

THE GOLD STANDARD FOR A PRIME MINISTER

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

[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. Since his family continued to be a part of the party and the government, any celebration of his life and work till recently was suspect. A genuine admirer of Nehru would have been mistaken for a courtier.

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.

Is it right to turn NMML into a museum for PMs?

It is always tempting for a leader to flex his muscles lest he be dismissed as a weakling. 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 virtue is the quality of the leader's legacy. Can the generations after him fall back on his ideas, traditions and exhortations that he preached and practised? 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.

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.

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. Only an introvert leader (an oxymoron) who is contemplative and familiar with the complexities of governance will be able to discharge this duty.

In defence of Nehru

These two halves of the job expect the incumbent Prime Minister to be simultaneously an extrovert and an introvert. If a Prime Minister fails in his front-office functions, it would produce a political disaster, and a back-office failure would result in paralysed governance or misrule. 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.

Among Nehru admirers, there circulates an anecdote which testifies to his dexterity of being a part of the masses while supping with intellectual giants like Arnold Toynbee and Albert Einstein. Nehru as Prime Minister maintained a tradition of having 'personal guests of the Prime Minister' who would stay at the Prime Minister's official residence, the Teen Murti House, in New Delhi for some time. The guest would meet Nehru at breakfast and, possibly, at dinner, and he would have his own engagements. These worthies included historian Toynbee and British physicist and Nobel laureate M.S. Blackett, who advised Nehru on setting up a defence research establishment in the country.

Blackett visited India as many as eight times during Nehru's stint as Prime Minister. On one occasion, during the late 1950s, being a personal guest of the Prime Minister, Blackett met Nehru at breakfast. It was disheartening to the great physicist that he found Nehru to be distracted, weak and melancholic. Though he answered his guest's questions, Nehru was truly out of his wits, or so his guest thought.

Blackett was sceptical that Nehru could solve the problems of a vast and populous country like India, despite his intellect and commitment to national interest. It so happened that Blackett met Nehru at dinner on the same day. For every minor query, he found Nehru launching into a mini lecture, brimming with enthusiasm.

Blackett wondered aloud: how could a man who was so weak to engage in an informed conversation at breakfast be so vigorous at supper to expound on every question? Pat came the reply: "Oh, I addressed a public rally in the evening!"

A great leader has something timeless about him and he remains consequential. He 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. Above all, people's collective memory will not allow him to fade into oblivion. Jawaharlal Nehru is one such leader that modern India produced.

D. Shyam Babu is Senior Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. Views are personal

YES | Om Routray Women can expose men and cost them their jobs. Power is a language that men understand om-routray Om Routray Judge Brett Kavanaugh was

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com