November 27 this year marks P.N. Haksar’s tenth death anniversary. On this occasion we offer our sincere homage to one of the country’s foremost thinkers by reproducing the following piece by the former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister. Haksar’s role as an eminent administrator and distinguished diplomat would remain indelible in the history of post-independence India.

The fundamental preoccupation of our distant and ancient thinkers was with three questions: First, who am I? Second, whence have I come? And third, what is my destiny? But now, if we could only transcend ourselves and our small egos, one would ask: where is our society and our country going? What is India’s destiny? And how can we attain dignity and greatness?

It is to this set of latter questions that Gandhi, Nehru, Subramania Bharati and Rabindranath Tagore addressed themselves. And they continue to be of contemporary relevance.

It is a matter of deep and profound regret that Gandhites and Nehruites have formed separate churches. From the history of churches, one knows how the messiahs get vulgarised the moment they are entombed in churches, mosques, temples and gurudwaras. The Gandhi–Nehru nexus needs to be restored today. The life, work and thoughts of the two are indissolubly linked together and constitute an interacting and integrated system. Gandhi articulated the imperatives of the moral and spiritual universe. Nehru articulated the imperatives of the rational and scientific universe. But the two together constituted the entire universe of mind and spirit of our national movement dedicated to the search for a new identity for our country.

The spirituality of Gandhi and Nehru constituted the finest expression of humanism. The essence of this humanism lay in the vision of a society where love and compassion transcend hatred and violence; where, as Tagore said, “the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit”; and where the only justification for acquiring wealth is that it is held in trust for the poor and the deprived.

During the seventeen years of his Prime Ministership, Jawaharlal Nehru did everything which he could
personally do to uphold the principles of openness and accountability in the governance of the country; he unrelentingly lent support to the institutional bastions of our democracy; he made us all feel, whether we were scientists, bureaucrats, politicians or journalists, that we were partners in the great and exciting venture of nation-building. His greatest contribution was to resist the temptation to restrict democracy in our country. He never allowed spirituality to degenerate into ritualistic religious expressions.

That very perceptive historian, E.H. Carr, has said that one looks back into history because our present dilemmas and perplexities lead us to have a dialogue with our past. He has also said that history is a response to the question: how did things come to be as they are? Recalling the life and work of both Gandhi and Nehru is urgently necessary because the development process itself within India is bringing into the open the unresolved conflicts not only between the past and the future, but between the vision we had and the way it has been translated.

If the vision of Indian society informed by the concept of equality is a valid one, then the historical structuring of our society, sustained by the structured inequality of the varnashrama dharma, is in conflict with the egalitarian social order. If the vision of growth with social justice is a valid vision, then the continuing and pervasive sense of injustice and deprivation contradicts assumptions about social justice. If pride in new India is not to be treated as a dirty word, then upholding of self-reliance and informing our economic as well as technological policies constitute the very means and mechanisms through which pride and patriotism can find expression.

India today desperately needs the restoration of the vision of Gandhi and Nehru. Even more desperately we need not merely the articulation of that vision but an analysis of the constituent elements of that vision. “Love thy neighbour as thyself” remains a valid and evocative vision of Jesus. It remains valid even when we human beings engage ourselves in killing our neighbours or hating them. But the contemporary world of the nuclear bomb, when seen in the context of the explosion of science and technology, demands that even if we do not love our neighbour, we owe a duty to take care not to hurt him. Even under the ordinary law relating to negligence, it is legally enjoined upon all of us to ensure that our neighbour does not suffer damage by the consequences of our own action.
So, one way of looking at human history might be to see how society develops in such a manner that what was only a moral injunction uttered by Jesus or the Buddha or Mohammad now becomes a legally enforceable imperative. Viewed in this light, India—our country—is crying for movements, combining together the passionate urges which informed Reformation and Renaissance. The earlier Bengal Renaissance has petered out.

If nothing else, the sacrifice of the 18-year-old girl on the funeral pyre of her husband in the village of Deorala in Rajasthan shows, if one has eyes to see, that a new movement for reform of society and renaissance of our mental processes is urgently required. In the measure we proceed to do that, in that measure we shall have to link that movement to the essentials of the Gandhi and Nehru framework.

[Extracts from an article in The Hindu (November 14, 1987). These appeared in Mainstream (January 26, 1988) marking the fortieth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s martyrdom.]