

Denying Nehru his due

Were ancient Indian polities democratic, democracy thus representing India's enduring culture? And what was Jawahar Lal Nehru's role in institutionalising democracy?



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In his widely noted parliament speech on February 7, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) made the following claim about India's democracy. "India did not get democracy due to Pandit Nehru, as Congress wants us to believe.

Please look at our rich history. There are many examples of rich democratic traditions that date back centuries ago. Democracy is integral to this nation and is in our culture.” Modi called attention to the ancient Indian polities, especially those inspired by the Buddh paramapara (Buddhist tradition). He concluded that “loktantra hamaari ragon mein hai” (democracy is in our blood).

How valid are these claims? Two analytically distinguishable issues require discussion. Were ancient Indian polities democratic, democracy thus representing India’s enduring culture? And what was Nehru’s role in institutionalising democracy?

To answer these questions, we need to start with a conceptual question: What is democracy? For at least two and a half centuries scholars have debated democracy. Two conceptions of democracy have emerged: A narrower concept, and a broader one.

‘Kashmir Issue’ Gifted By First PM Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress:

Shivraj Chouhan

The narrower concept is purely electoral. It focuses on (a) contestation and (b) participation. The first means the capacity of political parties freely to contest the incumbent government in elections. The second points to adult universal franchise. The right to vote should not depend on caste, creed, race, ethnicity, income, gender or religion.

The broader notion of democracy goes beyond elections. It also speaks of politics between elections. Special note is taken of three freedoms — freedom of speech, freedom of religious practice, and freedom of association — without which everyday politics can become authoritarian, despite free elections.

In what sense were ancient Indian polities democratic? Did they satisfy the narrow conception, let alone the broader one? Did they have elected governments? How widespread was the franchise? One can indeed find polities in ancient India where kings bound themselves to assemblies and debates. But kings were unelected, and very few subjects had the privilege of participating in political debates.

That there was discussion and debate (charchaa and vichaar vimarsh, as Modi put it) in several ancient Indian polities is beyond doubt, but democracy goes beyond such constrained contestation. Some scholars have used terms like “oligarchies” for systems that encouraged limited assembly and debate, but didn’t have elected governments or broad citizen participation.

The “democracies” of the ancient city-states of Greece also had this problem. While going quite far towards popular constraints on governments, they excluded women and slaves from their assemblies.

Indeed, as late as the 19th century, the idea that everyone should have the

right to political participation had few takers. Europe accorded the right to vote on the basis of property, education and gender, for it was believed that only the propertied and educated men had the rational capacities to vote. Women and the poor did not. Nineteenth century democracy satisfied only one half of the narrower concept of democracy: Contestation. Universal participation was an anathema.

Rahul Denies Enmity Between Nehru, Patel, Slams BJP

Consider, also, the claims of John Stuart Mill, arguably the father of modern liberalism. In the 1860s, he wrote that (a) for their political enhancement, the Scots and Welsh in Britain required England's tutelage, and the Basques and Bretons in France would benefit from Parisian cultural tuitions, and (b) while white British colonies deserved democratic government, non-white colonies did not. As Uday Singh Mehta argues in *Liberalism and Empire*, Mill viewed white colonies as "of similar civilisation to the ruling country, capable of representative government: Such as the British possessions in America and

Australia”. And non-white colonies included “others, like India (that) are still at a great distance from that state”. The latter deserved colonial tutelage, not democracy.

Claims about differential worth of human beings were also present in India, especially taking the form of the caste system. To talk about India’s ancient democracies, as Modi did, and ignore the caste system, legitimated by the Manusmriti dating back to the 2nd century BC, a text that heaps indignities on the “lower” castes, can’t be called a plausible claim about democracy being “integral to Indian culture”. Caste inequalities were also in India’s blood. There is much to be proud of in ancient India, especially its scientific discoveries such as the decimal system and the heliocentric view of the planetary system, but democracy was not one of them.

Nehru departed from the old prejudices. He contended that universal franchise, including poor and rich, educated and uneducated, men and women, upper and lower castes, was based on the great 20th-century premise that “each person should be treated as having equal political and social value”. Nehru also endorsed the broader freedoms: “Civil liberty is not merely for us an airy doctrine or a pious wish, but something which we consider essential for the orderly development and progress of the nation”. This was the reason why, despite admiring the Soviet Union for its economic achievements in the 1930s and 1940s, he would claim that “Communism, for all its triumphs in many fields, crushes the free spirit of man”.

Modi is right to say that Nehru alone did not produce India’s democracy. In the Constituent Assembly, there was no great resistance to the idea of universal franchise. But Nehru and Ambedkar led the argument about citizen equality as a foundation for the new polity. Despite his differences with Ambedkar, Gandhi also believed in such equality, but his life’s energies were focused on securing India’s freedom, not on the post-Independence

constitution or polity.

Consider an analogy. If Modi is able to give the gift of a swachh Bharat (clean India) to Gandhi on his 150th birthday in 2019, as he promised from the Red Fort in 2014, he will be called the architect of swachh Bharat, though thousands of his colleagues have worked on the project. Leadership matters.

Nehru has a similar relationship with democracy (as does Ambedkar with the Constitution). Without the first three universal-franchise elections — 1952, 1957, 1962 — under Nehru's leadership, when democracies were collapsing in developing countries, it is hard to imagine the institutionalisation of democracy in India. Ancient polities did not create, or sustain, India's post-1947 democracy.

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