

*Nehru's Chairmanship of Allahabad Municipality and His Vision of the City*

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I would be talking about Nehru's Chairmanship of the Allahabad Municipality and the vision he had for the cities in general. As it would become clear later in the paper, cities occupied important position in the thought of Nehru. Many of his experiences in the city administration and the administration in general were gained when he was the Chairman of the Allahabad Municipality from April 1923 to April 1925. They also came at a crucial juncture when nationalist politics was beginning to emerge from its local roots.

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## **Local Administration and Politics in late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century India**

The British in India introduced a slew of reforms intending to create local self-government in India. The cost factor was also kept in mind. The argument runs that the British wanted to reduce the cost of administration in India and it was more profitable to have Indians run their own administration in a limited way. It was a means to financial and administrative decentralization. The reforms were introduced gradually and often reluctantly. It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that these reforms started. It started with the introduction of the legislature into the government of India by the Charter of 1853.<sup>1</sup>

This limited Indianization of the British administrative machinery would be important for the later emergence of the Nationalist movements. Our concern here is the administrative decentralization of the Urban local bodies and their reconstitution. In a way, the shock of the 1857 rebellion was still looming large as the British devised plans to maintain the existing balance of forces within the society. One of the innovations of the post-mutiny years was the development of the network of municipalities.<sup>2</sup>

Local government remained firmly under the control of the Indian Civil Service, and this service remained predominantly British. In 1870, Lord Mayo proclaimed for the financial decentralization. It was Lord Ripon though who eventually freed more the municipalities from the official control and extended local self-government to the Districts.<sup>3</sup> The resolution enunciated proclaimed that the local bodies should have mostly elected non-governmental members and Chairman. The State control over urban bodies should be indirect and these bodies must be endowed with adequate financial resources to carry their functions.<sup>4</sup> Even so the municipal electorate was minute. Wealthy people paying certain amount of tax or owning land can form the electorate. The municipal politics was, as is mentioned above, an area where power was supposed to be exercised by the local notables. Often the town populations were divided along ethnic or religious categories.

### **Nehru as the Chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board**

Allahabad was occupied by the British in 1801. Till 1863, the administration of the city was run by an official committee called the "Local Agency". In 1863, the Municipal government of Allahabad came into existence under the North-Western Provinces and Oudh Municipalities Act XXVI of 1850. The chief motive was to provide for an efficient police force, to improve the conservancy arrangements and to promote the welfare of the city. It was a nominated body constituted at the initiative of the collector. A limited elective principle in Allahabad Municipal Committee was introduced in 1868 by the North-Western Province and Oudh Municipal government Act VI of 1868.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Tinker *South Asia: A Short History* Pall Mall Press London 1966 pp.115

<sup>2</sup> Ibid pp.158

<sup>3</sup> Ibid pp.161

<sup>4</sup> Ram Narayan Prasad *Urban Local Self-Government in India* Mittal Publications New Delhi 2006 pp.109

The development of Municipal self-government also made it essential for the bankers to protect their economic interests by electoral actions. The municipality became an object to the immediate political energies of both commercial notable and professional men, thus providing framework within which bargaining for local resources could reinforce local control by the authorities. The first Municipal board of Allahabad was constituted under the U.P. Municipalities Act II of 1916. In the same year, election of a non-official Chairman was permitted and provisions were made to represent minority communities, especially Muslims, in the Board.<sup>5</sup>

This limited Indianization permitted Jawaharlal Nehru to become the Chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board, as it did CR Das who became the first Mayor of Calcutta, Vithalbahi Patel who became the president of Bombay Corporation, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel of Ahmedabad. Nehru was a reluctant chairman when he assumed office in the April of 1923. For him at that point of time, the chairmanship was “only the means for serving the nation for hastening swaraj”. The best method for him was to go straight ahead on the lines chalked out by other leaders and not to wander in the shady alleys and lanes of constitutional activity.<sup>6</sup> As he outlined in that circular, he was following the conscious policy of the Congress to capture municipalities and spread the Congress programme. For him, everything else was secondary. Yet, we would find him in a letter addressed to Congress working committees in 1928 stating that he loves the municipal work and it could be one way of making the lives of our people better. At the same time, he says that one or two people can’t accomplish that feat.<sup>7</sup>

Though he said in the beginning that he regrets that he cannot split himself up into various compartments- one for “general politics”, another for “municipal affairs”, and so on. Eventually though he started liking the work, “What I feared and disliked I have begun to like, and municipal work has begun to have some fascination for me. I feel that it is in the power of our board to make life a little more bearable, a little less painful to the inhabitants of Allahabad.”<sup>8</sup> In 1924 the Board unanimously requested the government not to accept Jawaharlal’s resignation and, if this were not feasible, to permit the board to re-elect him. Nehru throughout his chairmanship criticized the nepotism prevailing in the elections to the municipal board where people get elected on the basis of contacts and personal qualities. He proposed for a meritocratic and ideological basis of the elections rather than the trivially personal<sup>9</sup>.

Nehru himself confessed that he was pestered with applications for appointments and people trying to advantage themselves through his position.<sup>10</sup> He declared that incompetency is a deadly sin and personally resolved to get rid of that. This is echoed all throughout his years in office. His concern for the socially ostracized and marginalized

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<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> Circular letter of Jawaharlal as secretary, prov. Cong. Committee to all district, town and *tehsil* Congress committees and members of prov. Cong. Committee, 5 April 1923

<sup>7</sup> Nehru’s Letter to Municipality, File No. XI Nehru Museum and Memorial Library(NMML),(My own translation)

<sup>8</sup> Sarvapalli Gopal *Jawaharlal Nehru A Biography* Volume One 1889-1947 pp.89

<sup>9</sup> Nehru’s circular to the Congress Working committee (My translation)

<sup>10</sup> S.Gopal (eds) *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Volume Two* Orient Longman pp.7

sections of the society is also evident through his interventions in the case of the prostitutes, or the poor *ekkawalas* (people who drive carriages). I will come to *ekkawalas* later, but Nehru was concerned with the treatment prostitutes get in a city.<sup>11</sup> He was against the Prostitutes being cornered to a party of a city and supported the rights of Prostitutes to buy property. For that, he was ready to interpret the bye-laws and even change them. In other words, Nehru was convinced prostitutes possess as much rights to the city as any other.

Nehru was made the chairman of the Hackney carriages committee in 1923. He was to look after the suitability of placing the hackney carriages in an appropriate stand. The Board members were convinced that Nehru was the best person for it<sup>12</sup>. The *ekkawalas* made a petition that a concession be granted to third and fourth class hackney carriages and ekka at twenty five percent and to ekkas of fifth class at fifty percent<sup>13</sup>. This is during the time of *Magh Mela* (religious pilgrimage) of 1924. What follows is interesting set of correspondence which reveals the tussle between the cantonment board committee and the municipality. In a letter directed to the Commissioner of the Allahabad division, the cantonment Magistrate objected to the proposed increased rates on behalf of the Cantonment Authorized on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 1924. The reasoning given is that it affects especially the poorer classes using such conveyances. These classes include sepoy and others living in Cantonments<sup>14</sup>.

Eventually it is argued that the area borders on the jurisdiction of the cantonment and hence the municipality has no legal right to frame laws over it. In a letter written on behalf of the *ekkawalas*, it was argued that the price of basic consumption has increased and licensing fee has increased too. They petition the board to increase the number of days they can charge nominally higher rates from three days to six days.<sup>15</sup> We know from the documents that the *ekkawalas* were being harassed by the constant fines they are being made to pay. We also know that free rides on these carriages were also used by the municipal board employees. Nehru himself chastised them strongly and warned that if they are found indulging in free rides, they would be dismissed.<sup>16</sup> We know too that these *ekkawalas* who were proposing an increase of the rates for few days were the lowliest of the carriage people.

In a way, the above tussle reveals to us the jurisdictional battle and the limited powers of the Indian municipalities. The Cantonments were not accountable to the municipalities and had their own cantonment committee. There was a conflict of interest between the military and civic needs of the city. In fact, the *Magh Mela* itself became a site of tussle between the Municipal board and the government. Nehru had to convene a special meeting of the board to discuss what termed the “obstinacy” of the Board to address the questions of the bathing of the pilgrims in the *Sangam*<sup>17</sup> (confluence of rivers). The

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid pp.16

<sup>12</sup> Allahabad Municipal Board File No. 9/X, NMML, New Delhi

<sup>13</sup> Allahabad Municipal Board

<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> Allahabad Municipal Board File No. 7/7, NMML, New Delhi

<sup>16</sup> Allahabad Municipal Board File No. 7, NMML, New Delhi

<sup>17</sup> 15 January 1924. Allahabad Municipal Board File No. 23/XII-4

authorities had denied access to the *Sangam* owing to the strong current of the river Ganges. He said he is convening the meeting because a large section of people's feeling was hurt.

This also reveals that Nehru was concerned with the state of affairs of the poor inhabitants of the city. There is a desire on his part to spend more money on public health and sanitation, education, public works etc. For example, when the commissioner points to the terrible infant mortality, Nehru wants something to be done to it. He also is worried about the lack of training among *dais* and wants them to be replaced with something more reliable.<sup>18</sup> As we proceed in Nehru's Chairmanship, the efficiency of the Board increases and gets reflected in the number of meetings. He commends the board in September 1923 and praises them for having regular meetings.<sup>19</sup> In three months, the board manages to have twenty six meetings, averaging nine meetings per month. However, the concern for poor carriage people or prostitutes did not necessarily bear result and Nehru got frustrated with nepotism and inefficiency of the Board.

The fact that municipal boards are not merely a space for city administration but an active sphere of politics is evident throughout the years of Nehru's Chairmanship. He objected to the public reception of the Lord Reading by the Allahabad Municipality and said that "public reception to the Viceroy is a shameful thing for anyone to whom the honour of India is dear and precious".<sup>20</sup> It is also evident when he talks about using khaddar in municipal schools, flying the national flag in universities and singing the national anthem. He introduced Hindustani in the Municipal board hoping it will instill pride among the people. Spinning wheels were distributed in all girls' school and spinning taught in a business-like way by experts and special attention paid to the care and repair of the *Charkha*.<sup>21</sup> Empire day ceased to be celebrated and Nehru argued that the idea of empire in the true sense of the word is out of date and only the dark side of the empire is visible.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Tilak day, the first August, the death anniversary of the late Lokmanya, and the eighteenth March, the Gandhi Day, when the leader Mahatma Gandhi was sentenced was added to the list of holidays.

When it came to the revenues of the municipal government, Nehru was convinced that octroi had to be abolished. He argued that the octroi tax kills the trading activity though it adds to the municipal revenue.<sup>23</sup> Octroi would reduce the tax on poor. He argued that there should be no indirect tax of any kind as it harms the poor and the small shopkeepers. There should be direct tax and those who are rich should pay more and the absolutely poor should not be asked to pay any tax. House tax should be replaced by land tax. There should be a tax on the rich who employ many servants. He concludes the letter by saying that the municipality should be taken to a new direction. It was the policy of Congress, as I have argued above, to capture the municipalities.

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<sup>18</sup> *Selected Works of Nehru* pp.25

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* pp.25

<sup>20</sup> 25 October 1923. Allahabad Municipal Board File 37/XII-3

<sup>21</sup> 17 December, 1923. *The Allahabad Municipal Gazette Extraordinary*, Part Iv, 21 December 1923

<sup>22</sup> *The Tribune*, 27 August 1924

<sup>23</sup> Nehru's Letter on municipal elections 18 November, 1928, File No. 7 (My own translation)

It does appear that Nehru remained in conflict over the politics of Congress and the local politics of the Municipal board. He expressed his love for the work in the municipal boards but often went back to the pessimism that not much can be done over it. In the year 1928 in which he expressed his desire to do municipal work, he was dissuaded by Gandhi. Gandhi suggested to Nehru not to combine all India work with solid Municipal work. "Solid Municipal work is a thing in itself and require all the energy that a man can give it and I would not like your work to be anything but solid", he suggested.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it did not sit well with the image he wanted to be identified with, that of a revolutionary leader who abhors constitutionalism.

Also the legislative councils expanded in 1909 and in U.P., of the elected members, thirteen were elected by local bodies, nine by district boards and the smaller municipalities and four chosen by large cities in rotation.<sup>25</sup> Thus as Tinker argues, in order to make his mark on national or provincial public life, the Indian politician of the time had to begin by standing as a member of a local board, and then had to secure sufficient prestige amongst his colleagues on the local bodies of his division to ensure further election to the provincial council.

To come to Nehru, his chairmanship of Board was appreciated from many quarters of society. The commissioner himself appreciated his hard work and devotion to the board. When he tried to resign from the board in 1924, his resignation was not accepted. There was certain discipline and efficiency that all agreed had been brought in by Nehru's leadership. It also needs to be noted though that there were certain control of urban affairs that had been achieved in U.P. due the U.P. Municipalities act of 1916 and the later Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. Such reforms did not produce the same results everywhere.

### **Nehru and the vision of the city**

City for Nehru occupied an extremely important part of not merely the society, but for civilization itself. He believed that between the State and the individual comes the municipality of a city which itself is a microcosm of the larger state.<sup>26</sup> Cities are also central to the removal of the poverty of the people. A municipality must provide schools, hospitals, water supply and good roads without any expectation of financial profit from them. For him, it was one of the main responsibilities of the city to house the poor and feed them. It itself was a part of his egalitarian vision. As for the revenue, he had already outlined the sources of the revenues. Basically, it would be the demand-driven mode based on increasing the consumption of the city dwellers.

He gives the example of the City of Vienna which had managed to do just that. By a jester system of taxation they have raised large sums of money from those who can afford to pay, and with this money they have provided fine sanitary dwellings for the ordinary

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<sup>24</sup> Reference is there in Sarvapalli book

<sup>25</sup> Ibid pp.88

<sup>26</sup> "Service to the Poor" *Letter directed to Syt Amal House, Editor Municipal Gazette, Central Municipal Office, Calcutta* 31.10.29 NMML, New Delhi

workers and raised their standard of life in many ways<sup>27</sup>. He argued that because of this raising of a standard of life, the worker has become more efficient and a better citizen. The trade also flourishes due to increased spending. The object of municipality for Nehru was not merely to “build fine buildings but to build fine men and women.”<sup>28</sup> The primary service of municipality is to remove poverty.

Fundamentally the idea was that the material poverty inhibits the realization of the civic consciousness of a city. Only a healthy and politically engaged citizenry can participate in the city affairs and work for its improvement. Nehru however does not take the question of civic consciousness as an abstract concept, for instance, as used by Weber<sup>29</sup> in outlining the history of cities in the world. The modern Indian municipalities got divided along caste and religious lines with reserved sections for the Muslims and the lower castes in the municipalities. It is striking that in a stratified society like India, Nehru did not say much about the caste division that existed spatially in the cities. A city based on the primordial identities of caste and kinship was clearly far more incapable of forming organic solidaristic institutions of the impersonal kind and displaying that bond for the cities. Hence can we talk of civic consciousness in the Indian cities?

In fact, certain facts do reveal how religious or caste consciousness hampered any British effort to provide limited amenities to the city. For example, just before 1914, in certain UP municipal elections “the various candidates preferred to substitute for open election the simple process of casting lots in a temple.” When electricity supplies were being extended to U.P. towns in the 1920s and 1930s, considerable opposition was voiced by orthodox Muslims on the grounds that the *Tazias* (processions) carried in *Mohurrum* (Muslim religious day) processions would be interfered with. Certain places like the tribal regions of the north-west abolished the municipalities after finding it of trifling use<sup>30</sup>. This is of course not to suggest that the British hold on the cities is not responsible for the state of affairs of the city. Perhaps it was the political considerations of the Congress that Nehru did not want to disturb. The important task, as he often said, was to fight imperialism. This is also striking precisely because the British ideology was that Indians are incapable of running their cities and country.

The growth of cities in history represents something positive for the human civilization. It was in the cities, he said, the idea of providing something more than the protection of the citizen first developed. Before the growth of cities, the state was looked upon as the private possession of the sovereign. The chief business of the State was to tax the subjects and provide security, but no more. Such states he calls the “Police states” and the British government in India was also a police state. Fundamentally, the “Police States” do not provide anything industrial, cultural, educational or material to the State.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Max Weber *The City*

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Tinker *The Foundations of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma* University of London The Athlone Press 1954

<sup>31</sup> “The Civic Ideal”, *Nehru Private Papers*, File No. XI, NMML, New Delhi

Cities provide the conglomeration of large number of people and results in the growth of cooperative activities and of culture, Nehru goes to on write in his “civic ideals”. It was from here that the civic ideals began to emerge, the idea that amenities for the common enjoyment of citizens should be provided for<sup>32</sup>. There was a sense of public sharing of resources and utilities that came about. These included roads, bridges, sanitation, lighting, water-supply, schools and recreation parks and many others. It is considered municipality’s responsibility to provide these and also art-galleries and music halls. However the basic need of providing food should be met in all conditions by the municipality. Cities should also provide employment and work too all.

Nehru goes on to say that under the current social structure there has been a saturation of socialist ideals. He says that it was eventually the state that monopolized the civic ideals. Not only the State now gives humans security from external invasion and internal disorder, but it educated them, taught them industries, tried to raise their standard of living, gave them opportunities for the development of culture, provided them with insurance schemes to enable them to face unforeseen contingency, gave them all manner of amenities, and made itself responsible for his work and food<sup>33</sup>. Under the current social structure, the civic ideals can proceed no more. What should be the future course now? Nehru proposes that it is under socialism that civic ideals can proceed now. As he puts it, “The true civic ideal is the socialist ideal, the communist ideal. It means the common enjoyment of the wealth that is produced in nature and by human endeavor.”

He feels happy and pleasant expounding these days because he says these ideas are beyond the domain of politics. These are constructive ideas which are engaging. He then laments the fact that he is too much a politician to give an advice on that. He hence seem to draw a line between the municipal work and the real politics that he is engaging in which is to fight imperialism. Municipal work is an autonomous domain, he seems to suggest while the fight against British imperialism is where the real fight starts. It is hard to be convinced of his ideas when we know municipal politics was the real politics too. It was a domain in which real power resided. Of course, this might be Nehru’s own rhetorical justification for the fight against imperialism. It clearly reveals Nehru’s own conflict of mind regarding municipal work. He often echoes this point that it’s not possible to work in municipal politics because of imperialism. Yet his own years as the municipal chairman revealed the possibilities of changing the fortunes of a city, albeit not in an unlimited way.

In another letter circulated in 1928<sup>34</sup>, he outlines other basic provisions of a municipality. The municipalities must also provide schools and playgrounds for children. All children must study and enroll themselves in a school. There should be clean mass housing for the poor and alternative accommodation should be provided for the people who are going to be displaced by municipal actions. Dairy should be opened to provide regular supply of milk. Small industries based on work at home should be encouraged, specially sewing and cutting. A library should be opened in all neighbourhoods so that people can avail its

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<sup>32</sup> ibid

<sup>33</sup> ibid

<sup>34</sup> Nehru’s letter to municipality , NMML, 18.11.1928

services. There should be committees and Panchayats of people who live in a neighborhood which could help the municipal board. The neighborhood committees would also ensure that the people are together serving the city. There should be also provision for the elderly. They should be taken care of.

What emerges out from the above discussion are the two domains of political action for Nehru- one in the municipal sphere and the other at the nation. It is also quite clear that the national politics is most important political domain for Nehru. It may well be that revolutionary politics continued to haunt Nehru well into his later life. He started as a revolutionary socialist and yet his first political move was being the chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board. It is also not that Nehru's interest in municipalities declined in any time in the future. That Nehru wanted to be a proactive citizen is exhibited often in his concerns with municipal work later in the years of high politics. He continued to complain against the ugly advertisements on the road, various kinds of unwanted voices in the processions and the lack of roads that inhibits movement of people.<sup>35</sup> In a letter to the Municipal board in as late as 1953, he expresses his surprise that the octroi duty has yet not been abolished in the municipality<sup>36</sup>.

For Nehru the detailed visions that he outlined above can only be achieved after the independence of the country when the British "Police State" ceases. Therefore for Nehru, the priority now should be to fight the British government in an aim to achieve independence. However, the municipal work also convinced Nehru that it required far more dedication than he thought. As he often said, it required people to dedicate themselves to it or there is no point to doing a municipal work. In that context, he often praised the American system of city development which was far more specialized and dedicated<sup>37</sup>. It perhaps was also very efficient having to deal with less nepotism and inefficiency of the kind that plagued the Indian municipalities.

Nehru was critical of the Improvement Trusts of Allahabad too in the manner in which they wanted to bring improvements to the city.<sup>38</sup> Improvement Trusts had been started after the First World War to improve the city infrastructure of roads and housing.<sup>39</sup> Nehru criticized the Allahabad Improvement Trust for its extravagance in dealing with the state of affairs. He criticized the Trust officers for drawing heavy salaries and buying expensive motor cars. He also accused them of being unprepared and immature in doing the work of the Trust. He was also critical of the Trust because of it doing very little for the inhabitants of the city in terms of better housing and more playgrounds. Allahabad is a spread-out city but the open spaces are mostly limited to the civil station.

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<sup>35</sup> Nehru's letter to the municipality, September 24, 1936, NMML, New Delhi

<sup>36</sup> Sarvapalli Gopal *Jawaharlal Nehru A Biography* Volume One 1889-1947

<sup>37</sup> S.Gopal (eds) *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru Volume Two* Orient Longman

<sup>38</sup> Improvement Trust Enquiry Committee 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1924, File. No. 7/X, NMML, New Delhi

<sup>39</sup> Nandini Gooptu *The Politics of the Urban Poor in the Early Twentieth-Century India* Cambridge University Press 2005

## Conclusion

Nehru's Chairmanship in the Allahabad Municipality was crucial for the future of Nehru's political career. The commissioner was compelled to record the impression that the "improvement of the administration as largely due to the Chairman, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and a few public spirited members of the board." The U.P. government too praised him writing "Pandit Kalpdeo Malviya was elected chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board by (a majority of) two votes, in succession to Jawaharlal Nehru, who strove to show that a swarajist could be an administrator and a gentleman, and the commissioner thinks the newcomer's position will be very difficult".<sup>40</sup>

Nehru's own interest in cities is evident throughout his life. Writing to his daughter which would eventually be published as "Glimpses of World History", he said, "Cities and Civilization often go together [...]... with the growth of cities learning also grows and the spirit of freedom. Men living in rural areas are scattered and are often very superstitious. They seem to be at the mercy of the elements. They have to work very hard and have little leisure, and they dare not disobey their lords. In cities large numbers live together; they have the opportunity of living a more civilized life, of learning, of discovery, and criticizing, and of thinking."

Writing in his autobiography, he said he felt "hedged in, obstructed, and prevented from doing anything really worth while"<sup>41</sup> in the municipality. Yet he adds that it was not a deliberate obstruction of anybody's part; rather he enjoyed surprising amount of willing cooperation. He further goes on to say that the main issues in the municipality are kept out, chiefly because it is kept out of its functions. He then launched an attack on the government for preventing any meaningful action in the municipality. The framework of the municipality was authoritarian and did not permit any radical innovation of any kind.

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<sup>40</sup> Sarvapalli Gopal *Jawaharlal Nehru A Biography* Volume One 1889-1947

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