

# Birthday Salute to Nehru

I have three heroes in my life, men whom I admire. There are others too, but these three top the list: Swamy Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. I have only heard about or read about the first two named for what they had achieved and what they stood for. Swamy Vivekananda stirred everyone's imagination, with his reformist ideas and the speech which he delivered in Chicago by addressing the assemblage as "Brothers and sisters of America". Nobel prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Where the Mind is Without Fear", an inspirational classic. I have been fascinated by this prose-poem. I had also read about his 'boat songs'. Here are some fond memories.

Nehru, as someone said, is not just a man but a procession of men: Patriot, Statesman, Author, Freedom fighter, Barrister and above all a Humanist. Known for his vivacity and the trade mark red rose in his lapel, Nehruji was one who connected with the people, with the common man. His credo was Gross National Happiness. This was his measure of a nation's progress. He was a freak among the herd of self-serving politicians. It was a distant hope of mine to 'meet' with this grand statesman of yesteryear and India's first Prime Minister.

In the late fifties, I had gone to Delhi in October and made it a point to visit Gandhiji's Samadhi on his birthday. There was a lot of police bandobust, and there he was, Nehruji, followed by a bunch of politicians and some members of the public. I joined the crowd and inched forward to a few feet of Panditji, when a Security man in mufti, took me firmly by the hand and told me in no uncertain voice 'Go back'. I did. I had to, but was happy anyway, hav-

ing had a glimpse of the great man from such close quarters..

Shortly afterwards, I met a Law College classmate of mine, one Mr. Karta, who was connected with the Indian Institute of Parliamentary Studies. "Why don't you come tomorrow? Panditji is addressing an invited audience", he said. I jumped at the offer. And he took out an invitation from his brief case. I went. Panditji spoke with great sincerity and passion, about 'checks and balances' in a Parliamentary democracy, about the Legislative wing and its significance. I was wowed by his speech delivered in a sing-song voice, by his use of felicitous phrases and grand, flowing English and words that twinkled like stars.

After the function was over, we moved over for buffet to an adjacent area, a sort of quadrangle. Rows of tables were laden with a variety of sandwiches and snacks. I was trying to reach out for a samosa when another hand too was extended in the direction of the potato chips plate nearby. It had freckles on top of the palm and wrist. I looked up and there he was- Nehruji. He smiled as though to say 'Hello' and before I could even say 'namaste', and recover from it all, he was gone.. It was the, the eye-contact, the visual experience of his physical presence which thrilled me. . Here I was in touching distance of a great man who mesmerized a whole nation.

He sort of pranced away. On his way out he playfully gave, with a rolled-up paper, a pat on the rump of a plump, round lady who was bent over picking up something. A senior woman of the Congress party, she was. She was shocked and a bit scarlet in the face but, soon realizing who had played the prank, she gave him a paternal look and

smile. Nehruji was gone.

In the late fifties, I was working for Indian Airlines, and was on duty at the Delhi Palam airport. The usual crowd of party leaders, politicians and others were there with garlands and bouquets. Nehruji was returning from a foreign trip and being in my uniform, I could see him again at very close quarters. He shook hands briskly with the reception party dignitaries and, soon enough, he was gone. The next day a commercial photographer who covered the comings and goings of dignitaries and known to me, handed over a photo. There I was standing next to Panditji who was smiling; a million dollar smile. I could not believe it. It was as though he had posed for the photo with me! The photo is still one of my treasured keep-sakes. Now for a post-script.

Soon after my marriage I took out this photo from my album and showed it to my wife who gave a look that I thought was one of admiration. "Hey, that's great" she said. rather tepidly. I saw something more in her eyes. "Oh, nothing", she said. After a little more persuasive talk, she said "Wait". She rummaged an old suitcase and produced from it a photo of Nehru at the Ramakrishna Mission in Bangalore. A slender girl was handing over a bouquet to a smiling Panditji.. "Who is it?" I asked.

"That's me, I was wearing glasses in those days", said my better-half who had done one better than me.

I am lost in fond memories of a great humanist, a man who had a place in his heart for the unfortunate, to whom life is all burdens and no choices!

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