



The gold standard for a Prime Minister- Jawaharlal Nehru

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Why in News?

On November 14, India has celebrated Pandit Nehru's birthday and debate raged over legacy of Pandit Nehru as India's PM and Freedom fighter.

Highlights:

- India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, is now moving through an eclipse that B.R. Ambedkar experienced and yet emerged from more luminous.
- During his life, Ambedkar was vilified by both the left and the right, and decades after his death, he was at best ignored.
- Later jurists and scholars joined his followers to dust up his legacy and recognise him as a guide in political, social and constitutional matters.
- That Nehru has lost state patronage is to be welcomed, for that is the only way that a great leader would be able to stand on his feet.
- A genuine admirer of Nehru would have been mistaken for a courtier.

The three virtues of a leader

- Democracy demands of a leader, especially one who is called to lead the government, to possess three virtues to redeem his pledge.
- First, he must have a track record of service with humility. The spirit of democracy militates against our notions of 'the leader'. What it requires of him is to submit to people's will while being firmly anchored to due process. Nehru's constant engagement with the

masses and his deep sense of national destiny helped him to be a class apart from his contemporary world leaders, especially in the developing world. A less competent leader would be driven either by the mob or become a dictator.

- Second, Democracy affords a leader two choices: either he can assert his position even at the cost of due process to convince others and himself that he's in control, or he can submit to institutional requirements and traditions not so much as constraints on his right to rule but as a sacred obligation to be honoured. Hence, the commitment to the institutions of state forms the second virtue of a leader. That Nehru understood the indispensability of institutions above personalities is not the only measure of the man; he also recognised the need for a strong Opposition for democracy to succeed.
- The third, quality of the leader's legacy. It is fashionable today to ridicule Nehru's non-alignment policy and his belief in a mixed economy, but he formulated these policies not as a figment of his imagination; he tailored them to suit India's position at the time - Though this is not the place to delve into the merits of these policies, one must surmise that Nehru would have admitted to a certain wear and tear of these policies. He was also pragmatic enough to alter or jettison his policies if national interest so warranted.
- Nehru was also pragmatic enough to alter or jettison his policies if national interest so warranted. Thus, Nehru was the complete Prime Minister that none of his successors can hope to be.
- Having witnessed more than a dozen of his successors in office over the past five decades, one is alive to the fact that no one comes even a distant second to Nehru.

Extrovert and introvert

- Over and above any virtue, there is the matter of temperament that gives a leader his character.
- A complex office like that of the Prime Minister of India requires not one but two divergent temperaments, wherein lies the difficulty of being a successful Prime Minister.
- One, it has a front-office function wherein the incumbent must become the face of his government and engage with the masses to explain his policies to draw their support and legitimacy, and also

nudge his officials to translate people's aspirations into policy outcomes.

- One must be an extrovert, articulate and full of vigour to hit the campaign trail every now and then to plead with people why he and his political formation need and deserve their understanding, affections and support.
- Two, the back-office function of the Prime Minister amounts to the invisible and hence unsung drudgery of reading dozens of files and making crucial decisions.
- India's history since Nehru is replete with instances of Prime Ministers who were of either temperament, not both.
- Nehru remains the only Prime Minister to have discharged these two functions with aplomb. A great leader has something timeless about him and remains consequential. Nehru cannot be deprived of the credit for the services he rendered and the values he stood for, even if his ideas and policies become passé and even if the rulers of the day find his memory inconvenient or unprofitable.

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