



Jawaharlal Nehru biography

SYNOPSIS

Born in Allahabad, India on November 14, 1889, Jawaharlal Nehru was eventually elected as independent India's first prime minister, following in the political footsteps of [Mahatma Gandhi](#). Nehru contributed to the establishment of a secular parliamentary democracy in India and was the father of [Indira Gandhi](#) and the grandfather of Rajiv Gandhi, who would both later serve as prime ministers.

PRE-POLITICAL LIFE

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in Allahabad, India in 1889. His father was a renowned lawyer and one of [Mahatma Gandhi](#)'s notable lieutenants. A series of English governesses and tutors educated Nehru at home until he was 16. He continued his education in England, first at the Harrow School and then at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he earned an honors degree in natural science. He later studied law at the Inner Temple in London before returning home to India in 1912 and practicing law for several years. Four years later, Nehru married Kamala Kaul; their only child, Indira Priyadarshini, was born in 1917. Like her father, Indira would later serve as prime minister of India under her married name: [Indira Gandhi](#). A family of high achievers, one of Nehru's sisters, [Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit](#), later became the first woman president of the UN General Assembly.

ENTERING POLITICS

In 1919, while traveling on a train, Nehru overheard British Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer gloating over the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The massacre, also known as the Massacre of Amritsar, was an incident in which 379 people were killed and at least 1,200 wounded when the British military stationed there continuously fired for ten minutes on a crowd of unarmed Indians. Upon hearing Dyer's words, Nehru vowed to fight the British. The incident changed the course of his life.

This period in Indian history was marked by a wave of nationalist activity and governmental repression. Nehru joined the Indian National Congress, one of India's two major political parties. Nehru was deeply influenced by the party's leader, [Mahatma Gandhi](#). It was Gandhi's insistence on action to bring about change and greater autonomy from the British that sparked Nehru's interest the most.

The British didn't give in easily to Indian demands for freedom, and in late 1921, the Congress Party's central leaders and workers were banned from operating in some provinces. Nehru went to prison for the first time as the ban took effect; over the next 24 years he was to serve a total of nine sentences, adding up to more than nine years in jail. Always leaning to the left politically, Nehru studied Marxism while imprisoned. Though he found himself interested in the philosophy but repelled by some of its methods, from then on the backdrop of Nehru's economic thinking was Marxist, adjusted as necessary to Indian conditions.

QUICK FACTS

NAME: Jawaharlal Nehru
OCCUPATION: [Activist](#), [Prime Minister](#)
BIRTH DATE: [November 14, 1889](#)
DEATH DATE: [May 27, 1964](#)
EDUCATION: [Trinity College](#)
PLACE OF BIRTH: Allahabad, India
PLACE OF DEATH: New Delhi, India
AKA: Pandit Nehru
AKA: Panditji

BEST KNOWN FOR

A key figure in the Indian Independence Movement of the 1930s and 1940s, Jawaharlal Nehru served as the first prime minister of independent India.

WORLD WAR II

At the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, British viceroy Lord Linlithgow committed India to the war effort without consulting the now-autonomous provincial ministries. In response, the Congress Party withdrew its representatives from the provinces and Gandhi staged a limited civil disobedience movement in which he and Nehru were jailed yet again.

Nehru spent a little over a year in jail and was released with other Congress prisoners three days before Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. When Japanese troops soon moved near the borders of India in the spring of 1942, the British government decided to enlist India to combat this new threat, but Gandhi, who still essentially had the reins of the movement, would accept nothing less than independence and called on the British to leave India. Nehru reluctantly joined Gandhi in his hardline stance and the pair were again arrested and jailed, this time for nearly three years.

By 1947, within two years of Nehru's release, simmering animosity had reached a fever pitch between the Congress Party and the Muslim League, who had always wanted more power in a free India. The last British viceroy, Louis Mountbatten, was charged with finalizing the British roadmap for withdrawal with a plan for a unified India. Despite his reservations, Nehru acquiesced to Mountbatten and the Muslim League's plan to divide India, and in August 1947, Pakistan was created—the new country Muslim and India predominantly Hindu.

The British withdrew and Nehru became independent India's first prime minister.

THE FIRST PRIME MINISTER OF INDEPENDENT INDIA

Domestic Policy

The importance of Jawaharlal Nehru in the context of Indian history can be distilled to the following points: he imparted modern values and thought, stressed secularism, insisted upon the basic unity of India, and, in the face of ethnic and religious diversity, carried India into the modern age of scientific innovation and technological progress. He also prompted social concern for the marginalized and poor and respect for democratic values.

Nehru was especially proud to reform the antiquated Hindu civil code. Finally Hindu widows could enjoy equality with men in matters of inheritance and property. Nehru also changed Hindu law to criminalize caste discrimination.

Nehru's administration established many Indian institutions of higher learning, including the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, the Indian Institutes of Technology, and the National Institutes of Technology, and guaranteed in his five-year plans free and compulsory primary education to all of India's children.

National Security and International Policy

The Kashmir region—which was claimed by both India and Pakistan—was a perennial problem throughout Nehru's leadership, and his cautious efforts to settle the dispute ultimately failed, resulting in Pakistan making an unsuccessful attempt to seize Kashmir by force in 1948. The region has remained in dispute into the 21st century.

Internationally, starting in the late 1940s, both the United States and the U.S.S.R. began seeking out India as an ally in the Cold War, but Nehru led efforts toward a "nonalignment policy," by which India and other nations wouldn't feel the need to tie themselves to either dueling country to thrive. To this end, Nehru co-founded the Non-Aligned Movement of nations professing neutrality.

Recognizing the People's Republic of China soon after its founding, and as a strong supporter of the United Nations, Nehru argued for China's inclusion in the UN and sought to establish warm and friendly relations with the neighboring country. His pacifist and inclusive policies with respect to China came undone when border disputes led to the Sino-Indian war in 1962, which ended when China declared a ceasefire on November 20, 1962 and announced its withdrawal from the disputed area in the Himalayas.

LEGACY

Nehru's four pillars of domestic policies were democracy, socialism, unity, and secularism, and he largely succeeded in maintaining a strong foundation of all four during his tenure as president. While serving his country, he enjoyed iconic status and was widely admired internationally for his idealism and statesmanship. His birthday, November 14, is celebrated in India as Baal Divas ("Children's Day") in recognition of his lifelong passion and work on behalf of children and young people.

Nehru's only child, Indira, served as India's prime minister from 1966 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1984, when she was assassinated. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi, was prime minister from 1984 to 1989, when he was also assassinated.

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