CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

The Myth of Nehru the Architect of Independent India

IN 1984, THE Films Division of India (FDI) released the film *Nehru*.[1] Avoiding interviews or reconstructions, the sole voice on the film, with a few brief exceptions, is that of Jawaharlal Nehru. Narrated by Saeed Jaffrey doing his best impression of the Cambridge-educated Kashmiri, and occasionally drawing on archived recordings of the man himself, almost the entire script is composed of extracts from Nehru's books and speeches. Directed by Shyam Benegal with the Russian director Yuri Aldolkhin, the film's three parts cover the span of Nehru's life. Quickly recounting his early childhood in Allahabad and then his education in the UK, touching briefly on his marriage to Kamala and the birth of their daughter, Indira, the majority of the film focuses on the freedom struggle. The script draws heavily from *The Discovery of India*, a volume that is part autobiography and part amateur history of the country. The viewer is introduced to the violence and exploitation of British rule, and then to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement. The narrative charts the mass movements that the Indian National Congress launched between 1919 and 1942, with Indians boycotting British goods, taxes, and employment in the colonial administration. It details the price Indians, including Nehru, paid for their civil disobedience, as their protests were met with violence and long periods of imprisonment. The film narrates the negotiations that Gandhi and the Indian National Congress undertook with the British from the 1930s for the devolution of power and eventually for independence. It chronicles the rise of the Muslim League, and Nehru's disagreements with the League's leader, Muhammad

Ali Jinnah, over the two-nation theory and the creation of Pakistan, which divided British India as the imperial power departed in August 1947.

Nehru's image is used sparsely in the first two parts where the story of the national movement is told. Throughout, Nehru's own words are played as scenes of India's varied landscape, its many peoples and the major historical events are displayed before the viewer. Such a presentation elevates Nehru, as one expects of this genre, but it also isolates him. Although Gandhi's image features prominently, the viewer hears the Mahatma speak but once. Other nationalist figures come and go, from Nehru's father Motilal to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, but again they are hardly given voice in the film. Instead, their ideas are delivered to the viewer through Nehru's words. In this way, Nehru is left as the sole narrator to tell the story of India's freedom struggle. In the final part of the film, titled 'Freedom', Nehru dominates the imagery while selections from his speeches are used to summarise his thoughts on secularism, socialism, non-alignment and the other ideas with which he is so strongly associated. Although they can be spotted in the archive footage used, none of the other prominent Indians of his day are mentioned by name. In this way, Nehru becomes almost the lone protagonist of independent India's story.

The film might be thought of as part of the trend of lionising, but also simplifying, Nehru for popular consumption. Although unique in many ways, the FDI's *Nehru* is evocative of a larger pattern in the way we think about Jawaharlal Nehru and in the way both scholars and ordinary people view the first two decades after independence in India. Nehru is often understood to be the 'architect' of independent India.[2] Real-world architects work in complex teams, building structures through elaborate negotiations with clients, regulators and neighbours. Their final product is mediated by constraints inherent in building materials, labour relations and consumer tastes. Used as a metaphor in historical writing, however, the term 'architect' is meant to describe an individual who has a vision for a complete edifice, set out in a blueprint and then realised through that individual's sheer ingenuity and drive.

Thus, when people today write and speak about Nehru or about India in the period after the inauguration of the Constitution in 1950, we often find an untroubled substitution of Nehru for India. Benegal's film achieves this through the layered presentation of sound and image. In written works, it is common to find the name of the first prime minister and the country used interchangeably: scholars and pundits write of Nehru's/India's policy on Korea or India's/Nehru's approach to modernisation, and there is no apparent discomfort as they slip between the two.

The impression conjured by the FDI's film is one of a tireless and dedicated, if isolated, leader. In the documentary, the sense of Nehru's isolation is achieved by excluding other perspectives, and by giving him the last, or the only, word on the conflicts of his time. In so doing, the film mirrors the story told by his biographers, among whom there is near consensus that Nehru governed India virtually alone at this time, inaccessible and unchallenged.[3] Scholars have tended to understand Nehru's isolation as a product, in part, of the fact that many of his contemporaries from the nationalist movement, including Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel and Sarojini Naidu, had passed away in the first few years after independence. Others, such as Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar or C. Rajagopalachari, moved out of Nehru's orbit and away from the centre of power. Bereft of peers, Nehru was left as the sole titan on the stage of Indian politics. He is also said to have been sequestered by those around him. At the office, his personal secretary, A. O. Mathai, filled his section of the South Block with mediocre public servants, and amassed great power himself, filtering and sifting information before it landed on Nehru's desk.[4] At home, his daughter, Indira Gandhi, estranged from her husband and living with her children at Teen Murti Bhavan by the late 1940s, was said to act as a gatekeeper, restricting access to a man who, before her arrival, had been more receptive to visitors. His own cool personality was also said to be to blame for his relative solitude. He regularly lamented that Indians had seen their standards fall, that there were too few who, like him, had the drive for the tasks ahead.

At the same time, scholars agree that after around 1950 Nehru enjoyed an unchallenged position as leader. This was down to the paucity of plausible rivals, but also to his electoral success. He carried the Congress Party to power at the centre and in most of the states in three consecutive general elections between 1951 and 1962. Nehru, scholars assume, took a detailed leadership role in the projects at the heart of the nation-building endeavour. His workload was tremendous: on an average day, he received some two thousand letters, and spent four to five hours each night dictating responses.[5] Benegal's film is just one example of the archetypal image we have of the solitary and dedicated life of the great man who ruled India.

Over the years the perception of Nehru's singularity has only grown. It has developed to the point where, on the seventieth anniversary of the departure of the British, the BBC could air an assertion that Nehru had allowed a personality cult to be built up around himself, without finding it necessary to go to any length to prove it, and without, it seems, stirring any controversy.[6] Why has this picture of Nehru dominating the

landscape persisted? Of the many reasons one can uncover, I would like to highlight three here, and come to a fourth later in the chapter. Firstly, Nehru's own personal stature, magnetism and longevity go some way to helping us understand why his reputation as the architect of India has only grown, even as people's assessment of his work has turned sour.[7] He was not only India's first prime minister; he served for seventeen years, longer than any other leader to follow him. To many he was genuinely charming, urbane and empathetic. He was an attractive man. And it is easy to attribute power to the attractive. To others, particularly since the 1980s, he has been vilified as representing all that was wrong with independent India's early years. But a nemesis without significant power is no villain at all, and so even those who deride his decisions invest the man with great influence.

Secondly, however, there are also important dispositional and methodological forces behind the rise of the Nehru myth. The way most people prefer to think about the past tends to favour a focus on individuals. Many (not all, but many) scholars, publishers, readers and podcast producers continue to prefer to understand the past through the lives of exemplary individuals. These tales offer the prospect of a more compelling narrative than the messy and contradictory histories one ends up telling when exploring the everyday negotiations of collectives, the functioning of institutions or the iteration of structures.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially for the professional historian, for over thirty years, the clearest, most coherent source of material on postcolonial India has been the Second Series of the *Selected Works* of Jawaharlal Nehru, published by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund. The series began under the stewardship of Sarvepalli Gopal, historian and son of the second president of India, who, with the eminent biographer B. R. Nanda, had also consulted on the FDI's production of the film, *Nehru*. Indeed, the first volume was published in the same year that the film was released. The series now stands at eighty-five volumes. Even as it was still being compiled, the collection was digitised for online consumption. The *Selected Works* provide access to Nehru's letters and speeches. These are curated from his private papers; they are not the full records of the files that crossed his desk as prime minister. As such, they give us only minimal exposure to the debate, dialogue and ordinary back-and-forth of quotidian decision-making that is the essence of governance in India. In other words, the *Selected Works* present us with a universe with a celestial body at its centre that produces such heat, light and energy that it is hard to make out anything else around it.

An Origin Story

In trying to uncover how this image of Nehru has come about, one must ask, did Nehru indeed propagate a kind of personality cult, albeit a soft one? Personality cults are produced by elevating a single man above others, often imbuing his leadership with a mystical air. This is achieved both through strict regulation over the reproduction of imagery, and the ruthless demand for loyalty from officials and ordinary people alike.[8] Every image of Stalin that appeared in Russian newspapers, for example, was first approved by Stalin's secretariat.[9] These images, in turn, served as symbols of political obedience. Images of Chairman Mao, famously on Mao badges, were essential parts of the public performance of individuals professing their loyalty to the supreme leader of the People's Republic of China.[10] In these authoritarian contexts, images were used to secure one's position in an environment of pervasive fear. The consequences for those who failed to send the right signals to the right people were potentially lethal.[11]

If there was one person's image that dominated political life in the 1950s and 1960s, it was not Nehru's, but Gandhi's. True, Nehru's portraits were not in short supply, but he seemed to prefer that impulses of iconisation be directed towards Gandhi. The murder of the Mahatma in January 1948, undoubtedly a personal tragedy for Nehru, also provided an opportunity to begin to unite and heal a traumatised nation around a man who, for many, had already been transformed into a symbol.[12] From 1950, Gandhi's death anniversary coincided with Republic Day celebrations, allowing leaders, including Nehru, to connect him repeatedly with the national project as it developed after independence.[13] Gandhi's image adorned rupee notes and postage stamps. When local governments, despite Nehru's objections, renamed roadways, Mahatma Gandhi Marg was, for many, the first choice. After his assassination, Gandhi's name, his face and his ideas all provided important symbols around which citizens could be rallied, and policies justified. Although there were important debates about Gandhi's ideas and his legacy in this period, his death helped to stabilise his image in a way that could be put to political use.

As for Nehru, his biographers have detailed his ambivalence and introspection about his own power.[14] There is little evidence that he sought to maintain much control over the ways in which he was portrayed. He professed to be 'allergic' to having things named after himself, and pleaded with the public to stop making such requests.[15] His image and his name may have been used during election campaigns, but ordinary citizens and

individual government servants did not use them to prove their fidelity, let alone to save themselves from liquidation. While touring Kanpur for his final election campaign in 1961, he told a crowd, 'I like your love but I don't want yes-men.' He scolded businessmen for donating to more than one party, telling them to keep their money if they did not have 'faith in the ideals and aims of the Congress'.[16] In fact, Nehru is known to have enjoyed a joke at his own expense. Inaugurating the satirical magazine *Shankar's Weekly* in 1948, Nehru told the cartoonist, '[W]e are apt to grow pompous and self-centred, and it is good to have the veil of our conceit torn occasionally. And so I gladly pay my tribute to Shankar and I hope that he will long continue to enlighten us and amuse us and pull us down a peg or two.'[17] To conflate the use of Nehru's name and his political charisma in democratic contests with the cults of personality developed by dictators would be to misunderstand the function of secular iconography in both types of regime.

If Nehru did not put special effort into his own myth-making, when and how did it arise? We find that the myth of Nehru's indisputable and indispensable leadership in India was propagated by Congress, at least in part, to keep an exhausted prime minister in his job. To understand this claim, we might look at one episode in which the prime minister made his weariness visible to the nation. In the hot weather of 1958, Nehru asked his party for permission to retire, if only temporarily, from his post as prime minister. At the time, the sixty-eight-year-old Nehru was at the height of his popularity and influence. He had established institutions that he hoped had launched the country towards a democratic and more prosperous future. By 1956, central and state governments had launched their second, more expansive and ambitious, five-year plans. Nehru had also seen the Congress Party through to success in the second general election in the following year. Even though the party had won a smaller share of the vote, and had lost Kerala to the communists, Nehru's personal stature was undiminished. Just before the election, in the first poll of its kind in independent India, the Indian Institute of Public Opinion had surveyed people with the question, 'What is your Opinion of Nehru?', and a full 74 per cent had answered, 'very good', with another 11 per cent answering 'good'. Though only 33 per cent of Hindu Mahasabha voters had a 'very good' opinion of the prime minister, a full 60 per cent of Jana Sangh voters did so, and 72 per cent of Communist Party voters felt likewise.[18]

Along with these accomplishments came further burdens. In February 1958, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a close friend who was only a year older than the prime minister, had passed away. Shortly thereafter the

finance minister T. T. Krishnamachari had been forced to resign as a result of one of the first big political scandals of the era.[19] Nehru had temporarily taken on the finance portfolio on his departure, adding it to his work as prime minister, chairman of the Planning Commission and minister for external affairs.

Addressing his party in April 1958, Nehru confessed to feeling 'tired and stale'. In a meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party, he told Congress MPs that he wished to 'seek a period of calm and quiet'. He regretted that he had no time to read or to really think through the problems faced by India or by the world.[20] At around the same time, he had begun to collect his correspondence from the freedom struggle, publishing letters written to him by his father, by Gandhi, by Sarojini Naidu and a host of others, in a volume he called *A Bunch of Old Letters*. Introducing the collection, the prime minister wrote that '[n]early all of them belong to a period which now seems remote'.[21] It was but one expression of his nostalgia for a time when the stakes were higher and the motives purer.

When he told the Party of his wish to retire, or at least take a sabbatical of perhaps half a year, they listened to his speech in 'stunned silence', cheering only when one member interrupted him to shout, 'No, Sir, you must continue.'[22] Around the country, the reaction was similar. The editorial board of *The Times of India* greeted the news with disbelief, saying the Party and the country were filled with a 'sense of bewilderment' as to why the prime minister might wish to retire. Even the opposition parties fretted at what a future without Nehru might bring: the Communist mayor of Bombay, S. S. Mirajkar, appealed to Nehru 'in the name of the working classes', urging him to remain in office out of fear that without him the social progress envisaged in the five-year plans would be subjected to 'sabotage'.[23]

Nehru had requested that Congress MPs consider his words carefully before arriving at a decision, but within minutes, they had drafted a letter declaring, 'It is universally felt that the nation needs Mr Nehru's continued leadership.'[24] Two days later, in a resolution adopted by acclamation, the Congress Parliamentary Party categorically refused to contemplate relieving Nehru of his duties for any length of time whatsoever. U. N. Dhebar, the Congress president, declared that at this 'crucial hour', the country 'will not be able to spare Mr Nehru'.[25]

Nehru dismissed their resolution, saying he had not been fishing for a vote of confidence, but rather was searching for a way out of his own mental impasse. He also offered a fuller explanation for his request in a longer speech in which he detailed his disappointment that Congress

FIGURE 1.1. 'The Retiring P.M.', *The Times of India*, 2 May 1958, 7. Published with permission of ProQuest LLC. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.

members were absorbed more by jobbery and factionalism than by the pursuit of ideals. He decried 'the deterioration of our standards' and the creeping entry of 'coarseness' and 'vulgarity' in the public life of the country. He was disturbed by majoritarianism among Congress members and the wider public. And the tense international situation had further burdened his mind.[26] The Congress Parliamentary Party responded by treating Nehru to a series of speeches declaiming his indispensable position as leader of the nation.[27] He was persuaded to withdraw his request for a lengthy leave of absence.

In the way that sometimes only satirists can do, R. K. Laxman captured the prime minister's position in a cartoon run nationally on 2 May 1958, as Nehru and his party contemplated his future (Fig. 1.1). Nehru was depicted as a giant, laid out on his back, viewing with fatigue his tiny fellow Congressmen as they squabbled on his chest.[28] This was neither the first time nor the last that Nehru would be portrayed as somehow greater than his peers by the cartoonists of the day. Given what we know about the episode to which it refers, we can see that the cartoon hardly captured

Nehru's state of mind. Instead, it was feeding the legend of the Great Man, who, if only he could be freed from petty problems, would stand tall again.

Nehru asked his party to let him step down, even temporarily, and there was no unseemly jockeying for position, no scramble to the top of the pile. The Congress Party simply refused to countenance life without Nehru. Was this, perhaps, the origin of the myth of Nehru as the unparalleled leader of independent India? Certainly, we need not point to a single origin to understand the significance of this episode: Nehru is revealed as a man of great energy, but one who could also become exhausted. He was the matchless leader of India, but not always in his own mind. Indeed, a wider reading of his letters uncovers regular bouts of self-doubt beyond this episode.[29] Unwilling to dictate to his party, even on the matter of his own retirement, he is revealed as a man who knew how to move forward only by consensus, and by building up and then bowing to institutions.

Propagating the Myth

The image of Nehru as the titan of postcolonial India was not the creation of Jawaharlal the aspiring supreme leader. Rather, the myth of Nehru as indispensable was orchestrated by his party to persuade a weary senior citizen to stay at his desk. But why has this image persisted for more than half a century? Why has Nehru not been exposed, not as a fraud, but as a mortal? The answer lies in the work of both the Congress Party and opposition parties after Nehru's death.

When Nehru's heart finally gave out on 27 May 1964, his doubts were eclipsed as the world eulogised him. His death was announced in the Lok Sabha with the same words he had used to inform the nation of Gandhi's death: 'the light is out'. Indians around the world began to grieve: Indian women in South Africa reportedly wept at the news, and Indian residents of London gathered at a vigil at India House.[30] In the ink that was spilled over his death, he was often lionised as the sole leader of independent India. Jayaprakash Narayan, sometime member of the socialist opposition and friend of the late prime minister, lamented, 'The captain of the ship is no more. The leader has left the people desolate and forlorn.'[31] *The Economic Weekly* portrayed Nehru as a man who had chosen 'to die in harness', unwilling to 'lay down his burden' because of his 'complete and utter commitment to the tasks that still remained unaccomplished'. Here we have a picture of Nehru yoked to the country, displaying his 'ceaseless striving, restless energy, audacious daring' as he pulled it in the direction of his dreams.[32] Reporting in a special edition on the day

after his death, *The New York Times* claimed, 'When he was alive, he had authority to decide on his own and prevail upon his party to accept his decisions.'[33] Describing his funeral the following day, *The Times of India* correspondent claimed to have detected, 'beneath the measured words of official and personal condolences the accents of a deep and genuine grief' among the world's leaders. The tributes of leading international figures, according to the paper, seemed to confirm 'Mr Nehru's standing as a global figure' who had a 'unique and precious ability to weave a web of magical sympathies stretching to many countries and continents'.[34] Nehru was remembered for his personal sacrifices, especially the time he spent in jail during the freedom struggle. He was lauded for his love of children and his desire to educate Indians. His illimitable energy and charisma were praised. The president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, told the nation in a radio address, 'As a fighter for freedom he was illustrious, as a maker of modern India his services were unparalleled [. . .]. It will be difficult to reconcile ourselves to the image of an India without Nehru's active and all-pervasive leadership.'[35] The rituals of mourning seem to demand hyperbole. Nehru certainly received at the very least his fair share.

In the weeks and months after his death, we begin to see a proliferation of Nehru iconography. At condolence meetings in New Delhi at the end of May, national leaders led 'thousands' in taking 'a pledge to follow Mr Nehru's ideals', a vow that had been unthinkable while he was alive.[36] Within days of his death, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi had resolved to rename the capital's Circular Road 'Jawaharlal Nehru Marg', and to place a statue of him at the roundabout facing the Turkman Gate.[37] By mid-June the General Post Office had issued a fifteen-paisa commemorative stamp in memory of the first prime minister, and a second stamp was issued on his birthday, 14 November, in the same year (Fig. 1.2).[38] India's first commemorative coin was emblazoned with his face. The Children's Book Trust, founded by K. Shankar Pillai of *Shankar's Weekly*, and funded by the Ministry of Education, published *Nehru for Children*, a volume that begins, simply, 'Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the greatest men the world has known.'[39]

A month after his death, an appeal for the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund was launched.[40] One of its early activities was to organise an exhibition in his honour at Teen Murti Bhavan in New Delhi, which opened on 14 November 1964.[41] The Fund has published commemorative volumes, celebrating him as a 'colossus among men'.[42] It oversaw the publication of his *Selected Works* and, more recently, their digitisation.[43]

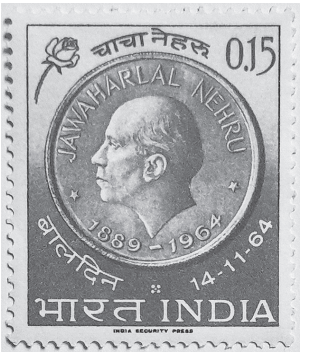

FIGURE 1.2. Chacha Nehru stamp, issued 14 November 1964. Author's collection.

That after his death the production of Nehru memorabilia expanded tells us more about the post-Nehru Congress Party than it does about Nehru himself. While pundits had predicted the party would succumb to skirmishes after Nehru's demise, Congress decided, in a seemingly orderly manner, to elevate Lal Bahadur Shastri to leader and prime minister. Shastri, however, had been virtually unknown to the wider public before he had begun to take on some of the prime minister's work in the last months of Nehru's life. Indeed, two opinion polls, in 1957 and again five years later, had asked the question, 'After Nehru, who?', and Shastri's name had not even appeared on the rather long list of contenders.[44] Perhaps the big players in the Congress Party found this rather unassuming man to be rather uninspiring: they looked once more to Nehru for inspiration, as they had done while he was alive. Thus, on the first anniversary of Nehru's death, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan urged the nation to adhere to the ideals and objectives which Nehru had set for them. The president told All India Radio listeners, 'The best way to honour [Nehru's] memory is to get on with the work which he left unfinished, his work for peace, justice and freedom at home and abroad.'[45]

The Congress Party used Nehru's image to help legitimate its rule before his death, and it continued to do so after it. To understand this through but one example, we can return to the film *Nehru*. Nehru's words, his opinions, and his actions dominate the film. Thus he simultaneously addresses and represents the nation. But before this relationship between the first prime minister and the nation can be explored, the film begins with a ninety-second preface. It opens with the camera focused on a portrait of Nehru, chin on fist, looking into the distance. The camera pans to show us that the photograph is on a wall in a room where Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, sits alone, addressing the camera. In 1984, she is India's prime minister, but her remarks are made in an intimate register: she refers to Nehru as 'my father', and as she speaks her eyes glow warmly with affection. Though she mentions his concern for solving the problems of India and of the world, there is no mention of the Congress Party or of the many political divisions of the day. There is only Indira and her father. The film

works its magic in part by connecting the people of India to Nehru, and Nehru to Indira. The Congress Party more broadly continues to rely on Nehru's charisma and his achievements to make their claims to legitimacy in India. Each year on the anniversary of his birth on 14 November, and his death on 27 May, the Congress Party, formerly in press releases, now in tweets, lauds him as the 'architect of modern India'.[46]

Perhaps paradoxically, opposition parties have also contributed to the myth. As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has emerged as an alternative to the Congress Party, Nehru's stature has been raised, not to lend him more esteem, but to personify the alleged mistakes of Congress in one man.[47] Since the 1980s, successive Indian governments, both Congress-led and BJP-led, have made economic decisions that they characterise as 'opening up' the economy. As they have done so, they have explained their decisions with reference to the mistaken policies of the first prime minister.[48] Thus, even as they claim he was wrong, they posthumously imbue Nehru with extraordinary influence.

Towards Some Hints about Nehru's Style of Rule

The idea that Nehru towered over India, sculpting it to his will, is simply a myth. I write this not to demean him, but to humanise him. How can we be certain? Let us begin with an explanation that stands outside of the man himself. Look for a moment at the size of the country: its population stood at more than 360 million people in 1951, and more than 438 million a decade later. It measured more than 3.2 million square kilometres, with a federal system comprising, in 1947, nine provinces, hundreds of princely states and a gaggle of centrally administered territories, from Delhi to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Although the number of separate administrative units had been streamlined somewhat by 1964, extra layers of government in the form of panchayats and related institutions had also been added. Under the complex federal system that had emerged historically during the colonial period, the British had devolved power to Indians at the lowest levels of governance first, designing the system to allow the imperial masters to retain what they thought was control at the apex of a complex power structure. Under the pressures of an independence movement which had not only opposed the colonial government but also been elected to run significant parts of it, minor insubordination had become a habit of governance by 1947.[49] The country faced complex economic and social issues, and its governments devised a proliferation of agencies to address the problems they identified. Nehru's energy may have been

boundless, but he was limited by what could be done with two hands and twenty-four hours in a day. Like all great men, his greatness was not only reliant upon, but was produced by, a web of human interactions, objects and institutions.[50]

Nehru's influence was not only restricted by India's geography and demography, or the constraints of the way humans experience space and time. His conception of his own power was that it was modest. Although he spoke and wrote extensively, he preferred not to turn his ideas into ideology.[51] In 1958, Sampurnanand, the Congress chief minister from Uttar Pradesh, called on Nehru to set down his philosophy in more concrete form, as a way of inspiring the masses again after the Congress Party's share of the vote had fallen in the second election. Nehru's reply came in the form of an essay called *The Basic Approach*, in which he explained how exasperated he was with people who, whether through religion or ideology, believed they had all the answers to the world's problems. He derided those who held to their principles without acknowledging that 'others might have some share of the truth also'. Such a dogmatic approach, he declared, was 'wholly unscientific, unreasonable and uncivilised whether it is applied in the realm of religion or economic theory or anything else'.[52] Far from producing a 'Little Red Book' containing ready answers to all questions, Nehru believed that the promulgation of such a credo would be damaging. Indeed, when someone had approached him the year before with the idea of publishing a book with extracts of his speeches under the title 'Nehru's Wisdom', he demurred at such a 'pompous' title.[53]

Nehru's biographers have been divided as to how he understood his position. Some have seen him as a man who was incapable of delegating work, with a 'Viceregal understanding' of his own role as prime minister.[54] Others have seen him as a delegator,[55] and a consensus builder.[56] Widening the scope to look beyond the man himself, one sees that Nehru had neither the desire nor the ability to work unchallenged. When he answered the question, 'after Nehru, who?', he felt it would be best to have a group take charge.[57] Indeed, his plea for temporary retirement was in part an admission that the work was too much for one person. To Nehru, governing as the representative of the people was not just a question of elections: 'In the ultimate analysis, it is a manner of thinking, a manner of action, a manner of behaviour to your neighbour and to your adversary.'[58] The primary norm in this democratic mode of being was respect for the person, even if one disagreed with his or her ideas. Opponents were to be won over by rational argument, rather than trampled underfoot. Indeed, Nehru maintained regular correspondence with members of

the opposition such as Jayaprakash Narayan, and relished the way that such exchanges improved his own ideas. Taking into account the fact that he was a man enmeshed in networks of people and institutions, his preference for working with others, and his modest conception of leadership, one can say that he saw his own role as having four facets: patron, mediator, educator and symbol.

His attitude towards democratic government helps explain Nehru's penchant for institutions. Of course, he inherited institutions within which the role of prime minister was central. The most obvious of these was the cabinet. Nehru worked hard to ensure that important issues were sent to cabinet for consultation. He also fostered the status of the Lok Sabha as the central deliberative body of government. As prime minister, he attended regular question-and-answer sessions, and took debates seriously.[59] His belief in the importance of institutions extended beyond the nation-state: as chapter 2 will describe, Indian representatives helped shape many of the early UN agencies.

Far from designing and overseeing everything, however, Nehru's role in many of India's new institutions might be encapsulated in the idea of the patron. One of the ways in which he shaped postcolonial India was through supporting projects that were proposed by energetic people around him. From S. K. Dey's Community Projects Administration (see chapter 4) to Durgabai Deshmukh's Central Social Welfare Board (chapter 5), brilliant men and women who earned the prime minister's respect and esteem were given the encouragement and support necessary to build institutions and pursue their own experiments in postcolonial India. He held the most prominent office in the land and so he was invited to observe, to inaugurate, to advise and to remove obstacles as these visionaries built their institutions. But he did so as patron, not potentate. Ruling through others did not always have benign outcomes, however. Nehru's penchant for ruling through others is also witnessed in the decision to remove Sheikh Abdullah as prime minister of Jammu and Kashmir and replace him with the more amenable Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad in 1953. At a mundane level, those who benefited from his patronage were sometimes accused of extravagance or corruption, and their projects wound down after a short time.

Given the large number of people for whom he acted as patron, it should not be surprising that Nehru expended a good deal of effort in acting as a mediator between people in various parts of his government and his party. He sometimes expressed frustration at the amount of time he spent settling feuds between different cabinet members, public officials or

Congress workers. Writing to his sister in 1953, he lamented that 'the best part of my time is taken up in reconciling people or in soothing them when they ruffle with each other'. Allowing himself to fantasise momentarily of alternatives to the arduous work of reconciliation, he pondered tongue-in-cheek, 'I do not know if in other countries people are continually faced with these difficulties of individuals behaving too individualistically. In the Soviet [Union], I suppose, when this happens somebody is liquidated.'[60] It was the difficult work of ruling in concert, of finding consensus, and of consoling bruised egos that occupied much of his time. These were not the concerns of a man happy to dictate to others. These were the concerns of an arbitrator, striving to help others cooperate harmoniously.

Nehru may have faced few challengers for the position of leader of Congress or of the nation, but he faced daily challenges to his leadership. Most often, these came in the form of members of his own government or his own party acting in defiance of stated policies or the norms of democratic fair play. These were, as noted above, habits of governance inherited from the colonial period. Nehru struggled with this quotidian insubordination. Writing to B. C. Roy in 1951, he insisted that he did not have 'the makings of a dictator'.[61] Rather, he stepped into other circles of responsibility rarely, often with some hesitation, and without unwavering commitment. When he did so, he intervened by trying to persuade his interlocutor, rather than by pulling rank and issuing orders. And if his wishes were defied, he most often simply let the issue drop. Nehru did offer to resign a few times over issues within the Congress Party, but he seems to have had little in his armoury between resigning his office and resigning himself to the everyday defiance of members of his party and his administration who would not be persuaded by his efforts.

Asserting his authority over others without negotiation was something Nehru did rarely and without much success, but he did relish his role as an educator.[62] This is evident in his fortnightly letters to chief ministers. As he declared his intention to write to them regularly in his first such letter, dated 15 October 1947, he told chief ministers that the aim of his missives was to 'to keep in close touch with each other, so that we can put forth concerted efforts' to confront India's problems. At the same time, he urged chief ministers to 'put across to the public the true basis of our policy', an act of cascading communication which he regarded as 'a matter of great importance'.[63] With ordinary Indians, he was happy to take on the role of professor. Discussing the rallies held for the first general election in 1951–52, Nehru explained, 'I speak to these people and I try to tell them in some detail of how I feel and what I want them to do [. . .]. The effort to

explain in simple language our problems and our difficulties and to reach the minds of these simple folk is both exhausting and exhilarating.'[64] The combination of hierarchy and benevolence suited India's first prime minister, at a time when similar attitudes were pervasive among India's elites.

Finally, Nehru understood that he was a symbol of the Congress Party, and that on the international stage he was a symbol of India.[65] Notwithstanding India's parliamentary system, whereby prime ministers are not directly elected, the Congress Party campaigned for each of the country's first three general elections on the back of Nehru's charisma and his achievements. His personal attention helped to soothe the pain of Muslims in Hyderabad after the invasion of the state in 1948. His word helped to anchor Jammu and Kashmir to India, a relationship symbolised by the tunnel the government opened in 1956, which connected Srinagar to the rest of the country. Quite exceptionally, he allowed it to be named Jawahar Tunnel. There is a difference between, on the one hand, allowing one's name, likeness and ideas to be used as symbols, and on the other developing a personality cult around carefully crafted imagery to maintain absolute power. It is certainly the case, however, that in making Nehru the centre of their electoral campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s, the Congress Party prepared the ground for the propagation of the myth of Nehru as the architect of independent India.

From Nehru to Nehruvian

Because Nehru's personal stature has been inflated, the ideals believed to define the first two decades after independence are strongly identified with the first prime minister. Thus the neologism 'Nehruvian' has made it into the reference work *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*. Srirupa Roy, the author of the entry, has crafted a definition that contains all the caveats and qualifiers one expects of rigorous scholarship. She is careful to assert that 'the notion of a singular immutable Nehruvian ideology is [. . .] largely ahistorical'. Nonetheless, her definition includes 'secularism', 'a centrally planned "command" or *dirigiste* economy with an emphasis on heavy industrial growth', 'state-led social and cultural modernization', 'developmentalism', 'a demonstrable fascination with scientific and technological accomplishments and artefacts' and 'a non-aligned foreign policy'.[66] The definition comes close to pinning all of the myths of Nehru's India which this book seeks to critically explore. Each of these ideas became a 'tenet' of the Nehruvian consensus in its own way, and their path to achieving the status of myth is charted here in the chapters that follow.

For now, it is important to record that in the more measured of the assessments that appeared in the weeks and months after Nehru's death, there is one surprising absence: there was no consensus as to the ideals he stood for, nor on the extent to which he had been able to transform the nation according to his own blueprint. This was in no small part down to the fact that while he was prime minister, Nehru avoided jingoistic slogans and aphoristic definitions, saying that such things 'come in the way of clear thinking'.[67] It should surprise us, therefore, that he is so strongly associated with a series of abstract nouns—non-alignment, secularism, socialism, modernisation, democracy—which are said to amount to the Nehruvian consensus.

Each of the features of what came to be known as the Nehruvian consensus was ill-defined, if not disputed, at the time of his death. Take foreign policy. In eulogising him, many stressed Nehru's earnest desire for peace and his abhorrence of nuclear weapons. But non-alignment was often not the central feature of the way his foreign policy was understood at the time of his death. Some even implied that non-alignment was no more than rhetoric. When Harold Wilson, the leader of the opposition Labour party in the UK, was approached for a comment on Nehru's death, his highest praise included the assertion that Nehru's India was on the Anglo-American side in the Cold War: 'He adopted a neutralist posture [. . .] but when the chips were down we could see where his loyalties lay[.]'[68] V. B. Karnik, trade-unionist and founding member of the anti-communist Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom, drew the opposite conclusion in his postmortem on Nehru's foreign policy: 'Nehru's non-alignment [. . .] was not non-aligned in the real sense [. . .]. It was more non-aligned against the West and less non-aligned in the case of Russia and other Communist powers.'[69]

The case of secularism was no clearer. *The New York Times* declared that 'Mr Nehru, although of Hindu heritage, considered himself an agnostic'.[70] But on the first anniversary of his death, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the president of the Republic of India, remembered Nehru as a 'deeply spiritual man though he did not uphold any particular form of religion'. Radhakrishnan noted that Nehru 'deeply distrusted all absolute philosophies and dogmas' but he went on to claim that the man had 'worked for the spread of [. . .] a liberal, spiritual religion among the people of India'.[71] Whereas there was room for more than one opinion on his personal faith, many agreed that Nehru's secularism had not taken firm root in the rest of the country. As the president mourned Nehru on All India Radio on the day of his death, he conceded that Indians had been unable to live up to

Nehru's ideal of non-communal politics.[72] Many others wrote of the 'gulf between principles and practice' in India's secularism.[73] This is a mirror image of the late twentieth-century version of Nehru, who was widely considered to be personally atheistic, but successful in securing hegemony for his version of secularism in the country.[74] By the twenty-first century, the consensus would have shifted yet again.

On socialism, views were equally diverse. Upon reporting his death *The Wall Street Journal* may have deemed Nehru to have been a 'doctrinaire socialist',[75] but closer to home the verdict was more ambiguous. In his first address to the nation on the death of their leader, the word socialism did not pass Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's lips. Instead the president extolled Nehru's 'steadfast loyalty to certain fundamental principles of liberalism'.[76] A postmortem review of Nehru's ideas in a special number of *The Economic Weekly* included a chorus of voices which concluded that the socialism Nehru pursued was 'curbed',[77] or perhaps most damningly, nothing more than 'a rather weak and hollow reed in which one can blow almost any kind of music'.[78] Many agreed, however, that capitalism and capitalists not only remained in India, even as it pursued a socialistic pattern of society, but were in a stronger position than they had been at independence.[79]

The verdict on democracy and the state was also surprisingly mixed. Nehru was universally praised for not just adhering to parliamentary procedure, but for elevating India's Lok Sabha by taking its role in debating policy seriously. At the same time, most people acknowledged that democratic governance went beyond elections and parliamentary procedures; it was also about the functioning of the bureaucracy, and the establishment of institutions that served the will of the people. On this plane of democratic governance, Nehru's contemporaries were split as to his achievements. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan argued that Nehru 'used the existing social and political institutions and breathed into them a new spirit, a new vitality'.[80] In his biography of Nehru, which is otherwise full of praise for him, the Communist Party leader Hiren Mukerjee noted that the prime minister had done little to curb corruption at the highest levels.[81] Rajni Kothari, writing outside the genre of eulogy, praised Nehru and his governments for overseeing 'the maturing of the nation's institutional growth', from the party system and parliament, down to village-level institutions.[82] Others, however, were not so generous. An unsigned assessment in the same special number of *The Economic Weekly* in which Kothari extolled Nehru's institutional achievements claimed that during the Nehru years, 'the administration underwent practically no change [. . .] and became,

if anything more rigid and impervious to the [. . .] aspirations of the people'.[83]

When it comes to modernisation, in the twenty-first century Nehru is strongly associated with an authoritarian high modernism that took the form of steel plants and mammoth concrete dams, and his vision for India's future is most often contrasted with that of Gandhi, who imagined a future of village republics. At the time of his death, however, those who knew Nehru best, including his daughter, resisted calls for memorials to him to be built in 'iron and concrete'.[84] Some commentators observed a split between Gandhi's ideas and Nehru's.[85] Radhakrishnan, by contrast, emphasised the ways in which Nehru 'was trying to put into practice all the great ideals which Mahatmaji taught us'.[86] There are only scattered hints of the so-called Nehru–Gandhi divide that dominates the thinking of scholars today about what visions for India's future were articulated in the first decades after independence.[87]

If there was no agreement on what Nehru stood for or what he had achieved, what are we to make of the idea of the Nehruvian consensus? This notion owes a great deal to Rajni Kothari, India's foremost political scientist for decades after independence. Kothari, having taken his BSc at the London School of Economics, had founded the Centre of Developing Studies in 1963. The Centre became the place to study Indian politics, and Kothari's influence on the nation's intellectual elite and its understanding of India was profound. Writing in *The Economic Weekly* just weeks after the first prime minister's death, Kothari argued that Nehru's greatest gift to India was 'the development of a national consensus'. At this point, however, Kothari argued that the consensus that Nehru brought about was not in the realm of ideas, but rather in the sphere of political conduct. Leading by example, Nehru had brought about a 'pragmatic orientation' of politics, channelling it away from theatrics driven by transcendental nationalism, and towards the management of people and institutions guided by self-interest. This practical politics fostered a culture of accommodation and flexibility and was marked by the ability 'to hold the temper of political struggle low'.[88] Kothari was describing a way of managing conflicting ideas, not a state of unanimity about the ideas themselves. By the end of the 1960s, however, as new national problems and new political competition had opened up a new sense of uncertainty in the country, Kothari had added the idea of an 'ideological consensus' to his analysis of the Nehru years.[89] With each new crisis, the sense that the past was a more coherent and harmonious place has grown.[90]

Within two decades of his death, the nuanced and contradictory reviews of the Nehru years had been largely forgotten. Let us circle back

to the film *Nehru*. The third part of the film is called simply, 'Freedom', and it tells the story of India between 1947 and 1964 in less than an hour. The film covers Nehru's opinions on peace and war, the treatment of minorities, foreign policy, parliamentary democracy, development and modernisation. By playing Nehru's words over pictures of dams flowing and scientific laboratories being opened, the film abolishes the often yawning gap between intention and implementation. By flipping rapidly between scenes of Nehru greeting cheering fans, inspecting nuclear plants, and meeting international leaders, it overcomes the limits which constrained the real Nehru from achieving everything he hoped.

The craftiest trick of the film, however, is reserved for the finale. It ends with the words from Nehru's last will and testament, in which he expressed his wish that the major portion of his ashes be taken high in an aeroplane and scattered 'over the fields where the peasants of India toil so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India'. While we listen to his last wish, we watch his daughter and his sister carrying it out. His request was a humble acknowledgement of his own relative insignificance. But the effect of the film is the opposite: India becomes indistinguishable from Nehru.

Nehru as the architect of independent India was never more than a myth. With this in mind, the remaining chapters re-examine one by one the tenets of Nehruvianism: non-alignment, secularism, socialism, the strong state, democracy and modernism. They not only reassess each of these aspects of postcolonial Indian life, but also bring to light how these abstract nouns have become myths about the Nehru era, and explore why these have been so enduring in the years since Nehru's death. Readers more familiar with the period will find that the man himself is not prominent in the rest of the book. Nehru was aware, at least in outline, of most of the issues that will be discussed here, and yes, he often had opinions on these matters. But in the chapters that follow, I have chosen not to fetishise Nehru's own words. Moving attention away from the myth of Nehru the architect has often meant choosing to avoid quoting the man himself, and privileging other people, institutions and structures instead. I would like to think that he would not mind being, to use his own phrase, pulled down a peg or two in this way.

INDEX