

Creation and Dissolution of Indian Democratic Socialism

**Creation and Dissolution of Indian Democratic Socialism: India's Constitution Under the
Leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi**

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Introduction:

With a population of over one billion citizens, India is the world's largest democratic state (World Bank, 2018). Since achieving independence on the 15th of August 1947, the Indian political sphere has experienced various reforms and mobilization movements promoted by leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC). Two critical Prime Ministers in Indian history are Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, and his daughter and successor, Indira Gandhi. Political power in India within the first thirty years of independence was consolidated predominantly by a single family and thus left a lasting legacy on the democratic secular state. While both had strong Hindu-Indian values and were highly accredited in politics, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi had surprisingly different visions of a 'successful India'. By examining the contrasting policies implemented into the constitution by Nehru and Gandhi, a greater understanding of democracy in relation to Indian society, economics and ethnicity can be gained. The first section of this essay intends to compare the political styles of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, focusing on the positive and negative impacts of their constitutional policies. The latter half will briefly discuss each Prime Ministers' legacy and why Nehru continues to receive more respect as a politician than his daughter in the democratic world.

1. Biography of India's Prime Ministers

To understand the differing effects of Nehru and Gandhi's politics, it is important to first understand the background, ideologies and motives that would later prompt the policies established during each of their time in office. A brief biography relating to their transition into politics must be discussed.

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Born into the Brahmans, the leading Hindu caste, Jawaharlal Nehru received the highest level of education. His teachers and mentors consisted of affluent English- educated governesses and private tutors (Keshap, 1964). In his late teens, Nehru attended Trinity College, Cambridge where he received his Honors degree in Natural Sciences (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). He then furthered his education at Inner Temple in London where he passed his Legal Bar exam and became a barrister (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). After seven years in England, Nehru returned to India, joined the All Indian Congress in 1918 and was elected secretary and president (Keshap, 1964).

Nehru's motivations and interest in politics stem from two sources: Fabian Society and more importantly, Mahatma Gandhi (Masilamani, n.d.). While the latter was mostly a personal motivator to participating in the future of India's independence, the former (Fabianism) would be reflected in his policies after becoming Prime Minister. Nehru was an advocate for Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, the non-violence resistance movement, as a means to achieve an independent India (Masilamani, n.d.). Similarly, the concept of "peace movements" is mirrored in Fabian ideology. Founded by the Fabian Society in Britain in 1884, Fabianism reflects Marxism but differs in the belief that no revolution is needed to create change; rather greater emphasis on democratic socialism to achieve political goals (Masilamani, n.d.). When Partition occurred on the 15th of August 1947, India adopted a new domestic and international image of *Satyagraha*, with Nehru at its core.

After Nehru's death in 1964, the Indian electorate sought to find a new leader that understood India's diversity and complexity like Nehru. Born into the *Satyagraha* movement, Indira Gandhi "was a child of the Indian Revolution" (Parasher, 1984). Unlike her father, Gandhi

only received one year of public higher education in India and one year at the University of Oxford, England (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). In 1938, she joined the INC and once her father gained power, she carried heavy influence in all INC discussions; eventually being declared the honorary president of the party (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). India needed a dynamic leader who understood Indian diversity and complexity, and in the 1966 election, Gandhi secured her spot in office as head of the INC and Prime Minister of the country.

Although Gandhi served as Prime Minister for four terms, my analysis will only focus on policies formulated in the first three consecutive terms. This is by choice, as Nehru only served consecutive terms and any policies or backlash implemented from either prime minister are in response to their own actions and not another leading party in power.

Gandhi, contrary to her father, had little regard for democratic institutions and Fabianism, and instead desired to obtain an egalitarian socio-political order with a nationalistic political economy (Parasher, 1984). Her time in office is seen as a radical approach to Indian politics by a majority of the population (Oberst, 2018). Through a comparative examination of Nehru's creation of the constitution and the later reforms implemented by Gandhi, it can be seen that their differing ideologies and political style will provide a basis to understand various policies and the effects on the lives of the Indian people.

2. Framework of the Indian Constitution

Prior to India's partition, Nehru summarized his constitutional vision before the INC during a speech in 1936 known as "the Socialist Creed" (Kinney, 2014). This declaration emphasized

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Nehru's commitment to India's independence, and explained why he believed socialism was the appropriate future of India. A segment of the Creed is as follows:

“Socialism is something more than an economic doctrine; it is a philosophy of life... I see no way of ending poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism... I work for Indian independence because the nationalist in me cannot tolerate alien domination... we are a nationalist organization and we think on a nationalist plane... I have no desire to force the issue on the Congress... I shall cooperate gladly” (as quoted in Kinney, 2014).

Through this excerpt, it is evident that Nehru understood the multidimensional crisis within India and turned to Fabian ideology as a driving force to reach a solution. Although Nehru may not have achieved his full democratic socialist state, remnants of the Socialist Creed can be identified within India's first constitution of 26th January 1950 (“Constitution of India”, 2015).

Nehru's political leadership and policies can be perceived as democratic liberalism. He valued individual freedoms and equality among all Indians, with a strong commitment to institution-building as a means to uphold rights outlined in the Indian Constitution. As stated in the ‘Socialist Creed,’ Nehru emphasized the economic struggles facing Indian society and thus promoted strong central economic planning to minimize poverty, unemployment and wealth divisions (Oberst, 2018).

Nehru faced two major political challenges in upholding democratic socialist values: power diffusion and Cold War tensions. While the latter accounts for external actors, the former includes deep rooted domestic actors. India was a feudal state, meaning power was divided not only among its' national, regional and local governments but also among the control of princely

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states (Masilamani, n.d.). Before manifesting his homogenous, socialist India, Nehru had to push hierarchical rulers into retirement or dismissal in order to achieve a true democracy (Masilamani, n.d.). If he did not do this, central planning would fall prey to bargaining and negotiating as power would be diffused to various domestic actors; thus making policies and constitutional resolutions subject to interest groups pushing individual demands. Indeed, this became a destabilizing factor for Nehru's government as his desire for a socialist society ultimately faltered and the government became subjected to pushing personal groups' agenda as a means to maintain leadership (Oberst, 2018). The constitution was viewed as a mere framework used to order society, while Nehru and the Congress party allowed nationalist views to advance socialist policies.

The second obstacle Nehru faced was his idea of socialism in the Cold War era. Nehru wanted India to be recognized as a major international actor without surrendering his ideology. This led to his assistance in establishing the Non-Aligned Movement in 1956 (Keshap, 2019). The Non-Aligned Movement was a multilateral approach to deter involvement in the Cold War by refusing to align with a major superpower and therefore protecting state independence (Haque, 2017). Nehru also believed that in being one of the founding leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, India would become more reputable on the international stage and rise as a key actor in the Global South.

Gandhi, on the other hand, was not as concerned with how Global South states viewed India, instead, she was motivated by holstering state power. One of the most controversial political motions in Indian history was spearheaded by Gandhi. Unlike her father, Gandhi did not value democratic institutions, but rather favored traditional, centralized authority and took steps

to undermine the liberal ideas of democracy within the Constitution itself. In 1975, India was experiencing rapid economic downturn, high public debt, increased poverty, strict labor laws and extremely high population rates (Das, 2006). All of these factors were a result of Gandhi's failing economic policies. Gandhi believed the primary socio-economic crisis facing India was mass population and thought that family planning programs could "cure" poverty (Connelly, 2006). Already confronted by state discontent and asked to resign as Prime Minister, Gandhi declared a state of emergency on 26 June 1975 (Johnson, 2016). Under the state of emergency, political opposition was arrested, new economic plans were established, statewide censorship was imposed, and forced family planning was implemented (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

The call for this declaration can be described as Gandhi herself, not the Indian state, facing an emergency. Weeks earlier, under claims of breaching electoral laws, Gandhi lost her seat in parliament, making her ineligible to hold office (Oberst, 2018). By announcing a state of emergency, India's political sphere froze, and Gandhi held onto her power. This was the first time India was subjected to authoritarianism since its independence. With help from her son, family planning measures were set forth, including mandatory sterilization, limiting the number of children per family and enforcing birth control (Ledbetter, 1984, p. 743). This strategic political movement allowed Gandhi to not only secure her role as Prime Minister for another 18 months, but also push her socio-economic agenda of population reduction to cure India of its poverty. Calling a state of emergency did not only undermine democracy and the institutions created by Nehru, but it also initiated what would be deemed the largest and most aggressive sterilization campaign in history (Ledbetter, 1984, p. 743).

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From 1971 to 1976, Gandhi's government had made a record-breaking twenty constitutional amendments (India Today, 2015). Of the 20 revisions, the 42nd amendment is the most disputed, subversive, and undemocratic change India has seen. Enforced during the state of emergency, the 42nd amendment curtailed powers of the supreme court, granted parliament full authority over the judiciary, and shifted power back to Congress rather than state governments and parties (Granville, 2000, p. 371). Gandhi's authoritarianism and lack of respect for political participation proved true under article 368, granting her, "anything in this Constitution, Parliament may in exercise of its constituent power amend by way of addition, variation or repeal any provision of this Constitution in accordance with the procedure laid down in this article" (*Constitution of India*, 2015). This article solidified Gandhi's power so that she could amend the constitution without being questioned by the state or seeking judicial review because absolute power laid with Congress.

Moreover, a significant change occurred under the preamble of the 42nd Amendment. In the creation of the Constitution, Nehru was against including 'secularism' to define Indian society. Under his Constitution, the preamble stated India as a "sovereign democratic republic" (*Constitution of India*, 2015). Although he did not believe it was a way to define Indian life, Nehru understood the importance of religion alongside historical traditions and advocated for a secularized state. Gandhi, on the other hand, did not agree with her father's views and during the state of emergency, changed the preamble to declare that India was now a "sovereign, socialist, *secular* democratic republic" (*Constitution of India*, 2015). India's religion and politics were, legally, separate entities. This warrants multiple criticisms. Primarily, by deeming secularization a trait of being a 'true Indian,' it not only overlooks all religions of India as secondary to society,

but limits democracy as a whole, specifically social democratic equality and freedom of religion within the political sphere and parliament (Roychowdhury, 2018). The second issue with altering the preamble was that India's structure was not socialist in nature. Political and social aspects of life—open press, free speech, freedom of political parties, and individual rights—were all suspended under the state of emergency. The poor classes were targeted for family planning while elite officials were given 'bonuses' for minimizing family size (Connelly, 2006, p. 629). Under Gandhi, India's socio-economic ills were blamed on citizens as a means to justify her motives towards establishing an autocracy, which was anything but Nehru's idea of democratic socialism.

3. Economic Policies and Intervention

The differences between Nehru and Gandhi's visions of democratic socialism can be seen in major economic policies they implemented while in office. Nehru's five year plans reinforced central planning and the importance of working-class growth rather than elitism. His industrial policy of 1956 called for the acceleration of growth rates and industrialization to achieve a socialist society (Masilamani, n.d.). Three key objectives of his policy were improving the standards of living and working conditions for the masses, reducing income inequalities and preventing power from being regulated by elites (Masilamani, n.d.).

Power diffusion was central to Fabian ideology and Nehru believed that prevention of private monopolies would create a homogenous India, dissolving the polarization inherent with the urban labourers and rural agriculture. To achieve these three key objectives, Nehru applied unduly strict production and price regulations to an already strict labour regime, maximized

government control of private enterprise, and was openly against foreign investment (Gurcharan, 2006). As India was newly independent, Nehru did not want to rely on Western powers for market stabilization because it reflected a colonial dependency legacy and would decrease the chances of India becoming globally recognized. Instead, Nehru and the INC focused on capital flow and declared the state solely responsible for establishing new industrial undertakings that were “inward-looking and import-substituting,” not export promoting (Gurcharan, 2006).

However, this five-year plan did not reduce income inequalities between working and rural sectors as Nehru had hoped. Major issues arose between the landed vs landless citizens. Forming 80% of the population, the landless (the rural poor) were economically constrained by landowners and urban centres (Oberst, 2018 p. 130). Nehru’s second five-year plan in 1956 did not directly address this social inequality. Instead, he focused on increasing transportation facilities and technological diffusion from urban to rural areas in hopes of solving the issue (Masilamani, n.d.). Nehru did not adequately assess the industrial framework that existed at the time— for example, regions of India were still operating under feudalism. Urban India and rural India could not be regulated under one economic growth policy. Though lacking effectiveness and efficiency, the 1956 policy indicated pitfalls for future economic planning since price control, quality control, and geographical location would not be included to achieve capital growth. Most importantly, economies do not run on static, five-year cycles; they are dynamic (Masilamani, n.d.). Therefore, plans to restructure should not be time-dependent, but rather, based on quantity, or direct reformation of the source of instability.

Following in her father’s footsteps, Gandhi continued to promote the public sector but did so by advocating an economy shaped by radical egalitarianism. India, under Nehru’s first eight

years as Prime Minister, saw 361 banks claiming bankruptcy, averaging at 40 banks closing per year, all of which were privately owned (Khan and Karim Haider, 2018, p. 5). To combat this, in 1969, Gandhi nationalized fourteen banks, including the Bank of India (Khan and Karim Haider, 2018). The goal of nationalization was to shift capital from the private sector to the “priority sectors” of minor industry, entrepreneurs, traders, and agriculture (Shen, 2019). The idea was that by reducing private ownership, rapid capital growth would increase deposit rates for those who were restricted by corporate control while simultaneously pushing investment into priority sectors at a lower interest rates (Shen, 2019).

Gandhi’s pursuit for economic growth intensified in 1971 with the nationalization of the cotton, copper, coal and steel industries, and again in 1973 with the nationalization of oil companies (Khan and Haider, 2018, p. 5). Similar to Nehru, Gandhi’s perspective was inward looking, focusing on wealth for the people so that citizens would, in turn, fund the state and raise industrial growth internally. Gandhi’s economic policies were favoured by intellectuals and the elite, or those who supported Marxism, rather than the masses of the working class, as the working class were exploited by elitists, granting workers little economic power over their employers and corporate entities (Oberst, 2018, p.55). Reflecting on the outcomes of Nehru’s five-year plan, Gandhi’s nationalization program failed at fulfilling the original mandate. However, she took a radical, proactive approach to economics by addressing the source of instability—banks and the resource sector—while Nehru took a passive approach by focusing on secondary factors, such as price, quality and location, rather than the economic institutions themselves. Although rash, Gandhi’s policies had greater socio-economic impact since she learnt

from the shortfalls of Nehru's static plans. Under Gandhi's leadership, savings rates increased, and India experienced the lowest inequality rate in all of South-East Asia (Kundu, 2016).

4. Social and Religious Policy Obstacles

Apart from the social welfare sphere of politics, religion and ethnicity were—and continue to be—two major destabilizing factors of Indian politics. Both Prime Ministers recognized the complexities but each of their approaches to combat the tensions in these spheres differed. While Nehru focused on traditional ethnic and social divisions, Gandhi was challenged by a religiously motivated movement. Although neither policies Nehru and Gandhi adopted to alleviate rising social tensions were added to the Constitution, they cast a heavy shadow over Indian democracy.

Enshrined into society, India functions on a caste-based system. Unlike class systems, individuals are inscribed into their castes and cannot move up within this framework. Caste systems organize employment, social interaction, and the moral conduct of some sects of Hinduism under the idea that God formed society to reflect order (Masilimani, n.d.) Nehru was born into the highest caste, the Brahmans, meaning he experienced economic stability, high social status and education, thus directing him into his career path. Following his socialist roots, Nehru tried to dismantle the integral framework India was based on.

In September of 1955, Nehru spoke at a seminar for “Casteism and its removal of Untouchability.” The following is an excerpt of Nehru's perspective on social structure:

“... untouchability is only an extreme form of casteism. From removal of untouchability, it naturally follows that we should put an end to various aspects of casteism, which have weakened and divided our society... from a democratic or socialist point of view, it is

anachronism. From a human point of view, it also wholly undesirable” (Nehru, 2002, p. 228).

Dalits or ‘untouchables’ are the lowest caste within India; they are often employed to do unsanitary work, subject to human rights violations, and face extensive isolation and oppression from higher ranking classes. Nehru realized India could not succeed if a vast population was at the mercy of an ethno-religious social order. Because Dalits had no political voice, meaning the likelihood of a caste uprising was marginal, Nehru understood that change must be sought institutionally. This notion aligns with Fabian ideology that revolutions are not needed to bring about change, but central planning can instead be the core activator of social change. Nehru attempted to criminalize caste inequalities—specifically for the Dalits—on multiple occasions. Unfortunately, no constitutional changes developed as the caste system not only provided religious and social order but also dictated how daily Indian life functioned. However, resolutions within government and educational sectors were implemented to minimize oppression based on their caste (New World Encyclopedia, 2019). Simply, Dalits were granted better access to education and received higher representation in political spheres.

During her first year in office, Gandhi’s core focus was not on the caste system or granting Dalits better access to state resources. Gandhi’s party faced the peak of the 1966 anti-cow slaughter campaign. The cow campaign was a historic movement led by multiple Hindu organizations to ban the killing of cows as they are a sacred, holy figure within Hinduism. When the campaign leaders demanded legislature to make slaughter illegal, Gandhi denied the motion; just like her Father did (Copland, 2014, p. 422). This denial resulted in the peaceful protests quickly turning violent. Curfews were broken, public property destroyed, tear-gas deployed, and

the President of the Congress Party's house was set on fire (Copland, 2014, p. 425). Rioting ceased, resulting in eight deaths, forty-seven wounded, along with two hundred and fifty cars, and ten buses destroyed (Copland, 2014, p. 425).

The primary reason for Gandhi refusing the anti-slaughter campaign was her political ideology. A Hindu herself, Gandhi valued cows, but saw no merit in politicizing Hinduism. Gandhi's India was secular in nature and if she had criminalized killing cattle, she would have risked maintaining the control and status of the Congress party in the 1967 election (Copland, 2014, p. 426). Moreover, socialist secularization was pivotal to her party's platform. Trying to gain favour of the masses, Gandhi, in all her terms in office, would not constitutionalize the anti-cow slaughter campaign.

Neither criminalization of the caste system, nor the cattle campaign under Gandhi's term sought constitutional implementation, however both provide a brief insight to the socio-political sphere of India and the challenges that each leader faced. Although both campaigns were deeply rooted in Hinduism, Nehru's caste dissolution gained more political traction than the religious-based campaign Gandhi faced. While Nehru was granted reservations in the system for Dalits, the cattle campaign only received negative political backlash and riots. Again, Nehru profoundly represented democratic institutions by fighting for equality and growth, while Gandhi resumed a self-interested religious stance to protect her future political career.

5. A Prime Minister's Legacy

Nehru and Gandhi governed India on different sets of principles and goals. The divisiveness of democratic socialism left a lasting legacy on Indian politics. Overall, Nehru's impact on India is

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perceived as more positive and beneficial in comparison to his daughters'. Nehru was committed to modernizing Indian nationhood via the four pillars of 'Nehruvian thought:' secularism, socialism, democracy and unity (INC, 2019). Nehru is often considered the father of Indian politics—not only in creating the constitution but in granting minorities equal rights. His charisma attracted the support of the masses that aided individual, communal and state social growth. Seen as courageous and innovative by scholar Zoe Keshap (1964), who claimed that Nehru was “a prince among men and champion of India’s freedom” (p. 35), Keshap, though not incorrect, does not take into account the flaws of his visionary personality. Nehru undeniably struggled with creating a stable economic sector. His five-year plans were too idealistic for Indian society as industry needed to be established before policies *shaping* industry could. However, Nehru remains India’s longest Prime Minister; diligently serving India for 17 years. His death on the 27th May 1964 left India mourning a hero, a legacy asking themselves, “after Nehru, who?” (Copland, 2014, p. 412).

Indians received their answer of ‘who’ when Gandhi took office in 1966. Predominately known for her boldness and radicalism, Gandhi transformed the idea of Indian democratic socialism. Gandhi’s legacy is deemed authoritative in many respects, but mainly because she undermined the very institutions her father established. Her socio-economic policies targeted the poor and won her the support of leftist elites. In comparison to Nehru, her nationalization program was erratic and impetuous yet progressive. She tackled the state’s growing economic discontent by granting all power to the state, only to later abuse this power. The state of emergency declared in 1975 is regarded as the most undemocratic event in Indian history (Masilamani, n.d.). Gandhi’s hegemonic attitude and self-interested motives made her highly

unfavourable among the masses. Under Gandhi, one can argue that Nehru's India, from a constitutional basis, had dissolved and 'Indira's India' was "...not the name of a mere woman but a philosophy which is wedded to the service of [India]" (Parasher, 1984, p. 258). Ultimately, Gandhi's policies and state-wide discontent led to her assassination—which was said to be committed by her own Sikh bodyguards, under Operation Blue Star on the 31st October 1984 (*Indira Gandhi*, 2019).

Conclusion:

Within the first thirty years of independence, the INC, under the authority of Nehru and later Gandhi, shaped India's populist, highly complex political sphere and perception on a global stage. However, differing visions of democratic socialism caused polarization within society, ethics and politics. Nehru, who built all of India's liberal institutions and created the Constitution, believed a stable administration was the key to India's growth. His daughter opposed these established institutions and exercised central authority in hopes to achieve a prosperous India. Nehru established democracy while Gandhi deprived India from experiencing a democratic society. Democracy in India did not die, rather, it went through tribulations, alterations and marginalization before the resurrection of democratic socialism. Nevertheless, the constitutional policies Nehru and Gandhi implemented during their years as Prime Minister aided India to become the world's largest sitting democracy.

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