

Anecdotes about Jawaharlal Nehru

[Anil K Rajvanshi](#)
 Phaltan, Maharashtra, India
anilrajvanshi@gmail.com

This is the 125th birth anniversary year of [Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru](#) our first Prime Minister and one of the main architects of Independent India. Lots of articles are being written about Pandit ji and hence I thought of writing about what I heard about him from some of his close associates.

Too often people do not write anecdotes about these great people and the interesting tidbits are lost forever when a person dies. The people I am going to describe never wrote about their association with Nehru and hence I thought of putting them on record. I have been lucky to have known them and felt that those interesting stories they told me about Nehru need to be told.

I saw Pandit Nehru only two times in my life and had no personal interaction with him. Hence all these anecdotes are from the people who knew him closely.

The first time I saw Jawahar Lal Nehru was sometime in 1961. Nehru had come to Lucknow for some meeting either at the Central Drug Research Institute (CDRI) or Lucknow University and he was supposed to pass through Hazratganj the main thoroughfare of Lucknow.

Since my father who was in the Congress Party talked a lot about Nehru, I had expressed a desire to see him. He knew Nehru's program that day so decided to take me with him so we could stand in front of the Mayfair cinema building in Hazratganj from where his cavalcade would pass. [Our flat was adjacent to Mayfair building](#) so it was easy to go and stand there. It was around 6:30 a.m. or so in the morning and Nehru appeared seated on an open Impala car which was followed by caravan of cars.

I still remember vividly the moment he came in view near the Mayfair building at a considerable speed in his cavalcade; he appeared like a white man in kurta-pajama. He was not wearing his Nehru cap and as he was quite bald, I saw a halo and a glow around his head. This was my first impression of Nehru.

As Nehru's cavalcade came near Mayfair cinema my father shouted "Pandit Nehru ki Jai". So when Nehru saw him he threw a bouquet at him. Those were the times when the Prime Minister of India went in an open motor car without any fear.

My father Jagdish Prasad Rajvanshi went to jail with Gandhi ji during 1942 Quit India movement. He told me many stories about Nehru since he knew him well.

During 1940s my father was studying for his Ph.D. in Allahabad University and came to know Nehru. So anytime Pandit ji needed a book from the University library a chit was sent to my father giving the book's details. My father would check it out from the library and take it to Anand Bhawan where it would be given to one of Nehru's assistants or servants.

My father told me that once nobody came to the door to take the book so he was ushered in by Vijaylakshmi Pandit (Nehru's sister) to Nehru's study and told to put the book on his table.

For youngsters like my father (he was about 23-24 years of age at the time of this episode) Nehru and Gandhi ji were like gods. So when he went to his study table and saw an ashtray full of cigarette butts he was shocked. Nehru was very particular about his image so he never smoked or drank in public.

Later on my father told me of another incident. After his release from the Lucknow jail in 1946 my father wrote a book "[Havalaat](#)" about his experiences of being interned in a solitary confinement cell.

He wanted to gift the book to the Prime Minister. So he went to Teen Murti House, the Prime Minister's residence in Delhi. It was 15th August and Nehru was getting ready to go to the Red Fort. I think this was either in 1948 or 49. [Rafi Ahmed Kidwai](#) who was then the Agriculture minister in Central Government was standing in the portico and waiting to accompany Nehru to Red Fort. My father knew Rafi saheb very well since he was his protégé. So he requested Kidwai ji to give the book to Pandit Nehru. Rafi saheb said that he should give the book to Nehru himself. By this time Pandit Nehru came out of the house and though he was in hurry to go, still he greeted my father, read the jacket of the book and as per his custom, wrote his name and date on the first page of the book. He then told his peon to put the book in his

bedroom for his bedtime reading. That was the quality of Nehru as a literary person and a great book lover!

A similar story was told to me by my father's friend [Ratan Lal Joshi](#). Joshi ji was the editor of Hindi newspaper Hindustan in 60s and 70s and at one time a very close confidant of Indira Gandhi. Joshi ji told me that Nehru used to invite intellectuals to Teen Murti house in the evening for tea and the intellectually stimulating conversation was his way of relaxing.

Nehru was a very broadminded and secular person. Yet he was greatly influenced by the spiritual traditions of India. In his book [Discovery of India](#) one gets a glimpse of his [great admiration for Swami Vivekananda](#) and Shri Ramakrishna.

The second and the last time I saw Pandit Nehru was in the Parliament in 1961. My father's friend [Sunder Lal, a dynamic young Congress MP](#) took me and my family to see the Parliament. Sunder Lal was an important member of the congress party and was the youngest MP elected in India's first election in 1951. He remained an MP till 1986 – the year he died and only lost an election in 1977 when Indira Gandhi was also defeated. I was only 11 years old so had no interest in hearing the speakers. But saw Pandit Nehru from the visitors' gallery. He was listening to a speech of Morarji Desai (Finance Minister of India at that time) and after 15-20 minutes left the Lok Sabha. Most MPs also left the parliament after him.

Shri. Sunder Lal was a bachelor and considered me as his son. We used to discuss lots of issues about India and he told me many anecdotes about Pandit Nehru.

It was generally said that Pandit Nehru chose [Lal Bahadur Shastri](#) as his successor. But according to Sunder Lal he was almost like a personal servant of Nehru rather than his successor.

Quite a few times when Nehru was in Kashmir for holiday and wanted some book or items of clothing, he would call Indira Gandhi in Delhi and tell her to send them. Almost invariably Lal Bahadur Shastri brought them in a small suitcase to Srinagar.

Similarly, once somebody suggested to Nehru that they should discuss certain issues regarding party matter with Shastri. Nehru shot back saying that Shastri does not know anything about them. Nehru had a very low opinion of Shastri.

Sunder Lal ji also told me that people considered Indira Gandhi as a mute doll (*goongi gudiya*) but she was sharp and managed Nehru's household both in Teen Murti house and in Srinagar quite well.

It was a general practice that Nehru invited intellectuals for lunch. Indira Gandhi would call the lunch guests beforehand and briefed them that under no circumstances any controversial topic should be discussed because Nehru would loose his temper and this would increase his blood pressure. With his heart problems his temper was a major cause of concern to Indira Gandhi.

Sunder Lal ji told me of an occasion during the lunch when Nehru started becoming angry with a guest. So Indira Gandhi immediately rose and offered the guest a plate of choicest dish and changed the subject!

According to Sunder Lal it was [Govind Ballabh Pant](#) the Home Minister who persuaded Nehru to bring Indira Gandhi into active politics so she could help Nehru. He would constantly remind Nehru that she has learnt so many political lessons by observing her father and also being with Gandhi ji and so would be a natural choice to become a Congress Working Committee member. Though Nehru outwardly showed that it was unethical but was never forceful enough to oppose it and so he was the one who really started the dynastic process. Naturally, Indira Gandhi took it to its logical conclusion and till today we are still suffering the Nehru-Gandhi family!

The grooming of Indira Gandhi was so perfect that she started talking and giving speeches just like her father. My father told me about an incident in early 1950s when he had invited Nehru to give a speech in Faizabad during an election rally. Nehru could not come so he told my father that Indira Gandhi will come on his behalf. She spoke just like Nehru with similar style and using the words and ideas that he used. My father said that had her voice not been that of a woman he would have thought that Nehru himself was speaking!

My father also told me about the gutsy behavior of Indira Gandhi during that meeting. It was getting dark when the meeting ended and as Indira Gandhi was coming down the dais after her address, some young boys misbehaved with her. She simply used her elbows very effectively in pushing them and hitting them! My father and other congress workers then rushed and made a cordon to escort her out of the venue.

Nehru never liked to give speeches about local issues. His mind would always be involved in world affairs. My father told me of an incident in Etah (U.P.) where Nehru came to give a speech during the first General election in 1951. Etah was one of the poorest and most backward areas of U.P. and yet Nehru never talked about what his government will do to help this poor district but talked only about U.N. and India's role in non-alignment movement (NAM)! People trusted him because he was the chosen heir of Gandhi ji and though his talk on U.N. or NAM did not change anything for them, yet they voted overwhelmingly for the congress party.

Similarly Sunder Lal ji also told me that he requested Nehru to give a speech at one of the rural venues in his MP constituency. Nehru shot back saying that he does not like being involved in *mohalla* and bylane politics! Yet it was these same poor, humble people who provided large number of MPs to the congress party in elections!

Nehru was never a stickler to details. He always was a thinker and left the details to his subordinates. In fact, he left too much to his subordinates so that his ideas were not implemented as he would have wished.

[My uncle Dr. Atma Ram who was the Director General of CSIR](#) during late 1960s narrated to me an incident about Nehru's distaste for details.

[Dr. Meghnad Saha](#) the famous Indian astrophysicist was entrusted the task by Nehru to make the first Science and Technology (S&T) plan of India. He was given a residence in a magnificent bungalow in Shimla and few months to prepare the plan. Dr. Saha took with him Dr. Atma Ram as his assistant. Dr. Atma Ram was his one-time student in Allahabad University and at that time was a scientific officer in a National Lab in Kolkata. Dr. Atma Ram told me that Nehru came for just 15 minutes and OKed the plan without even looking at it properly. Either he trusted Meghnad Saha completely or S&T was not very much in his vision field at that time! Dr. Atma Ram told me that both he and Saha felt that their 2-3 months were wasted.

This behavior of Nehru was in complete contrast to that of [Vallabh Bhai Patel](#), the deputy Prime Minister of India. Patel was a nuts and bolts man, with feet on the ground and believed in the dictum of "God is in details". He took decisive actions and would go to the bottom of an issue very fast.

Shri. B. B. Vohra, who was like an uncle to me, was a member of the first Indian Administrative Services (IAS) batch and later became the chairman of Advisory Board of Energy, GOI. He told me an anecdote about the administrative skills of Vallabh Bhai Patel.

Before Indian Administrative Services (IAS) came in existence, India was ruled by officers of Imperial Civil Services (ICS). Patel wanted one uniform IAS for the whole country whereas all the regional leaders wanted separate administrative services for their states. To resolve this issue Patel called a meeting of all State Chief Ministers (CMs) in Delhi to come to a consensus on this thorny issue. Patel started the meeting at 9 a.m. and told the CMs that it will end at 5 p.m.

During the meeting one after another all the CMs spoke about the need of having separate administrative services which will be state based only. Patel sat quietly listening to the CMs speeches. At 5 p.m. sharp Patel rose and told the group that the meeting had been very productive and that he had learnt a lot regarding their problems and their views and the consensus was that we should have only one IAS! He told his staff to write the minutes of the meeting accordingly and put this as the resolution passed! There was a pin drop silence in the room and not a single CM had the guts or the courage to go against Patel. This was the iron man of India!

Patel and Nehru never saw eye to eye on most matters and Gandhi ji was constantly worried about their differences. Yet Patel was magnanimous and big hearted. My father told me of an incident about this trait of Patel. A very close associate of Patel (who was a good friend of my father) told him that at Patel's death bed he and other followers told him that they will become orphans after he is gone since they would have lost their only leader. Patel told his followers that after him Nehru will be their leader and they should follow him. He told them that though he had differences with Nehru but now he was their leader. I wonder whether Nehru would have shown such magnanimity.

Vergheze Kurien, the father of milk revolution in India, has narrated a story in his autobiography of how after Patel's death, Nehru treated his daughter quite shabbily.

Nehru really liked children. He was rightly called "Chacha Nehru" (Uncle Nehru). Sunder Lal told me about one incident regarding his love for children. Nehru had invited all the newly elected MPs of his party for a dinner at his house. The dinner

was held in the lawns of Teen Murti house. During dinner Nehru saw that some street urchins had climbed the boundary wall and were sitting on it looking at the guests who were having dinner. So he took his plate and went to the wall and gave it to a young boy. Immediately all the MPs also gave their dinner plates to the urchins!

Nehru nevertheless was a vain person and very susceptible to flattery. My father told me that one very mediocre writer from Allahabad decided to translate Nehru's Discovery of India into Sanskrit and wanted to have discussions with Nehru regarding it. Nehru gave him unlimited access to his house so he could go in and out of Teen Murti house wherever he wanted. Besides, he gave him lots of his personal time.

Nehru's uncle Dr. Atal was a close friend of my father. They were both in Lucknow jail together during the freedom movement. Dr. Atal was a good friend of Chairman Mao and Chou-en-lai and hence was sent by Nehru as his emissary to China before China war of 1962. Any time Dr. Atal introduced my father to Nehru he would say "Jawahar meet my friend Jagdish". Nehru never liked being addressed as Jawahar and would flinch at this introduction.

Another instance of Nehru's vanity and temper was shown in a film entitled "A day in the life of Prime Minister" and was shot by BBC in early 1960. I saw this movie when I was [a student in US in 1970s](#). The documentary showed Prime Minister Nehru's day from morning (breakfast) to late night dinner. The BBC team had picked January 26, India's Republic Day for shooting.

In one of the scenes Pandit Nehru was shown sitting in the front row watching the Republic Day parade with some foreign dignitary and Krishna Menon – the then defense minister of India. It was quite a sunny morning so Pandit Nehru was holding a folded newspaper to shade his eyes. The scene showed Krishna Menon as per his nature continuously chatting with the guest. Nehru got quite irritated and said, "Menon can't you stop talking for a bit". After this rebuke Krishna Menon kept quiet for a few minutes but again started chatting animatedly. By this time Nehru lost his cool and he whacked Krishna Menon on his shoulder with the folded newspaper and told him to shut up! I could not believe that the most democratic Prime Minister of India would behave like a school master with the Defense minister of India! I believe this movie was never shown in India.

Similarly Sunder Lal ji told me of an incident that Nehru had this habit of threatening MPs that he would resign if they did not agree with him. I guess sometimes after 1962 China war he again threatened that he will resign. The young MPs said please do so. Nehru was really taken aback as he never expected such an answer from his MPs. I guess he was living in his own world.

Sunder Lal also thought that Gandhiji's act of making Vinoba Bhave as the first individual satyagrahi instead of Nehru was meant to bring Nehru down in size and reduce his vanity and ego.

Even with all these shortcomings I think he was a great prime minister who had certain vision for India. His vision of India was shaped by his detailed understanding of the history of India which he vividly described in his seminal book [The Discovery of India](#). This is a remarkable book which should be an essential reading for the younger generation to get a sweeping panorama about India.

Nehru gave us Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), laid the foundation of big scientific organizations like CSIR, DAE, etc. and most of all did not temper with the Constitutional Institutions that later Prime Ministers did. For a nascent nation that was a remarkable achievement since it allowed these institutions to develop roots and grow.

Nehru was a prisoner of his time so his vision was colored by those times and events. Now in hindsight some consider it flawed. Nevertheless, he had a vision for the country, was a great patriot and was honest. Such qualities unfortunately have not been seen in prime ministers of recent past.

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