

June 13, 1938

Jawaharlal Nehru, 'A Letter from the Mediterranean'

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Summary:

In June 1938 Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), a Indian National Congress (INC) leader, one of the earliest INC members calling for full independence in 1927, and the main responsible for INC's foreign relations, took a ship to Europe. This trip was not a first for India's inaugural prime minister (1947-1964) to be. Already in 1905 he had left India to enroll at the elite British boarding school of Harrow, going on to study at Cambridge and work as a lawyer in London before returning home in 1912. And the last time he had sailed was in 1935, staying until 1936 as the INC representative in meetings with fellow Asian and increasingly also African anti-imperialists in Britain and Europe. Sure, by then the League against Imperialism (LAI), whose Comintern-organized foundational conference Nehru had attended in 1927, was defunct. (For the LAI see the 1927 document on Messali Hadj in this collection.) Even so, Nehru continued to see his secularist Indian nation-statist goals within an international leftist-anti-imperialist and now anti-fascist framework and web, as Michele Louro's *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (2020) argues.

Hence, when on the ship en route to Europe in 1938 he received an invitation from Egypt's leading nationalist wafd party and agreed to meet their leaders. Having been in contact with Egyptian nationalists before, a story told in Noor Khan's *Egyptian-Indian Nationalist Collaboration and the British Empire* (2011), and having detailed their anti-imperialism in *Glimpses of World History* (1934), he saw the wafd as INC's appropriately leading anti-imperialist counterpart in Egypt. Sure, in confidential INC memoranda, he criticized the wafd's insufficient attention to the masses, especially the peasants, which cost them an election in early 1938, he thought; indeed, the wafdists were liberal nationalists whereas Nehru was a leftist nationalist. Nonetheless, sitting down with the wafd and exchanging views about world politics and anti-imperialist strategies was called for, in his and the wafd's view, at a time when fascism was rising and Britain continued to rule India and be very present in Egypt. Reproduced in the massive compilation *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, this text is a letter by Nehru, the first to the INC while he was on the ship en route to London.

Original Language:

English

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Transcript - English

A Letter from the Mediterranean[\[1\]](#)

S. S. Biancamano

June 11/13, 1938

Our voyage is nine days' old already and in another three days' time we reach Genoa and disembark. It has been a pleasant voyage. The Indian Ocean was a little choppy. This did not affect me at all but it affected a considerable number of passengers who remained in the bowels of the ship for several days and then suddenly appeared as we approached the Red Sea. The Indian Ocean was close and sticky—that is the weather was so—the Red Sea was cooler and pleasanter than is usually the case. We are now in the Mediterranean and it is chilly.

We have a varied assortment of passengers on board—people from China and Japan, from India and those picked up from Italian Somaliland. Italians predominate and there are Chinese, Americans, English, Swedes, Danes, etc., and Indians. The English are not much in evidence. There is an Italian mission, under the leadership of an ambassador, which is returning from Japan, Manchuria and North China (the areas under Japanese occupation). This was a mission of goodwill to Japan with a business and industrial side to it. A small group of Chinese are going to Geneva for the labour conferences there.

Our ship stopped at Assab, which is not usually a port of call, to pick up the Duke of Aosta, the Italian Viceroy of Ethiopia, and his mother, the Dowager Duchess. It stopped next at Massawa in Eritrea (Italian Somaliland) and many fresh passengers came on board, almost all Italians. Suez and Port Said were the subsequent stops.

At Massawa, a number of Indian merchants and their wives had gathered together on the quay to welcome me. They were Gujarati Hindus and Muslims from western India—all Gujarati-speaking. Many of them had travelled long distances from the interior (from Asmara) especially for the purpose. Unfortunately, no one was allowed to land from the ship owing to some medical regulations, but a few Indians managed to get special permission from the local governor to board the ship, in order to see me. The rest of the crowd remained standing for hours in the hot sun on the quay. They gave me a rousing welcome which evidently impressed both the passengers and the Italian authorities. They shouted our well-known slogans and sported our national colours.

The small deputation of Indians-Muslim and Hindu—that came to see me on board at Massawa, complained to me of various disabilities they were suffering from and how the Italian Government was trying to squeeze them out. Many of them had been settled there for thirty years or more and had prospered. Trade was practically in their hands as the Somalis were backward, and the Italians were not well acquainted with the language and ways of the inhabitants.

I was told that the relations of the Indian merchants with the Somalis were excellent. Even with the Italian authorities, their relations were outwardly good. (I might mention that the Duke of Aosta subsequently spoke in good terms to me of the Indian merchants in that part of the country and even added that sometimes the Italian authorities borrowed money from them.) The merchants told me that since the Ethiopian campaign and the introduction of economic sanctions against Italy, all imports from foreign countries other than Italy, had been stopped. Trade was thus confined to Italy and Italian goods. They put up with that of course, as it was not possible for them to affect Italian policy in this respect. What they objected to was the new policy of pushing Indian merchants away whenever opportunity offered itself. Thus when an Indian merchant went to India, he must come back with a fixed period or he could not return at all. Newcomers were not welcomed or even permitted. There were a number of other disabilities which I need not mention here. The merchants asked me to move the Congress to take up this matter with the Italian Government. I explained to them that we could not do much in view of the international situation. Still, we could give publicity in India and I suggested to them to send a full memorandum to the foreign department of the A.I.C.C. They have promised to do so and I hope the foreign department will keep in touch with them and take such steps as it may consider necessary. The memorandum they will send will be in Gujarati. They know some English and can speak Italian and Hindustani but they feel at home in Gujarati only.

We may not be able to do much for these outlying colonies of Indians, but I do feel that we must keep up contacts with them. Their eagerness to meet me and display their solidarity with the national struggle in India was pleasing and encouraging. And in this welcome the Muslims took the lead, as they appeared to be the most important merchants there. Even my passage through their port of Massawa became an event in their lives as it brought them in personal touch with our struggle for freedom. It was evident that they had faith in the Congress and its leaders. I had a short talk with these Indian merchants and I told them of our recent success in Zanzibar and of the position in India and abroad.

As in Massawa, there are innumerable groups of Indians scattered all over the world who look to India. Even an occasional letter from our foreign department would cheer them up greatly, for they will feel then that India also remembers them and cares for them.

Many passengers in ships, passing through the Suez Canal, often manage to pay a brief visit to Cairo. I had decided not to do so. But three hours before reaching Suez, I received a telegram from Cairo conveying to me the welcome of the Wafd Party [2] and requesting me to get off at Suez and proceed from there by private aeroplane, which had been chartered, to Alexandria to meet Nahas Pasha. I decided to accept this invitation and cabled accordingly. But the time was short and my cable reached too late. So when I disembarked at Suez there was no one to meet me. Through the good offices of Reuter's agent there, who had come to interview me, I engaged a car and went off to Cairo, reaching there at 9.30 p.m. on the 9th June. At 11.30 p.m. that same evening I was at last traced down by the person representing the Wafd. It was arranged that early next morning I should go to Alexandria, spend some hours with Nahas Pasha and other Wafdist leaders, and then go to Port Said to catch my boat the same day. Then just after midnight, I paid a visit to the pyramids and the Sphinx which looked very impressive in the moonlight.

On the 10th morning, we went to Alexandria. There I met Nahas Pasha and a number of prominent leaders of the Wafd Party, including several ex-cabinet ministers. These included Makram Ebeid Pasha, [3] Secretary General of the Wafd and ex-Minister of Finance, Mahomoud Bassouring Bey, ex-President of the senate, Naquib Hilaly Bey, [4] ex-Minister of Education, Saby Abu Allam Bey, ex-Minister of Justice, Abdul Fattab Tawil Bey, [5] ex-Minister of Health. We had two hours talk and then had to consume an enormous and magnificent lunch for another hour.

Our talk ranged over many subjects. Nahas Pasha and Makram Pasha told me of developments in Egypt. I told them of the position in India, and then we discussed briefly international affairs. There was nothing very new in what I was told about the Egyptian situation but certain interesting and instructive facts came to light.

I began by conveying the greetings of the Congress and of the Indian people to Nahas Pasha and to the Wafd Party which had carried on for many years the struggle for Egyptian freedom. I told them how deeply we were interested in this and how we had followed it, as far as we could, for we looked upon it as part of the great world struggle for freedom. Between Egypt and us there were many other bonds also and our opponent was the same imperialism. Nahas Pasha reciprocated these sentiments and said that they had looked upon the Indian struggle and its leaders with admiration. He reminded me of the attempts he had made in 1931 to meet and do honour to Gandhiji as the great leader of the fight for Indian independence. He had arranged a great party in his honour at Heliopolis, near Cairo, and issued invitations for five hundred guests to it, but the then government would not permit it. He had then tried to meet him at Port Said. Again, the government would not allow him to go on board or Gandhiji to set foot on Egyptian soil. In this way all his attempts to meet Gandhiji had been frustrated and he could not convey personally, as he desired, the greetings and admiration of the Egyptian people to the people of India, through their great leader. Those were black days for Egypt, he said, and unhappily they had returned more or less to them again and present conditions were very bad. The Wafd was as popular as ever with the *fallaheen*, [6] but the palace clique, aided by British imperialism, dominated the scene. The recent elections [7] had been accompanied by the most shameless intimidation and falsification of election returns. They were producing soon a black book on these elections. (I might add that from independent testimony, previous to this, both from English and French sources, there was a great

deal of truth in this charge.)

I put it to Nahas Pasha that such tactics had always to be faced by a nationalist or a social movement struggling for freedom. Every device and method of oppression was employed by imperialism and reactionary cliques and vested interests. Unless the movement itself had sufficient strength, it could not cope with such tactics. Strength only could come from organised mass support. It therefore seemed to me that the Wafd did not have this organised mass support, for otherwise it would not weaken so rapidly because of palace intrigues. He admitted that there was some truth in this although the Wafd was still very popular with the masses. The Wafd leaders had thought that with their treaty with Britain, the independence struggle had practically ended in their success, and they had thrown themselves enthusiastically into the task of preaching Anglo-Egyptian friendship. As a government, they became absorbed in the work of the government and neglected their organisation and agitational work. This ultimately weakened the Wafd and when the time for a trial of strength came, they were unable to rise to the occasion. They had been over-confident, too full of faith in the bona fides of the British Government, not in sufficient touch with the masses.

As a matter of fact it is quite clear that the Wafd Party, while it was in power, did little or nothing for the peasantry. They were afraid of alienating the big landlords as well as the palace. The royal family actually owns over ten per cent of the land in Egypt. It used to own much more. Over fifty per cent of this land is owned by a handful of people. These big landlords put a brake on the Wafd's activities and at the same time organised themselves under the shelter of the palace, to oppose the Wafd. The palace succeeded in creating a split in the Wafd. One group started criticising the main party on the ground that it was not advanced enough and was too friendly to the British. As a matter of fact this was a ruse, for this dissentient group consisted chiefly of the big landlord elements and it has subsequently cooperated fully with the palace group and even, to some extent, with the British.

The Wafd would not have been much affected by this if it had a powerful organisation behind it. But it had neglected this and thought of itself more as a government. The great fall in cotton prices was exploited by the opponents of the Wafd against them as if they were responsible for it. This had some effect on the peasantry. All this and other causes led to the defeat of the Wafd. But the real reason is the inherent weakness of the party. It is definitely an upper middle class party with a certain mass support but with no roots among the masses. Even the middle classes in Egypt have not grown sufficiently (less than in India); and such as exist are largely tied up with foreign interests. There is no real agrarian movement, no labour movement at all (trade unions are not permitted by law), and the whole outlook of the Wafd has been moderate and somewhat primitive. Oppressed by the physical force behind the palace and the British, they have thought in terms of raising trained volunteers to protect themselves. I understand that the Wafd were contemplating trade union legislation when they were thrown out of office.

We discussed the Indian movement and how it had been based on nonviolence. We considered the practical sides of it, apart from its moral aspects. We had a much harder task in India than the Wafdists in Egypt. The British were comparatively new in Egypt and although they had taken control of all the important and key positions, they still had not gone deep down to the roots. In India, they had dug themselves in during the last century and a half. We were disarmed as the Egyptians and had no means at our disposal to oppose violence with violence. Indeed it was manifest that the state's apparatus of coercion could not be successfully opposed anywhere by violent methods. The state had now a terrific superiority in this respect. And yet unless we could counter it and neutralise it by effective sanctions, we would remain helpless. It was only by our strength that we could progress. I pointed out how we had developed strength by our peaceful methods and how the British Government, with all its coercive apparatus, had been unable to crush it. The Wafdists were greatly interested in my account, both of this method and of the development of our national movement during the past twenty years.

Then I told them of how and by we accepted ministries. The fact that some of our biggest leaders did not go into ministries, and also our rule that ministers should not belong to Congress executives, interested them greatly. They had had to face similar

problems and they had decided differently. Of course conditions were different here but some of them were beginning to feel that the Congress policy had been a wise one.

We talked of many matters and I cannot write in detail or else this letter will never end. I tried to explain to them the background of our struggle, of how our main aim had been to put backbone and character into our people, to organise and discipline them, to lay stress on the means and high standards in public life, to forego even a present minor advantage if that conflicted with the principles we adhered to, and always to think and act in terms of the masses. Without the masses we were helpless and even 'independence' meant to us the removal of the poverty and distress of our people and raising them to higher levels. I pointed out, of course, that we had not always lived up to our ideals and principles, we had made mistakes, showed weakness, and yet those ideals had helped us greatly in preventing us from straying too often and too far. And the success that had come to us had really been remarkable. Perhaps I exaggerated, as I am apt to do, when I talk to foreigners about our movement. Also when I am out of India, our day to day difficulties fade away and the major achievements and problems stand out. Anyway I impressed them considerably.

We discussed briefly the Hindu-Muslim problem in India and they expressed their great regret at the fact that some Muslims were not throwing their full weight into the national struggle and were creating difficulties.

We then went on to international affairs and I pointed out how India was thinking more and more of her own struggle in relation to struggles for freedom elsewhere. We realised that our own future was partly tied up with this. We had, therefore, definitely taken sides, in so far as is an expression of opinion and sympathy went in various external struggles such as in Ethiopia, Spain, China and, of course, in countries where a nationalist struggle for independence was going on. We had gone further and opposed fascism and generally but vaguely allied ourselves with the non-fascist forces. I mentioned our association with the International Peace Campaign and of how this had brought us nearer to the progressive and anti-fascist forces in the world. Although still a subject country, India, because of the inner strength she had gained and her widening outlook, was already playing some part, however small, in international affairs. Our prestige abroad was increasing and it was generally recognised that our independence could not long be delayed and, when freed, India would play an important part in world affairs.

Two hours were not sufficient for our conversation and we had to end it hurriedly. The question was put to me of how closer contacts could be established between Egypt and India, the Wafd and the Congress. I said that we would do all we could to have such contacts. The first thing to do was for the headquarters of the Wafd and the A.I.C.C. office to get into touch with each other and to exchange all publications, reports, etc. The next step might be sending delegations. I extended a cordial invitation on behalf of the Congress to Nahas Pasha and his colleagues of the Wafd to visit India, and they assured me that they would very much like to accept it and send a delegation. They inquired about a suitable time for this. I suggested January or February so that they might attend the Congress session, but I added that they would be welcome at any time. May I suggest that an official invitation be extended to Nahas Pasha and the Wafd by the President of the Congress?

Among the Wafdist leaders I found Makram Pasha to be the most intelligent and with a grasp of wider issues. He is a Copt.

After my interview with the Wafdist leaders we flew from Alexandria to Port Said. At the aerodrome, a number of Egyptians representing the local Wafd welcomed me, also some Indian merchants. We were pressed for time to catch our boat and could not stay but still we were given a rousing welcome in the streets of Port Said.

We have many interesting passengers on board and I have had frequent talks with them. The Duke of Aosta, the new Viceroy of Ethiopia, is a very charming man. He is about forty but is still very school-boyish and entirely unaffected and simple. His chief grievance in life seems to be that he has to put up with ceremonials.

The Italian mission to Japan has several agreeable and interesting members. They are full of praises for Japan of course, and they had tried to point out to me the virtues of

the fascist regime. They knew my views. Some passengers possess my books and these have been going round, and the Italians have been reading my views on Mussolini and fascism. They were not to their liking but they took them in good part. I explained to them at length what we have been doing in India, laying special stress on our nonviolent technique. They seemed to be impressed. It is extraordinary to notice among the Italians, and sometimes among others also, their firm faith in the decline of the British race and in the approaching collapse of the British Empire. The Chinese passengers are quiet and retiring and keep largely to themselves. I have had talks with them about our China medical unit and other matters.

June 13th

We have just left Naples and are on the last lap of our journey by sea. Early tomorrow morning we shall reach Genoa. At Naples there was an imposing display of the Italian royal family, generals, fascist leaders militia, bands, etc., to welcome the Duke of Aosta. The Italian mission to Japan also disembarked here. After the reception was over, we got down and spent some hours in Naples.

Soon after our boat reached Naples harbour, a customs official came to me and informed me that he had been instructed by the ministry in Rome to help me in getting my luggage through the customs and in any other way that he could. In case I disembarked at Genoa, instructions had been sent to the customs authorities there also.

Among the letters I received at Naples was one from the Marquis of Zetland. This was a cordial letter from his private address. He wrote to say that he would greatly welcome the opportunity of meeting me if I felt disposed to have a talk. I shall send him a reply after I see my programme.

In Naples I met Sardar Ajit Singh^[8] who has been an exile from India for over thirty years. I met him previously in Switzerland. He is very keen on going back to India and probably the government will permit him to do so. He lived for many years during and after the war in Brazil and became a Brazilian subject under another name which he had adopted in Persia. I have suggested to him that he should apply formally to the Government of India and the government of the Punjab stating all the facts.

I do not yet know my programme definitely after Genoa but it seems likely that I shall go straight to Spain-Barcelona-for a few days. With luck I might have a fairly exciting time there as bombing is a daily occurrence. I am due in London on June the 22nd or 23rd.

Miss B. Bativa^[9] who is a fellow passenger, has kindly acted as my secretary during the voyage and has helped me greatly. She accompanied me to Cairo and Alexandria.

^[1] A.I.C.C. File No. G-71/1938, pp. 17 (a-i), N.M.M.L.. Enclosure to preceding item.

^[2] An Egyptian political party founded in 1918 by Zaghlul Pasha to press Egyptian demand for independence; dissolved along with other parties in January 1953.

^[3] A Copt and the principal lieutenant of Nahas Pasha; left the Wafd Party in 1943.

^[4] Later left the Wafd Party; served as Prime Minister of Egypt from January to June 1952.

^[5] Minister for Public Health and Social Affairs in 1942; later held the portfolios of justice and communications.

^[6] Peasants

^[7] In the elections held in April 1938, the Wafdists were heavily defeated and a coalition government of Liberals, Saadists and dissident Wafdists was confirmed in office.

^[8] A revolutionary who went into exile in Persia in 1908 and remained abroad in Europe and South America till 1945; died 1947.

^[9] Now Mrs. Mansell.