

Nehru and the Concept of One World

-Idealistic Fantasy or Practical Necessity?

by

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We meet today to honour the memory of one of India's most illustrious sons, Jawaharlal Nehru, and to celebrate his ideas and vision for the future, a vision not only for his beloved India but for the world as a whole. Nehru was a patriot but was also a committed internationalist. As the historian Arnold Toynbee observed:

“Nehru was a pioneer in taking nothing less than the world itself as the field for his public activity”.

In this context, one of Nehru's significant contributions was his passionate advocacy of the concept of One World, which has received less attention than it deserves. Nehru drew upon the ideas of Wendell Willkie who wrote the book entitled One World which attracted Nehru. After the Second World War the Federation of American Scientists which included Albert Einstein also drew attention to how the advent of nuclear weapons had made the establishment of One World necessary to ensure human survival. This paper seeks to explore how Nehru came to identify with these ideas, giving them an uniquely Indian and even Nehruvian flavour

and the manner in which he sought to promote their realization. Nehru's vision of One World has a strong resonance today in a world that is riven by violence and conflict and witnessing the viral spread of extremist ideologies and fanaticism, even as the rapid advance of technology and the economics of globalization render national or regional interventions both inadequate and ineffective.

Nehru's sensibilities as a political leader, but also as a humanist, was deeply influenced by terrifying and brutalizing experience of the two World Wars and India's own misery and oppression as a country under colonial rule. In his own mind, the predilection towards conflict and war was inherent in the competitive inter-State system brought into being by the Westphalian peace of the 1648. Imperialism and colonialism followed from this same inter-State system. Thus, he was convinced that the struggle against colonial rule and for national independence must go hand in hand with the dismantling of the Westphalian State system, if peace has to prevail and the independence of nations assured. Thus Nehru observed in the most categorical terms:

“We shall have to put an end to nation states and devise a collectivism which neither degrades nor enslaves.”

The idea of One World had been germinating in Nehru's mind for several years during the period of India's freedom struggle. It derived from his study of world history and India's own history and its philosophical and spiritual traditions. In his interpretation, the Indian ideal of universal brotherhood or Vasudev Kutumbukam, the innate syncretism of its accommodative culture and the easy embrace of vast diversity with an underlying spiritual and cultural unity, all these were precisely the attributes that world must have to enable a new world order of free nations, living in peace and harmony with one another. But there was a more contemporary compulsion to promote One World. Nehru was ahead of his time in acknowledging that rapid and far-reaching technological change was blurring national and regional boundaries; that the world was shrinking into a shared neighbourhood and many of the challenges now facing countries could only be resolved in a spirit of collaboration. The dawn of the nuclear age further reinforced his commitment to One World; war was now unthinkable because it could lead to global annihilation. His dream for India was for a country at peace with itself, a democracy which guaranteed fundamental rights of the individual, allowed its citizens to pursue their own genius and a federation which gave expression to the ideal of unity amidst diversity. But Nehru also saw India's quest as part of a global quest for peace and development.

“And so we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams. These dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and people are too closely knit together today for any one of them to imagine that it can live apart. Peace has been said to be indivisible; so is freedom, so is prosperity now and so also is disaster in this One World that can no longer be split into isolated fragments.”

As the world today struggles to cope with the forces of terrorism, with the spreading pandemic of Ebola, the persisting consequences of the global financial and economic crisis, the intensifying impact of global Climate Change and many more such trans-national challenges, Nehru’s words appear prophetic.

It was in the Quit India resolution of 8 August, 1942, passed by the Congress Working Committee, that Nehru spelt out in some detail, the idea of One World and what it may look like. He drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi’s own belief in and commitment to the principle of non-violence and the need to ensure that means and ends were morally aligned. Even though there was a realistic acknowledgement that the ideal of One World would be a long and arduous quest, it was argued that it must nevertheless be articulated as a vision to aspire to if the world was to escape from the cycle of hatred, fear and destruction. The resolution states:

“The Committee is of the opinion that future peace, security and ordered progress of the world demand a world federation of free nations, and on no other basis can the problems of the world be solved. Such a federation would ensure the freedom of its constituent nations, the prevention of aggression and exploitation of one nation over another, the protection of national minorities, the advancement of all backward areas and peoples, and the pooling of the worlds’ resources for the common good of all. On the establishment of such a world federation, disarmament would be practicable in all countries, national armies, navies and air forces would no longer be necessary and a world federal defence force would keep the world peace and prevent aggression.”

Having outlined the contours of the proposed world order and its institutional make-up, the resolution nevertheless recognized its current impracticability in a world still beset with a raging war:

“The Committee regretfully recognizes, however, despite the tragic and overwhelming lessons of the war and the perils that overhang the world, the Governments of few countries are yet prepared to take this inevitable step towards world federation.”

India’s independence coincided with the efforts to build a post-war international order to promote lasting peace and security. This

provided Nehru with an opportunity to try and shape the United Nations as an initial building block of an eventual world federation. Despite some misgivings about various elements in the UN Charter, Nehru was an enthusiastic supporter of the new organization, accepting the structure of the UN Security Council with its veto for permanent members as temporary detraction from the democratic principle. He welcomed the UN as a forum where independent nations could meet and deliberate on global issues as equals. Despite the overweening power and influence of some of its members, he believed that the UN represented world public opinion and that in itself was a factor of restraint. Under his leadership, India launched into a most active phase of international diplomacy, which remains unmatched to this day. From the time he headed the interim government in 1946 and throughout the decade of the nineteen fifties, India put in a remarkably intense and focused effort into promoting universal, rule-based systems and norms at the United Nations, which could eventually lead towards the One World envisaged by him. The early phase coincided with the framing of India's own republican Constitution and Nehru consciously regarded this exercise as a template for the One World he had in mind.

An important part of this exercise was the incorporation of fundamental human rights in the Indian Constitution, even while India led a diplomatic offensive at the UN for the negotiation and adoption of Covenants of Universal Human Rights. In their original form, these were to be implemented through the UN Security Council, but later

the responsibility was assigned to the General Assembly. Due to East-West differences and mistrust and concerns over violations of national sovereignty, the idea of Covenants was initially given up in favour of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights though a Covenant was eventually adopted in 1966. But what is remarkable is the extent to which Nehru was willing to accept derogations from national sovereignty in order to promote his One World ideal. In his way of thinking, human rights of individuals, across national boundaries, had to be safeguarded and upheld by an international body in accordance with rules adopted by the comity of independent nations. Success in this endeavour could then be extended, step by step in other domains.

In playing this advocacy role, Nehru was conscious of the enormous challenge of building consensus in a world already fractured into opposing ideological and military blocs. There was a pressing need to generate a world-wide movement which would transcend this expanding polarization and enlarge the middle ground of peace and cooperation. Nehru worked for this on the regional and global tracks. A great believer in Asian resurgence and solidarity, he tried to mobilize the emerging countries of the continent in support of this ideal. At the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in March 1947, Nehru said,

“We have arrived at a stage in human affairs when the ideal of that “One World” or some kind of world federation seems to be essential though there may be many dangers and obstacles in the way. We

should work for that ideal and not any grouping which comes in the way of this larger world group. We therefore support the United Nations structure which is painfully emerging from its infancy, but in order to have “One World” we must also in Asia think of the countries of Asia cooperating together for that larger ideal”.

It is in these early years of India’s independence that the principle of non-alignment as the basis for India’s foreign policy began to emerge. In Nehru’s view, the only way in which India and the emerging countries could play the role of a reconciler, of a consensus and bridge-builder, was by keeping aloof from opposing ideological and military blocs. Non-alignment was a logical corollary. At the same time, Nehru did not want non-alignment to be interpreted in a negative sense. Thus, the five principles of Peaceful Coexistence or Panchsheel, which were adopted as part and parcel of the India-China agreement on Tibet in 1954 and elaborated at the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955, became, along with non-alignment, the instruments to advance the cause of One World. Non-alignment meant the rejection of competing ideological and military blocs. Peaceful coexistence meant the active pursuit of peace and cooperation, while respecting ideological differences and social systems among nations. In 1957, Nehru’s influence reached its apogee when the General Assembly adopted by consensus, and transcending the Cold War divide, a resolution incorporating the principles of peaceful coexistence and the need for all States,

members of the United Nations, to work together to actively strengthen international peace and develop cooperative relations.

In 1961, Nehru joined Yugoslavia's Tito, Egypt's Nasser, Ghana's Nkrumah and Cambodia's Sihanouk to establish the Non-Aligned movement, which turned India's own foreign policy choice into an international movement. Twenty five countries took part in that first Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade in September, 1961. This was an important building block in Nehru's conception of One World. It brought together the increasing number of newly independent countries into its fold, rejecting the Cold War and sharing a vision of equitable and just international order, which recognized the indivisibility of peace and prosperity. The Non-Aligned movement was visualized as a powerful support to the United Nations, generating a moral force and international public opinion in favour of the One World ideal. It worked on the basis of principles which could, one day, characterize a new world order.

Nehru did not believe that the One World which he visualized would be possible in the foreseeable future but he was convinced that overall historical trend was towards its realization. He was also conscious of the fact that current geopolitical realities may compel India to adopt policies which appeared contradictory to its professed adherence to the principles on which a new world order must be built. However, even in these instances he declared, the ideal must not be

lost sight of and faith in its eventual realization must remain undiminished.

In a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on October 13, 1949, Nehru spelt this out in some detail:

“ We have to achieve freedom and defend it. We have to meet aggression and resist it and the force employed must be adequate to the purpose. But even when preparing to resist aggression, the ultimate objective, the objective of peace and reconciliation must never be lost sight of and heart and mind must be attuned to this supreme aim and not swayed or clouded by hatred and fear.”

This nuanced distinction was always going to be difficult to maintain in practice and the 1962 Chinese attack against India in 1962 led Nehru himself to revise his views in significant ways. Confronted with what was then considered an existential crisis for the country, Nehru implicitly criticized his earlier advocacy of the One World concept in words of considerable sorrow and disillusionment:

“ We were living in a world of illusion...We were getting out of touch with reality in the modern world and living in an artificial world of our own creation. We have been shocked out of it”.

Perhaps the unexpected and traumatic turn of events may have swung the pendulum too far in reverse than may have been warranted but the fact is that the advocacy of One World soon lost its drive and energy thereafter and has been rarely articulated by any world leader after Nehru. What is noteworthy is that even while the One World concept receded into the background, some the building

blocks that Nehru put in place to promote its realization did survive and gain strength in the succeeding years. The Asian resurgence which he considered indispensable to the remaking of the world order is a reality even though it may be remaking the world in ways Nehru may not have been comfortable with. The Non-Aligned Movement survives as a pale shadow in the post-Cold War era but its rhetoric still resonates among developing countries across the world. India may now call itself multi-aligned or strategically autonomous but the fact is that few Indians would be comfortable with the idea of their country as a junior partner in a military alliance or acquiescing to the hegemony of another power. This is a part of Nehru's legacy as is a continuing commitment to multilateralism as a means of safeguarding and promoting India's interests. What is missing is the larger frame and world view in which Nehru tried to locate India's pursuit of its interests. Manu Bhagavan in his very informative study entitled *The Peacemakers*, points to a very telling political action taken in the aftermath of 1962, the adoption of the 16th amendment in 1963 to the Indian Constitution. As Bhagavan points out, the amendment retroactively added "specific language throughout the document to preserve and maintain the sovereignty and integrity of India." This objective now assumed priority over any other objective. The Westphalian state which Nehru had tried to move away from had reasserted itself.

Was Nehru a romantic idealist who exposed India to avoidable dangers in the pursuit of an unattainable One World ?

Does the idea of One World hold any contemporary relevance ?

Is there any merit in revisiting the ideal of One World as articulated by Nehru to refocus international attention on current global challenges and the need for collaborative responses to tackle them?

These are the questions which we need to answer today in reassessing Nehru's place in history.

While Nehru himself chose to abandon the pursuit of One World as unrealistic in the wake of Chinese aggression against India there were other causes for the India-China conflict. There was a fundamental misreading of Chinese perceptions concerning India after the Tibetan revolt of 1959 and the grant of asylum to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India. What were till then only border skirmishes to improve ground positions in advance of an eventual border settlement, took on a strategic character thereafter in Chinese perceptions. Indian actions at the border were increasingly regarded as a deliberate effort to undermine Chinese control over Tibet. This was also the period when Chairman Mao reasserted his supreme authority over the Party and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) after having been sidelined over the massive failures of the ill-conceived Great Leap Forward (1959-61). From about August 1962 it was he who was directly leading the policy on India and it is he who decided that the perceived Indian danger to Chinese control over Tibet had to be eliminated through a massive and debilitating attack on Indian forces across the border. These signals were missed by Nehru and

his civilian and military officials who were convinced that the skirmishes would never escalate into a full scale war. If Nehru had been given the right inputs and analyses of the situation after the changed environment post-1959, India may have been in a better position to deal with the Chinese threat. This was certainly a failure of Indian foreign policy for which he owned responsibility but had little to do with his advocacy of One World which was in any case conceived of as a long term goal not a current prescription. The advocacy of One World became a casualty of 1962. It was not its cause. Perhaps if Nehru had lived longer he may have recovered his faith in the ideal which to him was the future to aspire for. We will never know because he died in 1964 tortured by a sense of having failed his country and people. His advocacy of One World was sound and rooted in the rapidly changing global reality which the Westphalian state system could no longer deal with. It was unfortunate that the concept became suspect after the India-China war and the almost coincidental Cuban missile crisis, which brought the threat of a nuclear war terrifyingly close. In fact, on closer analysis, both pointed to the need for a restraining and reconciling entity that could prevent and mediate such threats to international peace and security, an entity that could only be a kind of world federation which transcended the existing inter-state system.

Does the concept of One World have any contemporary relevance and can it help find answers to some of the pressing global challenges humanity confronts today?

It was pointed out earlier that Nehru was ahead of his time in recognizing that technological and economic change had thrown up

challenges that were no longer amenable to purely national solutions. He also recognized that nations were likely to be impacted by forces beyond their control, no matter how rich and powerful they were. The threat of nuclear war was one such new reality, but it was also true that it would be impossible to sustain the prosperity of the few in a sea of dehumanizing poverty. Nations could no longer insulate themselves from what was happening outside their borders and it was only through collaborative efforts could such challenges be met. If we look at the world around us, Nehru's characterization of the new world is now apparent in a much more compelling manifestation. In the past half a century and more the salience of global and cross-cutting issues has been rising relentlessly. The global financial and economic crisis erupted in the U.S. but soon spread with lightning speed across the world. An Ebola virus infecting a handful of people in a remote African village threatens to become a global pandemic. Global Climate Change threatens the entire planet with an ecological disaster and national and regional actions are inadequate. Sectarian conflicts and terrorism are no longer confined within boundaries of sovereign states and those who seek to extract some short term gain by sponsoring such inimical forces are now being consumed by them. There are successes too, in some respects. After all ,older pandemics like small-pox and polio have been mostly eradicated through collaborative efforts among states. The danger from the depletion of the earth's ozone layer was met through commendable cooperation among states. Both successes and failures point to the urgent need to devise institutions and processes which align the

pursuit of national interests with the interests of humanity as a whole. Even if it is premature to talk of a world government, some platform for enabling global responses to global challenges is essential and this will inevitably require some derogation from the principle of absolute sovereignty that underlies the current state system. This is inherent in the Human Rights Covenant finally adopted in 1993 and the later principle of Right to Protect. However, it has to be admitted that these have been often implemented selectively and even as instruments of realpolitik rather than in defense of the weak and vulnerable.

Most cross-cutting challenges we confront today cannot be dealt with through mechanisms that are inherent in an inter-state system. These mechanisms entail negotiations wherein each state endeavours to concede as little as possible and extract as much advantage as it can. Such negotiating dynamics can at best yield a least common denominator result when what we often need is a maximal cooperative effort. The Climate emergency that we face today is a case in point as is the ongoing global financial and economic crisis. In tackling its own apparently domestic crisis each country is pursuing policies which cumulatively make the global crisis worse. Take another example from the new cyber domain. It is an indispensable domain to virtually all human and economic activity and yet it remains anarchic. Cyber security has become a most pressing concern and yet there is hardly any effort towards setting internationally accepted norms and rules of the game. The UN would have been the logical place to attempt such efforts but the general trend is towards marginalizing the UN rather than empowering it. Nehru died before

the age of information technology and the internet. Yet he was remarkably prescient in visualizing a world in which technological change would render the prevailing system of sovereign states increasingly incapable of tackling emerging challenges. Therefore his conception of One World does have a strong resonance today and deserves to be revisited and refined in the light of recent developments.

Why did Nehru believe that his country India was uniquely placed to champion the idea of One World? His study of Indian history and philosophy convinced him that India was a cosmopolitan culture, created layer upon layer, by its location at the cross-roads of the caravan routes from Central Asia and the maritime routes both East and West of peninsular India. India had, like other ancient civilizations, its ups and downs in history, but had never lost its sense of identity . The emergence of India as an independent country, Nehru was convinced, provided a historic opportunity to help reshape the world using principles derived from India's philosophical and spiritual legacy.

There is a certain revisionism one witnesses today casting doubt on Nehru's love for India and his dreams for her future. I wish to end with a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, which is a most eloquent tribute to his mother country but also a most perceptive description of its civilisational quality:

“ And yet India with all her poverty and degradation had enough of nobility and greatness about her and though she was overburdened

with ancient tradition and present misery, and her eyelids were a little weary, she had a beauty wrought from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Behind and within her battered body one could glimpse a majesty of soul. Through long ages she had travelled and gathered much wisdom on the way, and trafficked with strangers and added them to her own big family and witnessed days of glory and of decay and suffered humiliations and terrible sorrow, and seen many a strange sight; but throughout her long journey she had clung to her immemorial culture, drawn strength and vitality from it, and shared it with other lands.”

Words to remember as we honour the memory of an extraordinary human being, statesman and a fine leader of his people.