharlal Nehru in the freedom struggle movement.

Keywords: Jawaharlal Nehru, Motilal Nehru, motherland, Gandhi, Purna Swaraj, independence, Cabinet Mission, Mountbatten.

Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru was an outstanding leader of immense national and international repute who took a leading part and played a notable role in the history of the freedom struggle in India against British colonial rule and "for the achievement of the unity of the Indian nation." There can be no doubt about the multi-dimensional and distinctive contribution of Nehru in the most crucial period "of the first half of the twentieth century of Indian politics" (Patil 1992:114). He gave direction and purpose to the struggle for freedom. According to Nehru's sister Vijay Lakshmi Pandit in this fight against the British: "Jawaharlal carried on with so much vigour, for all his political beliefs lay in this direction and his dream was one world in which all men would live in justice and with honour" (Pandit 1992: 114).

Early Life

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in 1889 in Allahabad. His father Motilal Nehru was one of the leading Indian barristers of the day. His mother Swarup Rani was "a gentle and noble lady steeped in the best Hindu traditions." As the only son of a prosperous father, Nehru's parents gave him not only their affection in

plenty, “but also an aristocratic training with the latest Western stamp.” Motilal Nehru entrusted the training of Nehru “exclusively to the care of the European governesses and later to European tutors.” During his adolescent days he was filled with nationalist ideas. He pondered and thought about Indian freedom and “Asiatic freedom” from the bondage of Europe. “He dreamt of brave deeds of how with a sword in hand he would fight for India and help in freeing her” (Nehru 2004: 17).

In 1905 Nehru then fifteen was taken to England by his father and put in Harrow School. While in Harrow news from India about the political happenings agitated his mind. “He kept in touch with Indian political developments through Indian nationalist periodicals, some of which like the Indian People were regularly sent to him from India” (Nanda 1998: 39). He was stirred tremendously to hear about the deportation of Lala Lajpat Rai and S.Ajit Singh, about the Swadeshi and boycott movement in Bengal. (Nehru, 2004: 21). He was immensely fascinated by books on Garibaldi by G.M. Trevelyan which he got as a prize for good work in school. As he wrote: “Visions of similar deeds in India came before me, of a gallant fight for freedom, and in my mind India and Italy got strangely mixed together” (Ibid: 21). He was greatly influenced by the “Sinn Fein movement” of Ireland which was an “aggressive, self-reliant new kind of Irish nationalism” (Pandey 2011: 42). This increased his fondness for extremism. “When Indian politics in 1907 and 1908 were in a state of upheaval he wanted to play a brave part in them.” This shows that during his youthful days in England, Nehru’s mind was already moulded and prepared to fight for his motherland as is evident in a testimony given by one Englishman and published later in the Manchester Guardian of 17 April 1942: “At the time he went up to Trinity there already burned in him the ideal of a united, autonomous self-sufficient India” (Butler 1992: 6). He also stated in his Autobiography: “With sword in hand I will fight for India and help in freeing her.”

Return to India and Immersion in the Indian National Movement

After a stay of seven long years, Jawaharlal Nehru returned to India in August 1912. Towards the end of 1912, he found Indian politics to be dull. He attended for the first time the Bankipore Congress during Christmas 1912. According to Nehru: “it was very much an English-knowing upper-class affair where morning coats and well –pressed trousers were greatly in evidence” (Nehru 2004: 30). He found it to be an essentially social gathering with no political excitement or tension (Butler 1992: 7). For the first four years after his return to India, Nehru led an aimless life (Nanda 1998: 53). His legal profession did not fill him with wholehearted enthusiasm. For Nehru, “politics meant aggressive nationalist activity against foreign rule, and it offered no scope for this” (Nehru 2004: 33). He joined the U.P. Congress Committee, but he hardly took any part in its activities. For some time he was attracted to Gokhale’s Servants of India Society, but he never thought of joining it because its politics were too moderate for him. In 1915, he gave his maiden speech at a public meeting in Allahabad. Immediately after the speech Dr Tej Bahadur Sapru, to the embarrassment of Nehru embraced and kissed him in public on the dais. In 1917, Nehru was attracted to the Home Rule agitation unleashed by Tilak and Annie Besant, and this awakened him to the realities of the Indian situation and started thinking seriously about them. Nehru admired Besant’s bold and fearless revolt against the British and her arrest in 1917 moved him greatly (Zakaria 1960: 10). Nehru, a pure nationalist was also moved by the number of eloquent speeches delivered by Sarojini Naidu, which was all about nationalism and patriotism (Nehru 2004: 18).

Nehru first came under Gandhi’s spell when the latter formed the Satyagraha Sabha in protest against the Rowlatt Bills, which sought to curtail civil liberties. “Its members were to disobey the law as a symbol of passive resistance. This public proclamation of Gandhi’s ideal of political action and the ensuing

Amritsar massacre combined to jolt the young Nehru out of his inactivity” (Butler 1992: 8). Nehru was on fire with enthusiasm and wanted to join the movement right away. Nehru felt that “here at last was a way out of the tangle, a method of action which was straight and open and possibly effective” (Nehru 2004: 45). As Nehru said: “I hardly thought of the consequences- law-breaking, jail- going etc.- and if I thought of them I did not care”(Ibid). However, there was opposition from his father to joining the Gandhian movement, as Motilal dreaded his son languishing in a British jail. There was a deep conflict between father and son as Nehru had made up his mind to go on the way of satyagraha even if it caused suffering to his father. At this point, Gandhi came to Allahabad at Motilal’s request and they had long talks. Gandhi then advised Nehru ‘not to precipitate matters or do anything that might upset his father’. Nehru was not happy with this. (Nehru 2004: 46)

It was the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre in Amritsar which occurred on 13 April 1919 and the horrors of martial law administration in the Punjab that “sealed the fate of the British Raj in India and underlined Gandhi’s leadership of the national movement and irrevocably brought Jawaharlal and Motilal Nehru to the conviction that nothing short of independence was acceptable” (Tharoor 2017: 26). In the official commission of inquiry that the Congress set up to look into these tragedies not only Nehru but Motilal took active part. The Punjab atrocities made Nehru determined to fight the British. “To him the fight represented an ideal; and he was prepared to die for it” (Zakaria 1960: 12).

In 1920, Gandhi launched the non co-operation movement for the national liberation struggle in India against the British. The programme of non co-operation for which Mahatma Gandhi stood and which he succeeded in getting adopted by the Congress electrified the masses- not in one province or one part but throughout the country. Nehru was also attracted by the method of the fight. As he put it:

“The idea of non-co-operation is simple enough, clear to the meanest intellect, but nonetheless few of us had realized it, except partly during the Bengal partition days, till the Mahatma issued his call to action. Evil flourishes only because we tolerate and assist it; the most despotic and tyrannical governments can only carry on because the people it governs themselves submit to it. England holds India in bondage because Indians cooperate with the Englishmen and thereby strengthen British rule. Withdraw that cooperation and the fabric of foreign rule collapses” (Cited Zakaria 1960: 12).

Again in a letter to the editor of a newspaper, ‘The Leader’ Nehru wrote on September 4, 1910: “I am an ardent believer in non co-operation with all that it implies and I am firmly convinced that non co-operation and no other course will bring us victory. That victory will not come in a day or a year but come it will and must” (Gopal 2012: 38). This led Nehru to come and take over the movement in making Gandhi’s new movement successful which consisted of picketing of liquor shops, the boycott of British goods, renunciation of British titles and awards, boycott of courts, colleges and schools. In this way, at Gandhi’s call Nehru participated whole heartedly in the freedom movement against British rule. He was ‘full of excitement and optimism and a buoyant enthusiasm.’ He was imbued with a sense of happiness that comes to people “crusading for a cause” (Mukherjee 2014: 35). Nehru “became wholly absorbed and wrapt in the movement....I gave up all my associations and contacts, old friends, books, even newspapers.... In spite of the strength of my family bonds, I almost forgot my family, my wife, my daughter” (Nehru 2004: 83).

The Non- Cooperation movement was galvanized in Uttar Pradesh after it got off to a disappointing start due to the enthusiastic participation of Nehru. As an ardent advocate of swadeshi he dedicated himself to the boycott of foreign goods and cloth. In Allahabad city he moved from house to house to gather

foreign clothes (Gopal 2012: 60). He believed that swadeshi would lead to the attainment of swaraj. Nehru passed resolutions which emphasized on “strict non-violence, the maintenance of Hindu-Muslim unity and the removal of the evil of untouchability.” Nehru had formed voluntary squads “which successfully organized a complete hartal in Lucknow, Allahabad, Kanpur and other principal towns and had effectively picketed shops selling foreign goods.” However, by December 1921 the volunteer organization in UP was declared unlawful and Nehru and his father were sent to jail (Ibid: 63).

Gandhi’s sudden withdrawal of Non- Cooperation movement on account of the violence that erupted disappointed Nehru “especially as the campaign in his own province had been mustering strength.” However, Nehru continued to sustain the morale of Congressmen and after his release from prison said: “keep fighting, continue to work for independent India and do not stop.....”(Ibid: 64) Writing about going to prison willingly and joyfully on the charge of organizing picketing he stated: “To serve India in the battle of freedom is honour enough.... But to suffer for the dear country! What greater good fortune could befall an Indian, unless it be death for the cause or the full realization of our glorious dream.” (Ibid: 66)

Soon after his release from prison in 1923 when Nehru became the Chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board, Nehru in a circular to Congress workers in UP clarifying his priorities stated:

“The great work that lies before every Congressman is to fight for Swaraj unceasingly, to strengthen the Congress and not to rest till we have achieved our goal. Everything else is secondary. We have gone to the municipalities to help our primary object... Let us be careful that we do not forget this or else our capturing the municipalities will become a curse to us rather than a blessing..... On no account can we allow the Congress to take a back seat...the chairmanship is to me only the means for serving the nation for hastening Swaraj.... If anyone imagines that I am going to function as Chairman of the Allahabad Board for the next three years and to let my other duties suffer he is grossly mistaken.... I shall fight and hit hard whenever I may. That is my main function till Swaraj is attained” (Gopal 1972:4-5).

Nehru characterized his mentality as ‘revolutionary’. He said ‘I believe in revolution and in direct action and in battle’. But again he was also of the belief that revolution requires “training and discipline” (Ibid). Therefore, although Nehru held the position in the Municipality he was bent on fighting for Swaraj against British rule.

From March 1926 until December 1927, Nehru with his family spent nearly two years in Europe which enabled him to talk with prominent intellectuals and labour leaders in many European cities. “This was the start of a phase in his life when he became recognized by Indians and by the imperial government as an all-India figure and leader in his own right” (Cited in Brown 2003: 81). During his European sojourn “his ideas and ideology had undergone a radical transformation.” He emerged as an intellectual and political radical, with a clear goal of independence from the British combined with major socio-economic change for India (Judith Brown p. 81). As Nehru himself stated in his *Autobiography*, “My outlook was wider, and nationalism by itself seemed to me definitely narrow and insufficient creed. Political freedom, independence, were no doubt essential, but they were steps in the right direction; without social freedom and socialistic structure and the State, neither the country nor the individual could develop much” (Nehru 2004: 175).

According to Nehru’s views, “the Congress should commit itself to the goal of independence” instead of Dominion Status. Therefore, in the Congress session held in Madras he made a resolution pass which

declared ‘the goal of the Indian people to be complete independence’ (Gopal 1972: 5). However, Gandhi was distressed by the aggressive tone of Nehru’s radicalism.

After the Congress session, Nehru toured the country addressing a number of meetings and conferences. His stress on socialism brought him closer to labour. Both the peasants and workers looked upon him as their leader. “He was able to give a new content to the national struggle, which was both radical and socialistic. He emphasized that the fight against the British was not only political but economic” (Zakaria 1960:19). Becoming the unchallenged leader of the youth he demanded from them action. “He sought for the dynamic element in Indian revolution, and made no secret of the fact that it was the function of the youth to supply it.”

In 1927 a Commission was appointed by the British Government under Sir John Simon to visit India to review whether the country was prepared for additional constitutional reform. Since this Commission was an all-white Commission that did not contain any Indian members, Indian opinions of all shades, were outraged. When the Commission landed in Bombay on 3 February 1928, it faced a full-fledged boycott, and a national hartal was called. Total non co-operation was observed and it accorded a new impetus to the national movement. Nehru himself led a procession in Lucknow and received two lathi blows, “a tremendous hammering” at the hands of the police. Nehru said, “I felt half blind with the blows.” Gandhi admiring Nehru’s courage and heroic struggle against the British wrote to him saying:

“My dear Jawahar, my love to you. It was well done bravely. You have braver things to do. May God spare you for many long year to come and make you His chosen instrument for freeing India from the yoke” (A Bunch of Old Letter 1988: 70-71)

Reiterating the call for complete independence Nehru in his Presidential address in the historic Lahore Congress held on 29 December 1929 said:

“Independence for us means complete freedom from British dominion and British imperialism. Having attained our freedom I have no doubt that India will welcome all attempts at world co-operation and federation, and will even agree to give up part of her independence to a larger group of which she is an equal member” (Gopal 1972: 189-190).

The resolution for complete independence (Purna Swaraj) was passed at the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1929 at the Lahore Congress. “The flag of independence was unfurled on the bank of the Ravi catapulting Jawaharlal to the forefront of national politics.”

“The call for complete national independence created a stir throughout the length and breadth of the country. It fired the salvo of national emancipation from the yoke of foreign rule. It was in this context that Gandhi decided to launch the Salt Satyagraha, a unique method of civil disobedience.” On 12 March 1930, Gandhi marched to Dandi with seventy-eight of his followers to break the salt law. “The long march evoked nationwide upsurge.” “On 6 April he violated the salt law and thus the Civil Disobedience Movement was inaugurated. Nehru led the nation in echoing his act of defiance by collecting salt from the sea and from salt-bearing rocks, in selling contraband salt and in courting arrest for doing so” (Tharoor 2012: 66). He asked his people, especially the youth, “Will you be mere lookers-on in this glorious struggle?” (cited in Zakaria 1960: 23) reminding them that, “the field of battle lies before you, the flag of India beckons to you and freedom herself awaits your coming. Who lives if India dies? Who dies if India lives?” (Ibid) Nehru was finally arrested on 14 April and imprisoned in Naini Central Prison for six months. In July, Nehru was joined by his ailing father in prison.

As the civil disobedience movement still had some momentum, the government welcomed the initiative of two Liberal leaders T.B. Sapru and M.R. Jayakar to bring about reconciliation between the Congress

and the British Government. In July 1930, these leaders met Gandhi in Yeravada prison and later the Nehrus in Naini prison. Though Gandhi was not entirely opposed to the deal, but he felt that he could not do anything without consultation with the Nehrus and that Jawaharlal must be the ultimate voice. According to Nehru the peace talk would only divert attention from the true situation. In August 1930 the government arranged for a special train to carry the Nehrus from Naini to Yeravada in Poona to meet Gandhi. “The conditions that the leaders finally laid down bore the militant stance of Nehru, namely that the Congress would suspend the civil disobedience movement and participate in the Round Table Conference in London if India got a national government with the right to secede from the British Empire.” But in early September, it became clear that the attempts made by the Liberals at mediation had collapsed, “and that Gandhi had come to share Nehru’s views in comparison with his initial stance. It was evidence of the singular importance of Jawaharlal Nehru in his strategic thinking” (Brown 2004: 94). The British also slowly began “to acknowledge that in India they had to reckon with another voice apart from Gandhi’s” (Mukherjee 2014: 92).

Nehru was eventually released from prison on 11 October 1930 and immediately issued a public statement that he hoped “to do little bit to hasten the dissolution of the British Empire and take part in its final obsequies” (Gopal 1972: 662). “Resuming his interrupted presidency of the Congress, he had defiantly called for renewed civil disobedience to the Salt Act, and boycott of foreign cloth, British goods and liquor.” He started a no-tax campaign in Allahabad and started delivering seditious speeches. Therefore he was rearrested on 19 October 1930 and returned to Naini prison. Nehru “refused to defend himself at his trial, but used the occasion to make a defiant statement that there could be no compromise with British imperialism and that he had no other profession or business than to fight it and drive it out of India” (Brown 2004: 95). This showed Nehru’s spirit of defiance of the British Raj and he was bent on throwing away the British yoke on India by any means. Amrit Lal Nagar, a famous Hindi scholar and writer while reminiscing about Nehru’s glorious role in the freedom movement stated: “Those days, when we took out our morning processions called prabhat pheris, we sang a popular song which said how the brave Jawahar had carried the name of his country far and wide, and how he had taught his countrymen to fight for freedom” (Nagar 1989). The term of imprisonment lasted until 26 January.

In early 1931 Nehru had to face two of the greatest crises of his life: the death of his father on 6 February and the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement by the Gandhi-Irwin Pact on 5 March. The news of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact appalled him, and he made no secret of his misery to Gandhi. “He felt that Gandhi had been a party to a diminution of the goal of independence and briefly contemplated dissociating himself from it.” Nehru while “commending the agreement to the nation”, emphasized “its temporary nature, for no settlement could be final unless it granted full independence”(Gopal 1972:490). “He warned the people not to consider it as ‘peace’; as it was just a truce- a temporary suspension of hostile activities” (Gopal 1972:1). But ultimately with great mental conflict and physical agony, Nehru agreed to accept it and in the Karachi Congress he even supported the resolution and seconded Gandhi-Irwin Pact and authorized Gandhi “to represent Congress at the Round Table Conference.” In return Gandhi supported Nehru’s resolution on fundamental rights to indicate that “political freedom” must mean “economic freedom” for ‘the starving millions’. “It was to be of considerable consequence for it laid down a blue-print for the rights Indians would enjoy under a swaraj government” (Brown 2004: 99). After seven weeks of holidaying in Ceylon with his wife and daughter, Nehru resumed his political activities. Having seen the unrest amongst the UP peasantry who were oppressed for a long time by their British-imposed landlords he decided to start civil disobedience in the form of non-payment of rent and

revenue. Nehru “knew it was a part of the class war; but he preferred to project it as an aspect of the struggle against the British” (Gopal 2012: 167). Since Nehru refused to obey the government order to discontinue his public speaking in favour of ‘no-rent’ campaign, and on 26 December 1931 he was arrested and sentenced to two years of rigorous incarceration.

Rabindranath Tagore while speaking to his students at Shantiniketan on 8 March 1936 about Nehru said, “Jawaharlal is the Rituraj, representing the season of youth and triumphant joy, of an invincible spirit of fight and uncompromising loyalty to the cause of freedom.” As 1940 progressed and events moved in quick succession, Nehru soon rediscovered or recaptured this spirit of youth as an indefatigable fighter and crusader in the cause of Indian freedom. Nehru was released from prison at the end of August 1933. In 1939 when the Second World War broke out, Nehru who was the primary drafter of the first Congress Working Committee statement indicated sympathy for the war but insisted that: “Only a free India can decide whether we can participate in the war or not. We want a declaration whether the principles of democracy, liberty and self-determination for which the war is claimed to be fought will be applicable to India also... A slave India cannot help Britain. We want to assume control of our government and when we are free we can help the democracies” (Gopal 1972: 184-185).

However, Lord Linlithgow, the then Viceroy took “the unilateral decision to make India a part of the war effort” without consulting any political leaders of India. Nehru criticized, condemned, and totally opposed the Viceregal ukase. Nehru who drafted the resolution of the Congress Working Committee “invited the British government to clarify its war aims with regard to democracy and imperialism and in particular how these were going to apply to India and to be given effect to in the present.” Gandhi hailing the resolution “stated that his disciple stood not only for India, but for all the exploited nations.” Linlithgow however, refused to amend any aspect of the British policy. Nehru leading the Working Committee directed its Congress ministries to resign “rather than continue to serve a war effort in which they had been denied an honourable role.”

As the war situation worsened further, Gandhi and Nehru had no desire to exploit Britain’s perilous position. Some of the leaders “were prepared to go even further and extend direct support to the war effort if there was a national government established in India to support it” (Tharoor 2007: 103). Linlithgow, however, evinced no enthusiasm and Nehru acquiesced himself to the struggle that Gandhi was planning. Gandhi launched the Individual Civil Disobedience movement on 17 October 1940. His first satyagrahi was Vinoba Bhave and second was Nehru. Nehru was arrested on 30 October 1940 and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for four years.

However, as “the external situation became critical for the British, it was too risky and unwise to keep any longer the Indian leaders in jail.” So, on 4 December 1941, Nehru and others were released. Nehru’s untimely release was followed by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour which drew the U.S.A. into the war. “As the Japanese forces swept across Southeast Asia” and came to the doors of India, “the British government woke up to the possibility of changing its policy towards India.” Therefore, in early 1942 Sir Stafford Cripps was sent to negotiate a political agreement with India. But unfortunately the mission failed.

In May and June 1942, Gandhi got involved in preparing Congress to issue an ultimatum to the British to quit India. This created a painful dilemma for Nehru, but ultimately realized that, “there was probably no alternative to Gandhi’s plan of action.” Therefore, “eventually Gandhi and Nehru together worked out the drafts of a Congress Working Committee resolution calling in July for British withdrawal from

India, and failing that indicating that Congress would embark on a further non-violent struggle led by Gandhi” (Brown 2004:150).

On 8 August 1942 in Bombay the All India Congress Committee approved the “Quit India Resolution” drafted by Nehru, “calling on the British to withdraw, and leading the party to a mass struggle for the vindication of India’s inalienable right to freedom and independence” (Ibid). However, within hours the entire Congress leaders including Gandhi and Nehru were arrested.

Nehru was released on 15 June 1945. Soon after his release Nehru declared that if British thought “that by keeping them in jail for three years they had broken the spirit of the Congress they were sadly mistaken” (The Leader: June 1945). For Nehru “whatever changes took place, internal or external the fundamental objectives and principles for India” remained independence and “freedom within the context of the freedom and cooperation of other nations and peoples. Neither of them can be isolated from the other” (Singh 1985: 107). Nehru stated that:

“I do not think that Indian independence can function by itself in a world where domination of one nation by another continues. Nor do I think that it is conceivable that any stable world order can be evolved unless the 400 millions of Indians are free. That freedom of a few at the top but must mean democratic and economic freedom and equality of 400 millions” (The Bombay Chronicle: 1945).

The Wavell Plan which was announced by the Viceroy Lord Wavell, one day before Nehru’s release from prison proposed “the formation of a new Executive Council which would include equal proportions of caste Hindus and Muslims” and accordingly a conference was convened at Shimla on 25 June, 1945 to discuss the matter. But however the Wavell Plan foundered because of Jinnah’s intransigence and obstinacy as he desired that Muslim League should nominate all Muslim members of the Council. According to Nehru the Wavell Plan did not herald the advent of complete independence and reminded the people not to rest till they reached the final and cherished goal of independence.

Nehru considered the year 1946 as the most eventful and decisive year for India and stated, “The 150 year old British rule in this country has almost come to an end” (Cited in Singh 1985:175). The general elections of 1945 which saw the emergence of Congress as the authoritative voice of nationalism, the loss of the British hold over the Indian Army on account of the INA trials and the realization of the British that the economic and social ills of India were beyond its capacity made the Clement Atlee’s Government in Britain “determined to rid itself of the burdens of its Indian Empire.” In February 1946, Prime Minister Atlee announced the despatch of the Cabinet Mission to discuss with the leaders of India the framing of an Indian Constitution for the transfer of power. The Mission comprised of Sir Stafford Cripps- President of the Board of Trade, Sir Pethick Lawrence- the British Secretary of State for India and A.V. Alexander- the first Lord of the Admiralty. They arrived in New Delhi on 24 March 1946.

Though Nehru was hopeful of a peaceful settlement from the Cabinet delegation he was adamant on the demand for complete independence. While addressing a large gathering at Jhansi on 3 March 1946 Nehru asserted that, “if the British Cabinet Mission failed to solve the pressing and urgent problems which were vociferating for solution ‘a political earthquake of devastating intensity will sweep the entire country’.” According to Nehru: “There was going to be no abandonment of independence whatever happened.” Nehru made the independence of India as the basis of the negotiations with the Cabinet Mission.

However, “the differences between Nehru and Jinnah- the former standing for unity, the latter for the separate Muslim state of Pakistan- could not be reconciled by the Cabinet Mission.” Therefore, the

Cabinet Mission framed their own scheme in their statement of 16 May 1946, which suggested a three-tier federal government for India with the Union exercising power on limited subjects such as defence and foreign affairs; and in which the provinces were divided into three groups, in two of which the Hindus and Muslims respectively would have their majority, and in the third representation would be nearly equal. “The Mission also outlined a scheme for the formation of an Interim Government.”

In spite of the Congress Working Committee accepting the 16 May Plan, later in two statements, on 7 and 10 July, Nehru said that the Congress would join the Constituent Assembly uninhibited by any agreement and it could modify the Cabinet Mission Plan. Jinnah reacting strongly against Nehru’s statement withdrew his acceptance of the Plan and asked the League to boycott the Constituent Assembly. The League was also intent on turning to direct action to attain Pakistan. The ‘Direct Action’ was launched on 16 August in Calcutta where over 5000 lives were lost. The widespread communal riots spread over the whole of northern India from Bengal to Punjab.

After abortive negotiations with Jinnah for League cooperation, the Interim Government under the Vice Presidentship of Nehru was formed on 2 September. Nehru considered the interim government as “the stepping-stone to the full independence of India.” However Lord Wavell was keen to have the League into the government and the interim government was reconstituted on 25 October, when the League joined it. Nonetheless right from the beginning “the League members sought to obstruct the government’s functioning, opposing every Congress initiative or proposal.” The Muslim League did not abandon the idea of Pakistan as its objective and continued to instigate violence across the country.

In spite of Nehru’s sincere effort to make the Muslim League to come to terms of cooperation and harmonious working, the latter refused to do the same. To resolve the deadlock Prime Minister Atlee called the representatives of the Congress and the Muslim League to London. But the talks failed.

After Nehru immediately returned from London, the Constituent Assembly met in Delhi on December 9, 1946. The Muslim League boycotted it. Therefore on 5 February 1947 the Congress members of the interim government demanded the resignation of the League since it had not accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan. Then the situation changed drastically on 20 February 1947 when Atlee announced that the British Government would leave India latest by 1948. It was also declared that Lord Wavell would be replaced by a new Viceroy Lord Mountbatten. “Mountbatten was given extraordinary plenipotentiary power to carry out his mission in India. His mission was clear -cut. First try to unite the warring parties and leave a united India. If unsuccessful, then consider the option of division.” “Nehru welcomed the decision of the British Government to transfer power by June 1948.” Nehru was central to the events that unfolded in the five months following the arrival of the new Viceroy, and the decisions which shaped the nature of the states that succeeded British rule in India in August 1947 (Brown 2004: 171). The situation in India was worsening and communal violence and killings became a day-to-day feature. Nehru himself witnessed the ghastly sight of brutality, and communal riots in March and April in Punjab. Nehru and Patel became reconciled to the partition scheme. Jinnah’s obduracy that the League would settle for nothing less than a sovereign state convinced Mountbatten that partition may prove to be the only possible alternative.

Therefore, Mountbatten in consultation with his personal staff drew up a ‘Plan Balkan’, where power “would have transferred to the provinces rather than to a central government, leaving them free to join a larger union.” Nehru was kept in the dark by the British while ‘Plan Balkan’ was revised in London. When Nehru was finally shown the copy of the revised plan by Mountbatten on the night of 10 May,

Nehru was horrified. In a letter to Mountbatten, Nehru lamented that the plan would lead to the fragmentation of the country.

After Nehru's violent outburst against Plan Balkan, Mountbatten went to London on 14 May and returned to India on 30 May with Cabinet approval of a plan for the devolution of power to the two Dominions of India and Pakistan. Mountbatten secured the approval of this plan from Nehru, Jinnah, Baldev Singh, and other Indian leaders on 2 June and Prime Minister Atlee "announced the plan in the House of Commons on 3 June which came to be known as The June 3rd Plan." Under this Plan, the Punjab and Bengal legislatures were to decide whether they wanted partition. As expected, they decided on partition. With regard to the North West Frontier Province, under this plan, a referendum was to be held, but as Congress ultimately boycotted the referendum, the North West Frontier Province went to Pakistan.

Nehru viewed this as a historic opportunity for a new beginning and urging the people "to bury bitterness and recrimination and to look to the future" stated:

"For generations, we have dreamed and struggled for a free, independent and united India. The proposal to allow certain parts to secede if they so will is painful for any of us to contemplate. Nevertheless, I am convinced that our present decision is the right one even from the larger viewpoint."

As the communal situation steadily deteriorated, Mountbatten advanced the date for Indian independence by ten months, setting August 15, 1947, as the time for the transfer of power. "The British Parliament succeeded in passing the Indian Independence Act on 18 July." Nehru "who, as Congress President in Lahore in 1929, had first demanded Purna Swaraj (complete independence), now stood ready to claim it." Free India was born one minute after midnight on August 15, 1947. Nehru rising "to the occasion and to the full stature of his leadership made perhaps the most moving speech of life to the Constituent Assembly" (Hutheesingh & Hatch 1967: 200):

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance."

Nehru concluded with the exhortation: "This is no time for petty and destructive criticism, no time for ill-will or blaming others. We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell."

Conclusion

By and large, Jawaharlal Nehru, a father figure for India, gave his entire life for "the cause of India's freedom and independence." Nehru and the Congress had sincerely laboured and struggled for the achievement of a free, independent and united India. Two years before the transfer of Power Nehru was staunchly opposed to the idea of partition, but when the time of taking a decisive action came Nehru became mainly concerned with India getting her freedom soon. Therefore independence for India came with partition.

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