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Rise and Demise of Nehruvian Consensus: A Historical Review

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Abstract

The scholarly terrain of this article charts a course from the making of Nehruvian consensus to the present times. In the true spirit of a social conciliator, Nehru created a system of governance that eschewed left and right extremism. It is this system that is popularly known as Nehruvian Consensus. The mainstream argument is that the old Nehruvian consensus has collapsed but there is no consensus capable of replacing it. This may be true of Nehruvian secularism on which there was a weak consensus right from the beginning, but we must not commit the fallacy of confusing what is true of a part with what is true of the whole. There exists alternative consensus in case of economic policy and conduct of centre-state relations whereas in the case of foreign policy the *form* may have changed but the *substance* remains the same. Surprisingly, democracy in India remains resilient in spite of the crisis.

Key Words: Nehruvian Consensus, Nation building, Democracy, Party system, Economic Planning, Socialism, Industrialization, Modernization, Secularism, Economic Reforms, Foreign Policy, Non-Alignment

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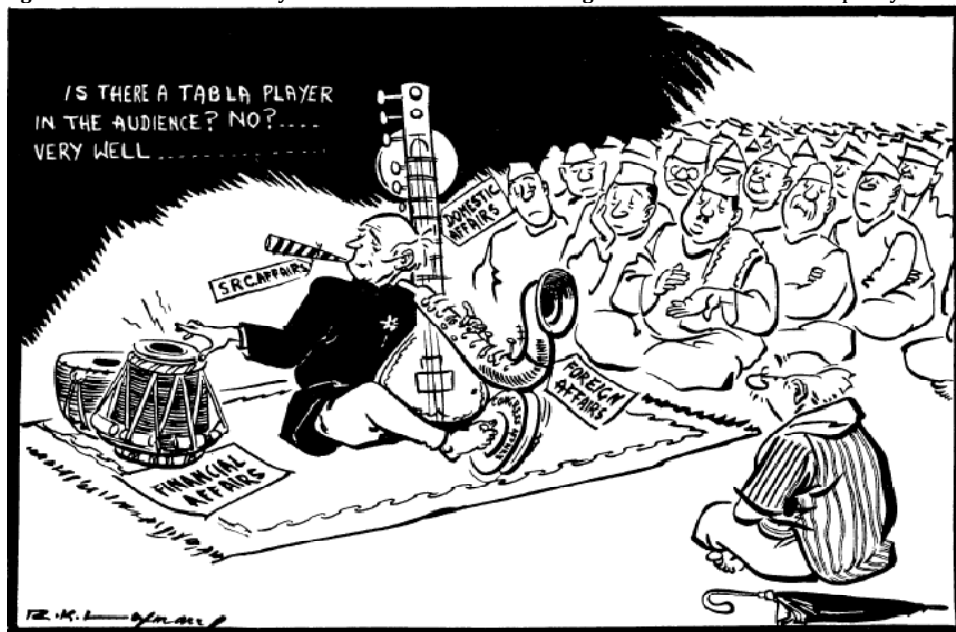
Introduction

After independence, Jawaharlal Nehru began the ambitious and formidable project of India's modernization and nation building. This postcolonial project was based on his ideas of democratic socialism, secularism, agrarian redistribution, planned economy, rapid industrialization and non-alignment. As the "national philosophy"¹ created by Nehru resonated deeply with the prevailing commonsense of the epoch, there emerged what has been retrospectively termed as the 'Nehruvian Consensus'.

The expression 'Nehruvian consensus' reflects the dominance of Nehruvian ideals and vision over the alternative discourses regarding the preferred principles of political, social and economic restructuring of postcolonial India. This dominance was a product of Nehru's personality cult and associated statism, that is, the overarching faith in the state and the leadership. The English speaking 'progressive' elite demonstrated a natural affinity for centralized government control as a means to achieve Nehruvian goals of social justice, secularism, and economic growth. The 'steel frame' of the 'enlightened technocratic bureaucracy' became, by default, a vehicle for the 'activist state'.

In order to go beyond the very general meaning of the term it is important to understand what it *does not* mean. The term Nehruvian Consensus *does not* imply absence of opposition to the Nehru's vision because there existed many alternative visions such as Gandhian, Patelite, Ambedkarite etc in addition to the varieties of vernacular world views.² The only implication of the term is that the proponents of the alternative discourses could not challenge the supremacy of Nehruvian ideas during the long inning of the Nehru era. The success of Nehruvianism was partly because of Nehru's unmatched popularity as a mass leader and partly because of his 'inclusionary strategies' that pacified the 'significant others' who had political differences with him.

Figure1: A famous cartoon by R. K. Lakshman demonstrating Nehru's dominance over policy making



The term also *does not* imply that all the components of the so called 'Nehruvian Consensus' were exactly as Nehru would have wished them to be. In fact, Nehruvian consensus in many crucial areas [as demonstrated in the third part] was a product of intense bargaining with and eventual accommodation of the influential interest groups, somewhat to Nehru's own discomfiture.

Rest of the article is divided into three sections. First section reveals the processes and critical junctures that led to the emergence of what has retrospectively been termed as Nehruvian Consensus. Second section details the key components of the so called Nehruvian Consensus. The third section spells out the processes and conjunctures that led to the erosion of various components of the Nehruvian consensus and critically focuses on the state of Indian economy and polity after the breakdown of the Nehruvian consensus.

Making of the Consensus: Processes and Critical Junctures

There are many watershed moments or critical junctures that, in conjunction with other processes of change, established distinct trajectories during crucial transition periods. The first such moment was the participation of the INC in the provincial elections of 1936-37 mandated by the Government of India Act 1935. It was during these provincial elections that the conservative elements increased their influence by replenishing the INC's financial resources which it required to contest elections. The rise of the conservatives [capitalists and peasant proprietors] altered the character of the INC as it forced Nehru to make compromises and dilute his stance on socialism, secularism and land reforms. This laid the foundations of a centrist and accommodative politics of the Congress Party (Baker 1976; Tomlinson 1976). Thus, quite paradoxically, the consensual approach itself made the Nehruvian consensus quite fragile and open to manipulation by various interest group coalitions.

The consensus on secularism in India was also influenced by two defining moments. These were: the crisis of partition [1946-48] and death of Mahatma Gandhi [1948]. In the aftermath of traumatic communal holocaust during partition the Hindu nationalists became more vocal and assertive. RSS leaders tried to influence politics in a Congress Party dominated by a rightist Vallabhbhai Patel (Andersen 1972). However, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by

a Hindu fanatic gave a big jolt to Hindu Communal forces. When the RSS was disbanded in July 1949, Patel, a political foil to Nehru, acquiesced. Patel was an odd man out in the Gandhian apotheosis, while Nehru was acclaimed as the father of the nation in succession to Mahatmaji (Spear 1967). This bolstered the modern secularist ‘consensus.’

Thirdly, the consensus on the federal system in India was determined by those critical moments in the evolution of INC when it stood for the principled opposition to the British conception of federalism, as contained in the Montague-Chelmsford report, 1918; the Simon Commission report, 1929; and the Government of India Act 1935. The INC refused to integrate the word federal into the 1935 constitution (Mathew and Jain 2005). In fact, the Nehru report, 1928, had already envisaged a government structure that was unitary rather than federal in form (Jalal 2000). Furthermore, the anti-separatist sentiments after 1946 led to rejection of idea of more subnational autonomy.

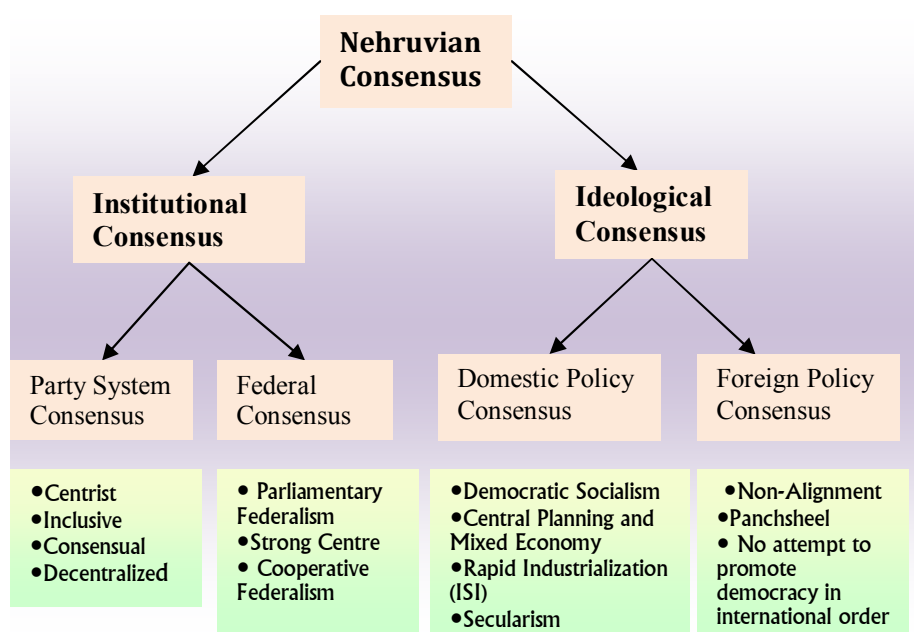
Finally, the consensus on Nehruvian socialism and central planning was created through five factors: “[a] political socialization as a product of Nehru’s attempt at building a ‘national philosophy’ [b] national problems like poverty and underdevelopment demanding state activism; [c] dependence of the nascent industrial bourgeoisie on the central state for the inputs needed for industrialization; [d] the presence of the Soviet Union as a success story demonstrating the virtues of a centrally planned command economy; and [e] contemporaneous academic theories in favor of a centrally planned economy as a development paradigm for developing countries” (Sharma 2011).

However, the exact manner in which the so called ‘Nehruvian socialism’ and the mixed economy model of centrally planned development was operationalized was determined initially by a serious domestic economic crisis at the eve of Indian independence and finally by a Balance of Payment [BOP] crisis in 1957. The crisis at the eve of independence was rapidly intensifying due to divestment by foreign business from their holdings in India and halting of domestic investment. Thus, liberal Industrial Policy resolution was adopted in 1948 to temper the growing fears of indigenous and foreign investors. On February 17, 1948, Nehru strongly opposed a resolution in the Constituent Assembly that endorsed “a socialist path for economic development.”³ Thus, Nehru demonstrated his willingness to compromise socialism for the expansion of private enterprise. However, the generosity towards the private sector led to an “unanticipated growth in private sector investment, which took planners by surprise” (Lewis 1962). This produced the BOP crisis of 1957. As a consequence Nehru turned Indian economy towards *import substitution industrialization* [ISI], introduced foreign exchange budgeting and resolved to expand the public sector.

Key Features of Nehruvian Consensus

In general parlance only ideological consensus (comprising socialism, secularism and non alignment) is discussed under the rubric of Nehruvian consensus. However, there is another component called institutional consensus (Kothari 1969). The institutional consensus was articulated around the party system and the federal system [see Figure 2].

Figure 2: Key Components of Nehruvian Consensus



Centrist, All-inclusive, Consensual and Decentralized Party Structure

The rejection of the Gandhian model of party-less democracy was a foregone conclusion after independence. Thus, the Nehruvian consensus on party system took shape within the framework of a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. The consensus was in the favour of making the Congress party a true model of institutional recognition and accommodation of the diversity of Indian society.

This centrist, all inclusive, consensual and decentralized party structure had many important features such as accommodation of diverse interests, groups and ideologies (left and right) and negotiating differences with them; respectful recognition to the rights of expression of the opposition; engaging the opposition MPs in governance of the country; allowing the state-level political officials to influence the national policy making process and have independent power bases in their respective states; and no interfere with elections of party leadership at the state-level.

The most important part of the consensus was that none of the above mentioned features should in any case diminish the authority of the central government.

Centre led Cooperative Parliamentary Federalism

At Indian independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, overrode Gandhi's goal of a decentralized (village-based) federation. In other words, he replaced the Gandhian ideal of bottom-up sovereignty with his vision of monopoly sovereignty (Rudolph and Rudolph 2010). There were prolonged debates in the Constituent Assembly on the issue of federalism. Ultimately, there was a consensus on what Jennings called "a federation with strong centralizing tendencies" (Jennings 1953). Thus, India was described as a 'Union of States.'

This is not to argue that the framing fathers of the Indian constitution had embraced a purely centralized structure, yet they considered a strong Centre, an imperative necessity to keep the country together. Thus, the consensus was on a cooperative federalism led by a strong centre.

The key concern was to accomplish the twin tasks of national integration and accommodation of linguistic and cultural identities. Nehru also believed that a centralized direction was required for success of policies like democratic socialism, agrarian redistribution, and a planned economy (Singh and Verney 2003). The concern for national unity and integrity was shared by the Indian big bourgeoisie who considered any attempt at the 'balkanisation' of India as a threat to homogenous market.

Centrally Planned Mixed Economy Model

Nehru closely intertwined the concept of political independence with the concept of economic independence. Thus, there emerged a consensus on the need for creating a self reliant economy through centralized planning and government intervention along Keynesian lines. The nationalist leaders, intellectuals, and businessmen agreed "that laissez-faire was the root of all evil and central planning the new panacea" (Lal 2005).

Since Nehru's goal, after independence, was to bring India into the modern world and not to establish a socialist state *per se*, he was willing to compromise the 'ideological consensus' on socialism for the perceived benefit of the country (Gopal 1980). As business groups played a significant role in early economic policy making, Nehru often referred to his own 'non-doctrinaire' version of socialism. Nehru emphasized the creation of a socialistic pattern of society,⁴ which was nothing but a mixture of Fabian-style central planning and free enterprise.

As noted in an earlier section, it was only after the BOP crisis of 1957 that India turned towards import substitution industrialization [ISI] and foreign exchange budgeting. Even then, the direct foreign investment regime remained quite open until at least the mid-1960s because Nehru appreciated the need for foreign capital and technology (Panagariya 2008). He never conceded to the demands for the ouster of multinationals by the Left parties.

Thus, the Nehruvian consensus advocated a 'mixed' economy model for India. It incorporated the elements of capitalism to solve the problem of production and the essentials of socialism to solve the problem of redistribution.

Land Reforms

The leaders of the freedom movement popularized the themes of land reforms and 'land to the tiller.' After independence also there was a concern about the oppressive and outmoded agrarian structure. This concern translated into a consensus in the favour of transformation of backward agrarian structure because it was felt that land reforms were needed to diminish inequality and poverty. Land reforms could be brought from below either through persuasion of landlords or through militant peasant action. The former was attempted but proved unfeasible while the latter was unacceptable.

So the consensus was to bring about 'land reforms from above' through land legislation, drafted by the central government, enacted by the state government and implemented by the local bureaucracy. Thus, a comprehensive policy based on the Nehruvian consensus on the objectives of land reforms was worked out. It had features like, Zamindari abolition, ceilings on agricultural holdings and redistribution of land, abolition of intermediaries, tenancy reforms and updating of land records. However, land reform policies in India, since the Nehru era, have remained conspicuous only by the failures of implementation.

Democratic Socialism

Nehruvian vision of democracy was to combine political, civil and cultural freedom with social and economic freedom. Thus, Nehru presented democracy as 'Democratic Socialism' with a distinctive content of Socialism and a strong element of Gandhian principles and methods. This amalgam of ideas was contained in the 1928 Nehru Constitutional Draft and the 1931 Karachi Resolution on Fundamental Rights. However, in the constitution of Independent India, adopted on 26 Nov. 1949, the political, civil, and cultural rights were mentioned in part III under the title of 'Fundamental Rights' and social and economic rights were placed in part IV entitled 'Directive Principles of State Policy'. Though the former are justiciable and the latter are general guidelines for governments with no legal sanction, yet the latter are no less important. In fact, the report of the sub-committee on fundamental rights referred to the directive principles as 'fundamental in the governance of the country' (Rao 1967).

Simultaneous Realization of Democracy and Development

The Nehruvian brand of parliamentary democracy was unique not only because it contained the distinctive content of socialism but also because of its close alliance with the goals of rapid industrialization and high rate of economic growth. The combination of industrialization and democratization was an innovative feature of the Nehruvian model because the initial take-off in terms of industrial and economic growth in almost all the countries, such as, the United States, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, etc., happened in the absence of democracy. Thus, many observers believed that the Nehruvian democracy will fail because India lacked the basic conditions for sustaining democracy, viz., industrialization, urbanization, and high educational and living standards.

However, the high degree of legitimacy of the state and its leadership provided the Nehruvian model of democracy the rare capacity to survive in the absence of basic economic conditions associated with the existence and stability of democratic society.⁵ This legitimacy was a product of the way in which the INC tended to accommodate, rather than override, challenges from regional, religious, and linguistic protest movements making the so called Congress system a foundation for a consociational grand coalition' (Lijphart 1999).

The Nehruvian framework of development was based on the belief that simultaneous realization of democratization and economic development [industrialization, urbanization etc.] by an activist state is not only possible but the twin processes will also lead to the establishment of a modern, secular society.

Establishment of a modern society within a secular democratic state through industrialization and urbanization

The aim of the Nehruvian secularist programme was to defeat the disintegrating forces such as communalism, casteism, provincialism and separatism.⁶ This was an integral part of his nation building project which aimed at achieving modernization and promotion of a shared national identity and culture based on Indian citizenship.

The Nehruvian consensus on secularism was a conceptual combination of Gandhian religious secularism and Nehruvian rational secularism. However, it was not just a merger of Religious Reformation and Modern Enlightenment but also included new emergent ideas. According to Nehru, the concept of secularism means, "freedom of religion and conscience including freedom for those who have no religion, subject only to their not interfering with each other or with the basic conceptions of our state... The word secular, however, conveys something much more to me, although that might not be its dictionary meaning. It conveys the idea of social and political equality. Thus, a caste-ridden society is not properly secular" (Nehru 1955).

Nehru's vision of secularism was inseparably intertwined not only with the ideals such as liberalism, individualism, rationalism and universalism but also with the Nehruvian framework of development. Nehru believed that the processes of industrialization and urbanization will transform the pre-modern social arrangements into secular, class-like, associational groupings.

Nehru considered the establishment of the scientific institutions [like IITs and CSIR etc] as an antidote to superstition, religion, rumor and myth. It was in this sense that Nehru referred to steel mills and dams as 'the temples of modern India.' Thus, while upholding the ideal of secularism, he did not bother to really concretise the idea in terms of offering practical solution to the problems of caste and communalism. For example, how to ensure secular governance in a society where one or more religions preach intolerance rather than co-existence?

Nehru mobilized large sections of progressive intellectuals in support of the view that modernization was required to transform the pre-modern social relations based on ascriptive group identities. Though the English speaking elite demonstrated a natural affinity for the Nehruvian ideals of modern, secular society, yet, such ideas could not penetrate the mass political culture which took shape under the influence of vernacular politics of community, caste, region and religion. That is why Kaviraj has stated that India's modernist state had "feet of vernacular clay" (Kaviraj 1984).

Foreign Policy Consensus

The Nehruvian consensus on foreign policy was based on the ideals such as maintenance of sovereignty of nation states, anti-imperialism, positive neutrality, mutual peace and non interference. Note that though Nehru had to accommodate diverse interests for creating consensus on all areas of domestic political and economic governance, he was relatively unconstrained in foreign policy making.

First important feature of foreign policy was the Non-Alignment. This policy aimed at the avoidance of military, political, or economic ties with either of the two power blocs of the Cold War world, enhancing India's international prestige as a key spokesperson for the unaligned countries of Asia and Africa and extracting aid and trade benefits from the rival East – West power blocs.

Second feature was Nehru's advocacy of Panchsheel. It included five pillars of mutual restraint, intended to be used as a guide for Sino-Indian relations. These were: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; equality and mutual benefit; peaceful co-existence. Nehru believed that an environment of peace and solidarity with neighbours will enable India to focus on national economic development rather than dedicating scarce resources for building up military capabilities. However, the humiliating defeat in 1962 war with China encouraged India to expand defense spending.

The third feature of Nehruvian consensus on foreign policy was to avoid any attempt to promote democracy in the international order (Muni 2009). This policy was a part of India's commitment and advocacy of the principle of non-interference which India wanted to secure for itself in the case of Kashmir conflict. Note that in the 1950s, the Indian government supported a number of anti-colonial liberation movements in Asia and Africa. However, the motivation was not to support democratic structures but rather to enforce independence from colonial rule. India made no attempt to promote democracy in Bhutan and Burma. India did intervene in Nepal in the 1950s, however, from Nehru's speech to the Indian Parliament in December 1950, it was clear that the motive was to promote peace, security and stability in the neighbourhood rather than democratic development in Nepal (Nehru 1961).

Unmaking of the Nehruvian Consensus and Thereafter

The Political System

After Nehru there was a complete reversal of the nature of party politics in India. Mrs. Gandhi's over-centralization of the party-politics and the policy-making process destroyed the consensual character of the Congress party and brought about its deinstitutionalization (Dua 1985;Kaviraj 1986;Kochanek 1976). She resorted to the politics of direct, populist, and plebiscitary appeals and decided to hold national and state-level polls at different times.

Thus, beginning from the Indira era, Nehru style, democratic politics, which was based on compromise and conciliation, lost its relevance and utility. Post Nehru politics became a business and an art of maneuvering, just to win election. All other parties adapted to this shift in the democratic politics as the electoral competition came to be based, not on policies and performance, but on emotive slogans and populist promises.

The declaration of Emergency in 1975, a major breach in the ideal of democracy, exacerbated the breakdown of Nehruvian consensus. In the absence of a spirit of consensus, Indira's overcentralization alienated and subsequently politicized those social groups who believed their voices were being ignored. However, the party retained the dominant status at the national level. The one dominant party system came to an end in 1989.

The post 1989 politics, completely bereft of a nation-wide consensus on a value system, witnessed the political brinkmanship of the lowest order. The Vohra Committee Report, 1993 found that the criminal network was running a parallel government in India. The rise of criminalization of politics in

India can be traced to mutually reinforcing factors such as the end of the charismatic leadership, delegitimization of the state and the deterioration of party politics.

Nature of Federal Governance

The shift in the party system towards a regionalized multi-party coalition system has altered the consensus on the nature of federalism in India. This substantiates William Riker's thesis that a federal system parallels a change in the party system.

Note that as late as 1988 the first Commission on Centre-State Relations (Sarkaria Commission, 1988) reiterated the paramountcy of the Centre to coordinate policy and action between the Union and the States on basic issues of national concern. However, the 73rd and 74th Amendments, deregulation, disinvestment, and indicative planning etc have eroded Central powers.

Furthermore, with a notable rise in the representation of the regional parties in the national legislature, the consensus on the strong centre led cooperative federalism has broken down. The earlier obsession with the principle of a 'strong Centre vis-a-vis the States' is gone. In the present state of federal politics, it is the State parties which are calling the shots. Thus, there has been a greater trend towards *de facto* decentralization. The positive feature of this scenario is that the centre no longer makes any arbitrary attempt to destabilize the elected state governments by imposing the President's rule.

The Development Strategy

The Nehruvian consensus on development strategy was seriously questioned in the face of stagnating industrial growth rates, declining agricultural output and rising inflation during the mid-1960s. Thus, immediately after Nehru's demise, PM Shastri started the process of economic liberalization and increased focus on the agriculture sector. Mrs. Gandhi carried forward the process but her devaluation package and trade liberalization failed to deliver (see Sharma 2011 for details).

Thereafter, Mrs. Gandhi turned towards the rhetoric of socialism. This however was a drift away from the Nehruvian ideal because she used the popular appeal of socialism for personalization of power and building of political cartel rather than for economic development. Note that the economic policy-making in the Nehru era was free from narrow political considerations (Balakrishnan 2007). However, Indira Gandhi used it for purely partisan purposes. Thus, she eventually degraded Nehru's democratic socialism into the License-Permit-Quota Raj.

During her comeback in 1980, Mrs. Gandhi abandoned radical socialism and embraced Indian capital as the main ruling ally (Kohli 2006). Her son Rajiv Gandhi openly committed his government to a new policy of economic liberalization in 1985 (Kohli 1991). However, it was the massive macroeconomic crisis of 1990-1991 and the consequent economic reforms that damaged the intellectual coherence and precision of the logic that justified Nehruvian socialism and central planning.

At present there is a consensus against the statist, centrally directed, excessively dirigiste, inward looking, protectionist closed and command economy in India. This consensus has been accompanied by a "homegrown version" of economic reforms where there is no public movement in favor of imposing cuts on welfare provisions by the government [as it happened in the UK and the USA]. The new consensus favours economic reforms with crisis proofing and measures to empower the poor (see Sharma 2011 for details).

Land Reforms

The consensus on land reforms eroded even before it could be operationalized. Nehru himself presided over the breakdown of consensus on land reforms as he could not withstand the opposition to his proposed policies from the landowning rural elites and the conservative right wing lobby within the Congress. According to Bardhan (Bardhan 1984), the Congress party, while trying to represent the interests of the nation as a whole, came to be influenced disproportionately by 'proprietary classes.' The Congress party incorporated landed interests into the body politic because it depended on upper caste, landowning groups for maintaining support base in the countryside (Frankel 2005).

Thus, land reforms under Nehru failed to ensure the rights of tenants and redistribution of land to the rural landless (Herring 1983). Overall, the land reform policy faltered in most States because of the callousness of the State governments and poor quality of peripheral bureaucracy (Myrdal 1968). Nehru himself admitted that the basic social engineering schemes like land reforms had turned out to be a joke (Gopal 1980). This failure sabotaged the elite project of social transformation.

During Indira Gandhi's rule, focus shifted from land reforms to Green Revolution. As the land reform project was completely abandoned, there was rural unrest called 'Naxalite Movement' in late 60s. In response, Mrs. Gandhi convened a meeting in 1972 at which a consensus was arrived at to reduce land ceiling and to introduce family-based ceiling on land, tenancy reform and other similar measures.⁷ However, the policies were not properly implemented and the big landowners restored to partitions and fictitious transfers in benami names on a very large scale.

In the era of economic reforms the emphasis has shifted from 'state-led land redistribution' to the 'Market-led land reforms.' The WB-IMF sponsored neoliberal package on land reforms aims at linking land to financial markets; facilitating productivity-enhancing exchanges of land in rental and sales markets; and most importantly, making it easier for industry to set up factories.

Secular Nationalism

It may be mentioned at the outset that Nehruvian secularism was built on weak foundations. Though many steps were taken to prevent alienation of Muslim community and win their trust,⁸ yet nothing was done to promote social cohesion in the country as such. Note that the government-appointed Sachar Commission, 2006, found that Muslims in India were worse off as compared to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This shows that preoccupation with the politics of identity and recognition has done nothing to redress socio-economic and political causes of hostility and material inequalities. For the same reason, the so called protective discrimination regime for the SCs and STs has failed to address the enormous social and economic disparities that plague India's inegalitarian social order (Weiner 2001).

In the late 1960s, the Nehruvian goal of building a modern secular brand of nationalism fell in tatters as the leaders, especially at the state level, began political mobilization along regional, sectarian, and caste identities. With the emergence of 'political demand groups,' regional parties and regional power brokers, Indian secularism was caught in a downward spiral of decline.

Far from making an attempt to reverse the decline of secularism in India, the Congress party further jeopardized the Nehruvian ideal of a secular state by embracing right-leaning Hindu nationalism in the 1980s. This phase of communalism culminated in the Operation Bluestar of 1984, followed by the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards triggering anti-sikh riots from 31 October 1984 – 3 November 1984.

The next major and radical break with the Nehruvian consensus happened in the 1990s with the rise of the Hindu right culminating in the demolition of the Babri-mosque in the town of Ayodhya in 1992.⁹ The Mandal agitation increased political consciousness among the low castes but at the same time brought a divisive agenda to the forefront. Overall, there has been a high degree of politicization of communal and caste cleavages since the 1990s. The Godhra Train Burning by radical Islamic mob provoking communal Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002 is another blot in the history of Indian secularism. The rise of Hindu terrorist groups, as evident from the Malegaon blast of 2008, is another threat to be wary about. Such centrifugal threats have badly ruptured the secular fabric of Indian Republic. The deterioration of identitarian politics into identitarian violence and militarization of conflicts signifies not just a crisis of Nehruvian secularism but is symptomatic of a greater malice called 'the crisis of governance.'

Foreign Policy

The story of the erosion of the Nehruvian consensus on foreign policy began with India's defeat at the hands of China in 1962. This had far reaching consequences. Firstly, it 'diluted' the moral tone with which Indian foreign policy was conducted in the 1950s. Secondly, it led India to tone down its avowed commitment to non-alignment in favour of an informal alliance with the USSR. The Indo-Pak war of 1965, the termination of aid by USA and failure of the 1966 liberalization reinforced this informal alliance. India developed closer ties with the Soviet Union after the 1971 war, in which the U.S. had supported Pakistan. Finally, and most importantly, it brought India's military weakness into a sharp focus and created a consensus in favour of more military power which culminated in the 1974 'Smiling Buddha' test at Pokhran. New Delhi's 'Pokhran II tests' in 1998 were, in the words of Jaswant Singh a mark of "the transition...from the moralistic to the realistic" (Chengappa and Joshi 1998). However, we must not get carried away by such sharp distinctions. In fact, Nehruvian policy was not completely bereft of realism and pragmatism (Noorani 2006), it was a mix of moralism and realism with a high dose of the former. In the post Nehru era the shift has been towards the latter without discarding the former.

Two major events that gave a serious jolt to the Nehruvian foreign policy were the end of the Cold War and the economic crisis of 1991. Former contributed to India's external security dilemma and the latter shocked India into a free market economy. Both these events overturned the logic that supported the pursuit of foreign policy goals such as non alignment and national economic sovereignty. India not only moved closer to the United States but also embraced the Washington consensus based globalization. The U.S. decision to demand withdrawal of Pakistan from the Line of Control during the 1999 Kargil War further repaired India's relations with Washington.

Clearly, the emergence of the so called uni-polar world has made it difficult for India to pursue non-alignment in the sense in which it was pursued during the Cold War period, yet, India has not forsaken the philosophy that formed the essence and the spirit of NAM.

The objectives that encouraged India to maintain its distance from entangling alliances are still guiding Indian Foreign policy. These are: denial of a junior partner relationship with any country or bloc of countries, building up of bargaining power with the external world, mobilization of "Third World" coalitions, increasing influence in international diplomacy, and developing institutional clout at the United Nations. The Prime Minister I.K. Gujral added the goal of developing leadership in *South Asia*¹⁰, and the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh added another goal of becoming a major global power in the *world economy*¹¹. Thus, "India's participation in South-South cooperation, IBSA, BRICS and increasing interest in the ASEAN as well as the look East policy all appear to be under the rubric of nonalignment and opposition to big power hegemonic dominance" (Mukherjee 2012).

Another change since the 1990s is that India has started participating in the promotion of democracy, underlining its global responsibility and ambitions as a major power. However, India is very defensive in this regard. India seeks to promote democracy through bilateral development cooperation rather than through the participation in economic sanction (Wagner 2009).

Summing Up

A study of different components of Nehruvian consensus shows that for Pandit Nehru, democracy provided an environment conducive to the realization of the goals of social justice, secularism, and economic growth. As a democrat, Nehru supported struggles against colonialism and fascism, yet he preferred the principle of non-interference to the promotion of democracy in international affairs. Being a progressive thinker, he did not sacrifice equality on the altar of liberty and being a moderate and a liberal reformer he did not wipe out the spirit of liberalism in his search for socialism. Thus, in the true spirit of a social conciliator, he created a system of governance that eschewed left and right extremism. It is this system that is popularly known as Nehruvian Consensus.

This system gradually began to fall apart following Nehru's demise. The study of the rise and fall of Nehruvian consensus showed that each one of its component had a different timeline of its breakdown. Furthermore the context, content, and consequence of the collapse have been different for different components. According to Achin Vanaik, "The old Nehruvian consensus has collapsed but there is no consensus available for or capable of replacing it (Vanaik 1997). This is true of Nehruvian secularism, but we must not commit the fallacy of confusing what is true of a part with what is true of the whole. There exists alternative consensus in case of economic policy and conduct of centre-state relations whereas in the case of foreign policy the *form* may have changed but the *substance* remains the same. Surprisingly, democracy in India remains resilient in spite of the crisis. (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Collapse of Nehruvian Consensus and Thereafter

The Component of Nehruvian Consensus	Extent of Collapse	Nature of Collapse/erosion	Consensus after Nehru (if any)
Socialism and Development Planning	Complete Collapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The statist, centrally directed, import substitution industrialization could not ensure growth and failed to address poverty and inequality. It has been completely discarded after 1991 crisis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •There is a consensus in favour of pro-market economic reforms, though the debate about scope, coverage and pace of reforms has not yet ended.
Secularism and Modernization	Complete Collapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rapid industrialization could not transform the pre-modern social relations based on ascriptive group identities •Hindu nationalist ideology has gained receptivity and recognition. 	-----
Strong-Centre led Cooperative Federalism	Partial erosion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Centralized government control failed to achieve Nehruvian goals of social justice, secularism, economic growth etc. •The obsession with competent centre versus incompetent states has disappeared. •The 73rd and 74th Amendments, deregulation, disinvestment, indicative planning etc have eroded Central powers. •Strong Centre led Cooperative Federalism is no longer feasible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Greater shift towards federalized governance in the era of coalition governments •There has been a greater trend towards <i>de facto</i> decentralization.
Democracy	Crisis With Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Steep erosion of democratic value system <i>yet</i> democracy as a guiding principle has not been called into question. •Widening gulf between the political incumbents and the public, <i>yet</i> elections are held with great rigour and enthusiasm. •Un-democratization of Policy making and implementation under the influence of Strong politician-bureaucrat-criminal-corporate nexus, <i>yet</i> the civil society continue to pressurize governments to be responsive. •Increasing fragmentation along various fault lines <i>yet</i> democracy empowers new actors to participate in governance. 	-----
Foreign Policy	Partial erosion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The principles of moralism and non interventionism have been diluted (not discarded). •Most of the principles that underlaid India's foreign policy, including the Non-alignment, still guide India's Foreign Policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The foreign policy shall be more realistic and pragmatic than moralistic. •India shall play its rightful role (as emerging global economic power) in promoting international democracy by diluting non-interventionism

NOTES

¹Nehru believed in creating a “national philosophy” to hold India together, providing coherence, a sense of direction and a purpose (Parekh 1991).
² In fact, for the first three years of independence (1947-50) the stance of Patel and Tandon had such a great influence on the Congressmen that Nehru did not expect his officials to be partners in his ideology (Gopal 1980).
³ See *Constituent Assembly (Legislative) Debates*, February 17, 1948.
⁴ Nehru’s choice of the strange term “socialistic,” rather than “socialist,” was intriguing and perhaps intended not to frighten his right-wing critics (Parekh 1991).
⁵Though Lipset argues that success of democracy depends on the presence of “economic development complex (comprising industrialization, wealth, urbanization, and education) yet, he also says that the stability of a given democratic system depends not only on economic development, but also upon the effectiveness and legitimacy of the political system. Further, the authors points out that the degree of legitimacy of a democratic system may affect its capacity to survive the crises of effectiveness (Lipset 1959)
⁶The literature on secularism in India focuses on the question of religion only. However, it must be realized that ‘Indian secularism’ is a nexus of multiple categories such as, community and caste, nationalism and communalism, liberalism and democracy (Tejani 2007).
⁷See The Report of the Working Group on Land Relations for Formulation of 11th Five Year Plan 2006, p.28.
⁸On the one hand, a maze of progressive measures, of which the Hindu code bill was most significant, were implemented by the Parliament to reform Hindu religious practices, yet at the same time, the Muslim personal law was left untouched and the subject of a uniform civil code was put in the list of directive principles. This gave an opportunity to the Hindutva brigade to deride Nehruvian secularism as ‘pseudosecularism’ and disrespectful of gender justice within the Muslim community.
⁹“The rise and growth of the Sangh combine is in the vacuum created by the historic decline of the Congress and the associated decay of the Nehruvian consensus as a comprehensive social-economic-political-ideological model of development” (Vanaik 1994).
¹⁰The Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral’s principles of multilateralism were aimed at developing leadership in South Asia. These principles, called ‘Gujral Doctrine’ were reminiscent of the Panchsheel of Nehru-era. The Gujral doctrine included principles such as, accommodative policy toward smaller states, non-interference, respect for territorial integrity, and peaceful dispute resolution (Gujral 1999).
¹¹“Commanding Heights: An Interview with Manmohan Singh,” PBS, February 6, 2001.

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