

# COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Jawaharlal Nehru

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(1889-1964)

*Jawaharlal Nehru, with Mahatma Gandhi, was one of the principal leaders of India's independence movement during the 1930s and '40s. He became the first prime minister of a newly independent India in 1947.*

Excerpt from *The Commanding Heights* by Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, 1998 ed., pp. 79-80.

In August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru assumed the role of Britain's successor, the first prime minister of a newly independent India. The approach Nehru articulated grew out of his view of the modern world and his belief in its technology, combined with his confrontation with the realities of Indian society—or, as he put it, his "discovery of India."

*The Discovery of India* was, in fact, the title he gave to a book he wrote during his 20 months of incarceration in the remote Ahmadnagar fort during World War II. He had started his autobiography during an earlier prison stint but had never finished, because he was released early in December 1941. Not long after, he was again arrested this time for leading protests against British rule during some of the worst moments of World War II. He generally was not ill-treated during his prison stays. The fact that he had been a student at Harrow, one of England's most prestigious public schools, seems to have won him some special consideration. At Ahmadnagar fort, he spent hours each day digging at the rocky soil in the prison yard, preparing beds for flowers. But he also wrote by hand over 1,000 pages of manuscript detailing his expectations for the future—and explaining his "discovery" of India and how it had transformed his life.

Nehru had grown up in a privileged setting in the city of Allahabad, on the banks of the Ganges, in India's Northern heartland. His father, Motilal, was among the most prominent barristers in India, successful and increasingly rich. An early leader of India's national economic elite, Motilal Nehru was one of the founders of the Congress Party, which called for independence. Yet he also prided himself on his achievements as a man of the empire. As a boy, young Jawaharlal lived in a house with 50 or more servants, a swimming pool, and the latest European cars. His father, endlessly doting, wanted everything for his only son. Specifically, he wanted him to join the Indian civil service—at the time, the most prestigious

appointment an Indian could enjoy in the Empire. He sent the boy to Harrow (where he was nicknamed Joe) and then to Cambridge, to Trinity College, where the young man studied natural sciences with considerable indifference and amused himself in the social life along the Backs, as the banks of the River Cam were called. He then studied to be a barrister in London, spent rather lavishly, toured Europe, and wrote his father about actors and actresses he saw in plays in different cities. He was deeply interested in technology. He followed with fascination the development of aviation. He also had recurring dreams about flying effortlessly in the sky.

In 1912, Nehru returned home to Allahabad, where for eight years he practiced law without much enthusiasm. His lifestyle bordered on the opulent. He worked as a lawyer, went to parties, and read *Punch* on Sundays. But he itched for something more. As a boy he had been stirred by stories of the Indian mutiny of 1857-58. He had also devoured histories about Giuseppe Garibaldi and other nationalists, and dreamed of "greatness." Moreover, he would write, "I was always, like my father, a bit of a gambler, at first with money and then for highest stakes, with the bigger issues of life." By this time, Mahatma Gandhi had begun his long journeys on foot through the country's villages, gathering followers and breathing a new urgency into the Congress Party's independence movement. Emotionally compelled, Nehru grew close to the mahatma, and became engaged in the cause. Even in his own privileged life, he saw that Empire and British rule were a humiliation. The senior officials of the British Raj would come to his father's house and drink his champagne, but they would never invite his father back to their own houses for dinner.

In 1919, the British Army massacred protesters in the city of Amritsar. Enraged, Nehru was raised out of his lethargy and stirred to action. He joined in an independent inquiry that the Congress Party established. But for Nehru, the decisive event came the next year, in 1920. His family had escaped the stifling heat of Allahabad for the elegant Savoy Hotel in the hill station of Mussoorie, leaving him to follow. A delegation of Afghani Muslims was in the same hotel. The British authorities, fearful of Hindu-Muslim collaboration, forbade Nehru to meet them. Rather than be ordered around by the British, he decided to stay at home in Allahabad. At the same time, a group of peasants, protesting against exorbitant taxes and mass evictions, arrived from the hinterland district of Rae Bareilly in hopes of finding Gandhi in the city. But he

was elsewhere. So instead, they headed for the Nehru family compound. And there they asked Nehru to go in Gandhi's stead, to lead a new inquiry. Nehru, with little else to do, agreed.

What followed would overwhelm him. The peasants built roads overnight so that his car could pass deep into rural India; they rallied together again and again to lift his car when it became stuck in mud. Nehru had never seen anything like the wretched poverty he now encountered. "After all," biographer M. J. Akbar would write, "he was still an Indian sahib in a hat and silk underwear." But under the scorching and blinding sun, Nehru was transformed. "I was filled with shame and sorrow," he later wrote, "shame at my own easygoing and comfortable life and our petty politics of the city, which ignored this vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India, sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India." He had also discovered his political vocation—and the focus for his ambition. To his father, with whom he corresponded candidly, he wrote: "Greatness is being thrust on me." He moved to the fore in the independence movement and emerged as Gandhi's designated heir. Joe, the public-school boy at Harrow, had become Pandit—Teacher—and the leader with Gandhi of the Congress Party.

If independence was the central political issue, then fighting poverty was the central economic issue. With independence achieved in August 1947, poverty was the problem. Whereas Gandhi and Nehru were united on political objectives, they were divided on economics. For Gandhi, the model was swadeshi, self-reliance—simple home production of basic goods, self-sufficiency in the village, and a spinning wheel in every hut. Why should colonial India export cotton to Manchester, only to import it back in the form of expensive clothing? Indians should make their own clothes. Gandhi had little time for socialism and class warfare. After independence, he lectured a group of Communists: "What to me is even more pathetic is that you regard Russia as your spiritual home. Despising Indian culture, you dream of planting the Russian system here." Nehru's view disagreed fundamentally with Gandhi's. He sought a different kind of self-sufficiency—industrialization and the steel mill. His central objective was "to get rid of the appalling poverty of the people." He believed in technology and progress, in machines and industrialization—"I'm all for tractors and big machinery," he said—and he intended to use 20th-century means to achieve his goal.

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Jawaharlal Nehru

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Lenin had said that "communism equals Soviet power plus electrification." Nehru offered a variant in his formula for India's development—"heavy engineering and machine-making industry, scientific research institutes, and electric power." He certainly shared in the Attlee consensus. His adoption of the themes and ideas of the Labor Party was evident in his recurrent evocation of the commanding heights, the mixed economy, and the need for planning. But he was also much impressed with the Soviet model, and embraced five-year plans and central planning. While troubled by what communism did to freedom, he wrote during his last term in prison that "the Soviet Revolution had advanced human society by a great leap and had lit a bright flame which could not be smothered and that it laid the foundation for a new civilization toward which the world could advance." Private property, yes, but it was to be subordinate to the state in the building of the Indian economy.

Their sharply differing economic visions put Gandhi and Nehru very much at odds. In 1945, Gandhi accused his appointed heir of being unfaithful to his economic vision of swadeshi and an India composed of harmonious villages. "I do not understand why a village should necessarily embody truth and nonviolence," Nehru shot back. "A village, normally speaking, is backward intellectually and culturally and no progress can be made from a backward environment. Narrow-minded people are much more likely to be untruthful and violent." The master's vision, said Nehru, was "completely unreal." |

A Hindu extremist murdered Gandhi on January 30, 1948. The country was thrown into shock and pervasive grief. Nehru had lost his spiritual father. But now there was also nothing left to stop his economic program, which he pursued as prime minister until his death in 1964. Under Nehru, India embarked on a socialist course that had already been laid out in the late 1930s in the Congress Party's National Planning Committee—chaired by Nehru. He had then divided the world between two groups of people. There were those "who want to advance the world further and free the people from the chains of imperialism and capitalism. On the other side, there are a handful of people who are deriving benefit from the present state of things." India, he concluded, would take its stand on "independence and socialism"; for, he added that was what was needed, "in our own poverty-stricken country, where unemployment prevails."

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