

Nehru and Buddhism: Approaches to Fundamental Human Problems

Introduction

Prior to Independence in 1947, with Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders, Pandit Sri Javaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) played a leading role in determining the destiny of India, and subsequently as its first prime minister he became the leading architect of modern India. His influence was felt not only on India or its surrounding countries including Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) but also on the whole world as one who pioneered the policy of non-alignment. Nehru's substantially long service of seventeen years to India as its prime minister has made him an indispensable political figure in India which is the largest democracy in the world today.

Understandably, Nehru has been studied extensively from political, historical and international relations perspectives by experts in those fields. Not being a historian, political scientist or a sociologist by profession I will not be discussing Nehru from any of those points of view. In this context, my discussion will be from a perspective from which Nehru has not been viewed as much, namely, from a perspective of Buddhism. Apart from my personal limitation as a student of Buddhism, my preference for this perspective is that it would highlight certain aspects of Nehru's political life which have not received adequate scholarly attention.

In this presentation, first I will review several major events in Nehru's political life which have direct bearing on Buddhism in India and Buddhism in general. Subsequently I will examine from a Buddhist point of view Nehru's approach to issues and his perceptions on global historical processes. I will conclude with some general observations on Nehru's 'Buddhist' vision to the today's world.

Nehru and Buddhism

It is a fact that Nehru had a great admiration of the Buddha and his teaching. Nehru's unimaginably wide knowledge in the history of the world invariably

included knowledge in this great world religion which was the most noteworthy Indian contribution to the human civilization. In his writings Nehru often referred with admiration to the Buddha, his teachings and the rich cultural heritage of Buddhism. What he liked is not any particular tradition of Buddhism, but the teaching of the Buddha per se. He in fact did not like the cultural and ritualistic thicket grown around it. Writing to his daughter from prison Nehru says:

Buddha has always had a great appeal for me. It is difficult for me to analyse this appeal, but it is not a religious, and I am not interested in the dogmas that have grown up round Buddhism. It is the personality that has drawn me.

In 1931 (April-May) Nehru was in Sri Lanka for a month on a personal visit with his family. In his autobiography later he reminisced of it:

At Anuradhapura, I like greatly an old seated statue of the Buddha. A year later, when I was in Dehra Dun Goal, a friend in Ceylon, sent me a picture of this statue, and I kept it on my little table in my cell. It became a precious companion for me, and the strong, calm features of Buddha's statue soothed me and gave me strength and helped me to overcome many a period of depression. (Gopalkrishna Gandhi, 2002, pp.5-6)

Writing to Indira Gandhi (July 3, 1939) Nehru again mentioned this statue:

...I hope to steal a day for Kandy and a few hours from Anuradhapura where I want to see again the old statue of the seated Buddha in contemplation. For the last seven years I had a picture of this almost always with me, in prison or outside (Gopalkrishna Gandhi, 2002, p.15).

Nehru liked the Buddha as a religious teacher who had a deep concern for human suffering. He summarized the life of the Buddha in the following words:

Why should there be so much folly and misery in the world? That is the old question that troubled Prince Siddhartha 2500 years ago in this country of ours. (Nehru 2004 p.552)

Also Nehru thought very highly of Asoka, his personal transformation and his political philosophy both influenced by Buddhism (Nehru 2004 pp.74-76).

Nehru and Buddhism in the more recent Indian history

Emerging from vast devastations of hundred thousands of people, predominantly Hindus and Muslims including Sikhs, it is understandable why Nehru wished to create a secular state in independent India. Nehru's secularism did not mean that he kept aside religion altogether. It may be defined more in line with respect for all religions without preference for any particular religion. In this stance, Nehru had a historical precedence from his own country, namely, Asoka, who famously said (in his 12th edict):

King Devanampriya Priyadarsi honours all the religious persuasions and their clergy and their laity. ... The religious persuasion of others should be respected in every way. So doing, one promotes one's own religion and supports the other's religion. Whoever extols one's religion and disparages another's religion entirely through devotion to one's religion, thinking, "we add luster to our own religion", injures one's own religion very severely by doing so. ... Let all listen to and be willing to listen to one another's Dharma (Ananda W. P. Guruge, 1993, pp.564-5).

Though being a Buddhist, Asoka admired and respected all the religions and treated well all religious people belonging to various traditions. Asoka embodied the ideal of universal monarch (raja cakkavatti) who ruled the world by Dharma and who conquered the world by Dharma (dharma vijaya). The Dharma he advocated for his people was common to all religious persuasions, and not exclusively Buddhist. Nehru had this example of pluralism, universalism and tolerance before him. It is most likely that he emulated Asoka in articulating his secularist religious policy at the inception of independent India. It is in this context that we have to understand the adoption of Asoka's state symbol of lions and the Dharma cakra as the symbol of the newly independent nation. In this connection, we cannot afford to forget the role of Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891-1956), a renowned economist and the leader of Dalits, who was the first minister of justice and law in the first parliament and chairman of constitution drafting

committee. Ambedkar who accepted Buddhism with about six hundred thousands of his followers in 1956, was already a great admirer of the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha and his universalist social philosophy. The Buddhist concept of 'pancashila' found a place in the constitution although with a different content. Once the constitution came out it was praised as a "social document" for the fact that it incorporated a system of 'affirmative action' which ensured social and economic justice for the scheduled castes and women. It is clear that philosophies of both Ambedkar and Nehru coincided and thus was born the great constitution of modern India.

2500 Buddha Jayanti

The 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's parinirvana, which was given the ever since popular name 'Buddha Jayanti', was a key occasion in which Nehru's admiration of Buddhism became clear to the world. The idea of celebrating this occasion was initiated by Lanka Bauddha Bala Mandalaya in 1950 under the guidance of the late Professor G.P. Malalasekera, its founder chairperson. Nehru's government took this occasion very seriously. He appointed a high-powered committee with Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the Vice President, as its chairperson, to organize the celebrations in India. In addition to issuing commemorative stamps, holding numerous exhibitions and the like, the committee organized several major projects:

(1) A 40 volume publication of Tripitaka in Pali and Sanskrit.

(2) Editing and publishing Buddhist Sanskrit works.

(3) A volume of academic papers covering the entire history of Buddhism in the world. *2500 Years of Buddhism*, edited by the late professor P.V. Bapath and published by the Indian government was the result of this.

(4) Publication of a pictorial book portraying the history and spread of Buddhism in the world. *The Way of the Buddha* was the result of it. (Asia Tribune, accessed on 20.11.2015).

The main celebration was held at Buddhagaya under the leadership of Nehru. In 1957 Nehru was invited to Sri Lanka to mark the completion of the Buddha Jayanti celebrations here. This personal involvement of Nehru and his willingness to spend public funds in the historic event shows how he perceived Buddhism not as a mere religion among many religions but as a great cultural force to provide light to the world.

Dalai Lama and the Arrival of Tibetan Buddhism in India

This politically sensitive event took place in the 30th March 1959 when Dalai Lama along with a group of his followers crossed the Tibetan border to India. Although Nehru knew that this could create difficulties to his non-interventionist position agreed upon with China in the joint treaty between the two countries in 1954 he decided to grant asylum to the spiritual leader and his group. This was followed by the arrival of several hundred thousands of Tibetan Buddhist in India finally establishing their headquarters in Dharmasala. Nehru's stance on Tibet and his support for the Tibetan religious leader and his people had political repercussions. Nevertheless, Nehru stood by Tibetan Buddhists and gave massive support for them to reestablish their great monastic centres in different parts of India and to establish higher education centres to preserve and promote their culture and tradition.

Decisions made by people are taken as either vindicated or refuted by the events that follow subsequently. Accordingly makers of those decisions are either blamed or praised. It is more so with political decisions. But I think that a decision should be weighed primarily on whether or not it was the right decision to make at that given point of time, given the circumstances. In the ensuing history only some decisions are lucky and some are not. In accepting Dalai Lama and his people to India and subsequently supporting them in a substantial manner, it is clear that Nehru had made a mammoth decision, which did not make subsequent India-China relations particularly endearing but made India lovable to Tibetan Buddhists and lovers of Tibetan Buddhism all over the world. Although 'Tibetan question' still remains unresolved, after a little more than five decades, Tibetan

Buddhism has become the most wide spread form of Buddhism in India as well as in the outside world.

Nehru's approaches to issues

In dealing with Tibetans as he did, Nehru was thinking in terms of a problems faced by human beings. Although this may sound a simple truism, when problems are viewed through such terms as national and inter-national, they tend to assume huge dimensions and lose the immediacy as human problems. In discussing the estate Tamil problem which was a contentious issue between India and Sri Lanka in the middle decades of the last century Nehru said (in his speech to Lok Sabha on April 9, 1958):

Fortunately, in spite of the complicated and difficult nature of the problem, it is increasingly realized in Ceylon by the Government and others and by us that it should not be treated as a political issue or dispute, but as a human problem. I do hope that, however long it may take, it will be settled in a friendly way and to the advantage of the large number of human beings whose welfare is involved.(Gopalkrishna Gandhi, 2002, p.81).

Although I do not venture to say that Nehru got this 'human orientation' from Buddhism, certainly two approaches coincide. The Buddha saw problems as basically human problems whether they originate directly from them or not. The Buddha articulated this insight when he said: I say that suffering, its arising, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation, all found within this fathom-long body with perception and mind.

Let me cite from his speech at University of Ceylon convocation address (January 12, 1950) an instance when Nehru articulated, with reference to vast technological innovations and knowledge acquisition, his vision of human predicament.

Referring obviously to globalization, which was not identified by that term during the middle of the last century, Nehru says:

Now, one of the brighter features of this age is – and I attach a great deal of value to it – that the barriers that separated the so-called East from the so-called West are gradually disappearing. That is a good sign. But, at the same time, other barriers seem to be growing in the East and in the West. (Gopalakrishnan Gandhi, 2002 p.36)

Globalization is basically the reduction of gaps of time and space as a consequence of which we reach today longer distances within shorter periods of time. Technological innovations in transport and communication have made human beings much closer to one another as have never been before. Under these conditions, with vast knowledge of different cultures and societies, one would expect a world not only physically close to one another but also emotionally close. One would expect mutual knowledge to lead to mutual understanding. But we know that this has not happened. The world is substantially different today from the world of early 1950s when Nehru delivered his convocation speech. We know much more today about all aspects of reality than those in Nehru's time did. But the paradox is that this knowledge, rather than integrating, has disintegrated us from one another.

Nehru analyses this situation as resulting from the growth of knowledge in the following words:

We have advanced greatly in science – I am a great believer in science – and the scientific approach has changed the world completely. I think that if the world is to solve its problems it will inevitably have to be through the means of science and not by discarding science. Nevertheless, I find that the sheer advance of science has made people, often enough, not scientific, which is an extraordinary thing to say. What I mean is that science has become so vast and all-pervading that scientists are unable to grasp the thing entire and become narrower and narrower in each individual subject. They may be very brilliant in some subjects but they seem to lose grip on life as a whole. (Gopalakrishna Gandhi 2002 p.37).

Continuing this vein of thought, Nehru refers to times when people knew less but had 'an integrated view of life' which made them wise. Nehru, ardent believer of

science and growth of knowledge, appears here contradicting himself in referring to the past when people knew less and felt much. I do not think Nehru was contradicting himself when he talked about wisdom as higher than knowledge. Accumulation of knowledge in itself may not be good or bad. The crucial question to be raised, according to a Buddhist way of thinking, is: knowledge for what purpose? According to Buddhism, knowledge is not for the sake of knowledge; it is gained always for action, and action should always be guided by compassion and wisdom, two pillars of Buddhist social action. Knowledge and action without moral guidance will ultimately serve the purpose of inflating one's own ego to the exclusion of the rest and perceiving oneself as an end in itself.

Liberal individualism with its associated goal, freedom, has become the only rationality of today. Aristotelean two-valued logic has given us the option of either/or, and the principle of excluded-middle has taken away any third option from us. Consequently the world has been bifurcated into clear-cut divisions of which one is necessarily true when the other is false.

The Indian tradition, long before, had gone beyond this limited way of thinking, and that it is so is testified by Sanjaya's (one of the six religious teachers during the time of the Buddha) skepticism, Jaina Mahavira's seven-fold predication (sapta-bhangi) which says 'may be' (syad) in the place of 'is', and the Buddha's, and following him, Nagarjuna's four cornered proposition (catuskoti), not to mention Taoist yin-yang (passive and active principles of the universe). All of these lead us to be wary of our false certainties and be aware of our own imperfections and limitations.

Nehru knew about his own imperfections. In this very same convocation speech under discussion he says:

In the citation about me I was referred to as a person who had, I believe, profound wisdom and political astuteness. I do not know how far I am politically astute but I must confess to you that the older I grow the more and more do I feel the lack of wisdom in myself. Perhaps it may be that the very feeling is a sign of having some wisdom. (Gopalakrishnan Gandhi, 2002, p.35)

I am reminded of the Buddha's statement (in the Dhammapada 63) that a fool who knows about his foolishness is in fact wise. Nevertheless, his political biography has ample evidence to show that Nehru was much wiser than in this minimal sense.

The secularist position adopted by Nehru at the very outset of independent India was both challenging and enlightening. He had the courage to go for what he considered to be the right view at that moment of national destiny. Identities rooted in ethnicities and religiosities have continued to function as great motivating forces all over the world, not only in India. The Buddha saw this situation in his times and described it as 'wilderness of ideologies and desert of ideologies.' He guided his listeners to transcend these man-made boundaries. Asoka following the example of the Buddha said that all human beings are his children (save manusa mama paja), and put this universalist philosophy into practice. I see Nehru's secularist position as following these historical examples. Looking at some of the exciting and interesting exchange of views and debates happening at this very moment in India It is clear that the Buddha, Asoka and Nehru are as relevant today as they were in their times.

The conclusion of my presentation is not that Nehru was the wisest of all prime ministers of India. Nehru has both his admirers and detractors. But undoubtedly he was a thinker in his own right, a quality not always associated with politics. Discussing Nehru, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike said that "Nehru is one of the few statesmen of the world who have a background of culture and learning, and who are thinkers beside being also men of action" (Gopalakrishna Gandhi, 2002 p. x). It is perhaps this combination of virtues of culture, learning and thinking that Plato had in mind when he said (in the Republic) that rulers have to be philosophers. Nehru, I believe, was one of the closest examples of our times to this Platonic ideal.

Reference

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