

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

Arpita Sen¹

¹Professor

Department of History

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan,

Birbhum, West Bengal, India

Email:arpitadib@rediffmail.com

Abstract: *The example of the Irish nationalist struggle and the adoption of its various strategies against British colonial rule have attracted the attention of Indian moderate nationalists and revolutionaries. This was so as both were British colonies subject to oppression and exploitation. This article is an attempt to understand how Ireland and its forms of nationalist struggle such as Obstructionism and Sinn Féinism figured in the perception of Jawaharlal Nehru who developed feelings of repulsion against the violent methods of Sinn Féinism, though initially he was a great admirer of Sinn Féinism when it was synonymous with the boycott of British goods and de-anglicization. He was totally against the adoption of violent methods of Ireland by the Indian Volunteers. Nehru was aware that Obstructionism, however successful it was in Ireland was unsuited to Indian conditions. This article therefore delves into some of these aspects and also refers to some of the correspondence that took place between Nehru and his father, Motilal Nehru regarding matters such as the hunger strikes in Ireland which were adopted as a means of protest against the injustices of British colonial rule.*

Keywords: Ireland, Nehru, Obstructionism, Sinn Féinism, Volunteers, Violence etc.

Date of Submission: 27.02.2026

Date of Acceptance: 04.03.2026

.....

Introduction

This article is an attempt to understand how Ireland and its forms of nationalist struggle such as Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* figured in the perception of Jawaharlal Nehru. It tries to explore how relevant Nehru thought regarding the adoption of these forms of resistance against

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

British rule in India. It is well known that Ireland's freedom struggle provided the Indian nationalists with a model to fall back upon, as both Ireland and India were British colonies subject to grinding poverty and periodic famines, their industry and commerce sacrificed to protect England's, drained of wealth in annual tribute and subject to political oppression. The early Indian nationalists looked askance at Ireland to provide them with guidelines in their struggle to wrest more concessions from the British rulers. Thus the talk of Irish rebellions, Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* dominated Indian nationalist circles. Ireland was under British rule for eight hundred years and the nationalist struggle that developed as a consequence contained two elements-non-violent constitutional nationalism and violent revolutionary nationalism, both in competition and increasingly hostile to each other. This article is divided into two sections followed by the Conclusion. The first section explains some of the trends in Irish nationalist struggle against British rule such as Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism*. The second section focuses on Nehru's perception regarding these trends and how he debated with himself as to whether they could be adopted in the context of India's nationalist movement.

The Irish Example- Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism*

It is noteworthy that Ireland, unlike India had one hundred representatives in the British House of Commons and who exercised considerable influence in its deliberations. When the Irish Home Rule Party founded by Isaac Butt in 1870 (to attain self-government within the United Kingdom) failed to pierce the indifference of the British Conservative Government, J.C. Biggar, a Belfast pork butcher, newly elected came to the fore. Tough, ugly, hunchbacked and shrewd, Biggar developed a technique of obstruction in the Commons which infuriated the British opponents; he would hold the floor for hours, interspersing a speech with extracts from the newspapers, or passages from acts of parliament, until the government programme of business was thoroughly snarled up.¹ Biggar set to delay legislation and aggravate the Commons by talking as long as possible. He did not deliver a reasoned speech, but related anything that came to hand, including newspaper reports and extracts from official enquiries.² It is interesting to note that he delivered a speech on swine fever for four hours. He attracted the attention of Charles Stewart Parnell, an important Anglo-Irish leader and henceforth Biggar and Parnell made a formidable team as they embarked on a policy of obstructionist tactics in the British House of Commons.

The *Sinn Féin* Movement was started in Ireland at the beginning of the 20th century under the leadership of Arthur Griffith, an outstanding Irish journalist and a brilliant propagandist for Irish Ireland. The central theme of Griffith's writing was that Ireland must rely on herself. *Sinn Féin* meaning ourselves implied self-respect and self-reliance. It was established in 1905 with a newspaper of the same name. The Irish *Sinn Féiners* looked apprehensively at the denationalizing influence of English culture. They advocated non-co-operation and national self-reliance and were opposed to British government, good or bad. They believed that economic

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

boycott as a weapon should be employed against the British, and native industry and manufacture should be stimulated and fostered. Griffith looked to mass popular action, by civil disobedience, passive resistance and voluntary involvement in the native system, and to stultify British power.³ In the beginning *Sinn Féin* disclaimed the use of physical force or violence for the attainment of its end. Between the years 1905-1908 there was great advance in the spread of *Sinn Féin* ideas in Ireland. However from 1910-1913 the *Sinn Féin* movement in Ireland became practically moribund. It was only revived in 1917 when a National Assembly was proclaimed in Ireland after the 1916 Easter Rebellion that was carried out by the Irish Volunteers (a militant nationalist organization) and the Citizen Army (socialist workers militia) both formed in 1913.

From 1919 *Sinn Féin* began to be identified with violence as its military wing, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged a war against the British government, resulting in unimaginable atrocities and mayhem committed by both sides. Finally a truce was declared and the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed with the British government in December 1921 that created two dominions in Ireland, one in the Protestant majority North (Northern Ireland) with its capital at Belfast which continued to be under British rule; and the other in the Catholic majority south (Irish Free State) with its capital in Dublin. This Partition was based on the Protestant – Catholic divide. The Protestants of Ulster province or Northern Ireland did not want to be ruled by a Catholic majority who came to be synonymous with Rome rule. The Partition was not accepted by many *Sinn Féiners* who wanted an indivisible and united Ireland. This resulted in dividing the IRA ranks into the pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions. A terrible and ruthless civil war (1922-1923) broke out in Ireland when Irishmen fought against Irishmen. Important Irish revolutionaries like Michael Collins, Commander-in-Chief of the IRA fought for the government of the Irish Free State and was pitted against another Irish daredevil, Dan Breen who fought with the Republicans who were against the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Thus, in later years *Sinn Féinism* became associated with the worst kind of violence that became repulsive to many an admirer of the Irish example of resistance.

Nehru's Perception

Born on 14th November, 1889 at Prayagraj to an affluent lawyer, Motilal Nehru and his wife Swarup Rani, Jawaharlal Nehru was tutored at home during his formative years. A resident tutor who made a deep impact on Nehru and entered the latter's life when he was just eleven was Ferdinand T. Brooks, who was partly Irish on his father's side. Brooks was a Theosophist and had been recommended to Motilal Nehru by Mrs. Annie Besant. It is not known if Jawaharlal got an inkling of Irish freedom struggle from Brooks. But it is clearly evident that Brooks influenced him in three distinct ways. One, he instilled in his pupil a taste for reading; two, he initiated him in the mysteries of science; and three, he introduced him to the Theosophy Society of which Nehru became a member at age thirteen.⁴ At the age of fifteen, in 1905, Nehru left for England

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

and was educated at Harrow School and Trinity College, Cambridge. While at Cambridge in a letter to his father (dated 7th November, 1907), Jawaharlal clearly expressed his admiration for the *Sinn Féin* Movement in Ireland. It is deemed necessary to quote a few lines here:

Have you heard of *the Sinn Féin* in Ireland? It is a most interesting movement and resembles very closely the so-called extremist movement. Their policy is not to beg for favours but to wrest them. They do not want to fight England with arms but “to ignore her, boycott her, and quietly assume the administration of Irish affairs.”...Among people who ought to know, this movement is causing much more consternation than the Nationalists ever did. They say if the policy is adopted by the bulk of the country English rule will be a thing of the past before long.⁵

In the same letter Nehru made a distinction between the *Sinn Féiners* and the Nationalists as the former preferred a boycott of the House of Commons which Mr. John Redmond and his Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), followers of constitutional agitation would have nothing to do with. He was surprised to see while he was in Dublin how Redmond held a meeting at the Mansion House there and where prominent people spoke. But as the *Sinn Féiners* could not get in as they did not have tickets, they held a meeting in the open outside the Mansion House which was much larger than the one inside the House. By this observation Nehru tried to highlight the fact that the *Sinn Féiners* were more militant and popular among the Irish populace, as compared to the constitutional methods of Redmond and his party. It is evident here that Nehru knew about the political developments in India around this time. The Partition of Bengal in 1905, had led to the *Swadeshi* Movement which with its principles of *swadeshi* (indigenous enterprise) and boycott of British manufactured goods had begun to be regarded as being synonymous with the *Sinn Féin* Movement in Ireland. The Extremist –Moderate divide had gradually assumed gigantic proportions leading to the Surat Split in 1907. So much did Nehru evince an interest in Ireland that he also informed Motilal about a booklet entitled, “The New Ireland,” by Sidney Brooks which had been published a few months ago. He strongly recommended this book as a must read to his father as it happened to be ‘a most interesting book.’⁶

Nehru left Cambridge after taking his degree in 1910. For the next two years he was in London and trained in the law at the Inner Temple. It was around that time Nehru became vaguely interested in Fabians and socialistic ideas and more so in political movements such as that in Ireland. During a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1910, the early beginnings of *Sinn Féin* attracted Nehru.⁷ He became a barrister, returned to India in 1912 and enrolled himself in the Allahabad High Court. In 1916 Nehru met Gandhi for the first time. He gradually began to take an interest in national politics and joined the Allahabad branch of the Home Rule League as its secretary in 1919. He was a member of both Tilak and Besant's Home Rule Leagues, but more actively involved in the latter. Mrs. Annie Besant, an Irish theosophist and socialist had formally launched her Home Rule League in September 1916, somewhat on the lines of the Irish Home

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

Rule League, but catering to the Indian milieu. Nehru was filled with feelings of nationalism during these years. Ireland once again cast a deep shadow over his thoughts and feelings. Roger Casement's wonderful speech at his trial in 1916⁸ seemed to point out exactly how a member of a subject nation should feel. Similarly the Easter Week rising in Ireland by its very failure, Nehru felt, proclaimed to the world that no physical force could crush the invincible spirit of a nation.⁹

Politics eventually became a full-time occupation for him. He plunged headlong into the non-co-operation movement called by Gandhi, which appeared to him 'an inner explosive force.' Gandhi adopted the Non-Co-operation resolution on 1 September 1920 and it was clearly evident that it had much in it for the Indian advocates of *Sinn Féin*, before it assumed a violent form. In the formulation of his Non-Co-operation Resolution, Gandhi admitted to Fenner Brockway, British journalist and passionate Socialist, that he was much influenced by his reading of Arthur Griffith.¹⁰ And like Griffith, Gandhi discovered that passive resistance could be contaminated by the doctrine of the sword. In spite of his admiration for *Sinn Féinism*, Nehru supported Gandhi wholeheartedly when the latter asserted that non-violence was infinitely superior to violence and forgiveness; and manlier than punishment. Nehru was moved when Gandhi pointed –“I isolate this non-co-operation from *Sinn Féinism*, for, it is so conceived as to be incapable of being offered side by side with violence.”¹¹

After the suspension of the Non-co-operation movement, a group of Congressmen calling themselves Swarajists, decided to follow Parnell's obstructionist tactics in the Legislative Councils, a dream that they had been pursuing for a long time. Chief among them were C.R.Das and Motilal Nehru who felt that they could utilize their legal and constitutional talents in opposing government resolutions through council entry. They organized the Swarajya Party on 1 January 1923. The party pledged itself to a policy of uniform continuous and consistent obstruction with a view to make Government through the Assembly and the Councils impossible. Gandhi acknowledged that the Swarajya Party represented, if not a majority, at least a strong and growing minority in the Congress and so must be given financial and executive authority and responsibility in the framing and prosecution of their policy.¹² The Swarajya Party thus derived its lesson from the history of the Irish Movement. Its aim was to bring deadlock in the Legislature and overthrow Dyarchy in the provinces through their method of obstruction. Right from the beginning Nehru's own inclination was wholly against Council entry, because this seemed to lead inevitably to compromising tactics and to a continuous watering down of the objectives of the Congress Party. He toed Gandhi's lines regarding adoption of Irish tactic of Obstructionism in Legislatures, which was, “..... once our people got elected they would be drawn towards the Councils and it would be difficult for them to keep out. There was not enough discipline and power in our movement to keep them out for long, and a demoralizing dribble would set in towards the many direct and indirect ways of taking advantage of government patronage through the Councils.”¹³

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

Nehru was made President of the All India Volunteers Conference that was held at Kakinada on 25 December, 1925. In this conference he made it clear that the meeting was being held to consider how the people could make themselves fit to serve their country and hasten the day of India's liberation. The volunteers had met as soldiers of freedom and as soldiers they must be men of action rather than of words. He pointed out that they were a group of disciplined volunteers who would serve their country and be prepared to sacrifice themselves at the altar of freedom. He felt that in this context thoughts naturally went to the volunteer organizations of other countries from which they could seek guidance, especially the Irish Volunteers and the part they took in the struggle for Irish freedom. Nehru implored upon his audience that they should profit by the experience of others but must not forget that there was really not much in common between Indians and many of the western volunteer organizations. The analogy of the Irish Volunteers was a dangerous one, and Indians could profit more by avoiding their methods and mistakes than by copying them.¹⁴ Nehru made it clear that emulating the Irish Volunteers would not do as the foundation of India's movement for freedom was non-violence and any volunteer organization in order to render effective service to this movement must have non-violence for its basic principle. The volunteer must resemble a good soldier – be courageous, self-sacrificing fit and disciplined, willing to obey his officer's command.

Nehru constantly sought affinities between India and Ireland's past. He focused on how foreign rule and exploitation of a country had many sins to answer for. It led to the concentration of nearly all activities in the struggle for freedom. He pointed out how in the fight for freedom the 'soul of a whole people is exalted and for the sake of an ideal even men of common clay do heroic deeds.'¹⁵ In relation to this Nehru referred to Ireland which in his words offered a sad and yet a noble example for such a struggle for freedom. According to him Ireland carried on her fight for independence for seven hundred years; and her history was full of heroism and sacrifice but the rich and noble culture that was hers had almost passed. He cited the example of India which was another example of stagnation and cultural death brought on by years of foreign rule. Nehru felt the struggle for political freedom brought with it an intense desire for one's own culture and traditions. Hatred for foreign rule extended to the foreigners' ways and institutions, and an escape was sought in dreams of the past when the foreigner was not there. This was exactly what happened in Ireland through the Celtic Revival and in India, through the Bengal Renaissance where an attempt was made to revive and restore the treasures of a glorious and pristine pre-colonial past.

For some time, as Nehru became more engaged in the activities of the Indian National Congress he lost touch with events in Ireland. This became evident when in a letter to a New York resident, Duncan Greenlees he confessed that he knew very little about Ireland specially since the Treaty with England.¹⁶ He had been trying to get books about Ireland but all those that he had obtained seemed to be in favour of the present regime, meaning the government of William

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

Thomas Cosgrave(President of Ireland,1922-1932) Nehru requested Greenlees to make arrangements to send Nehru the Irish newspaper *An Poblacht* regularly, and also to recommend some recent books on Ireland.

Irish nationalist movement has been replete with examples of hunger strikers, the most famous being that of Terence MacSwiney, Lord Mayor of Cork who had died in Mayo Prison of hunger strike after 70 days in October 1920,. The nearest Indian example was that of Jatin Das, the Bengali revolutionary who died in Lahore Central Jail after 63 days of fast in September 1929. It is well known that family of MacSwiney send a telegram with a condolence message to the bereaved family members of Jatin Das. Incidentally, Das was joined in his hunger strike by Sardar Bhagat Singh, and both happened to be inspired by the Irish example. This must have led Motilal Nehru to take an interest in Irish hunger strikers as he requested Jawarhalal to send him books on the same. The latter send him the first volume of Michael Collins as desired by Motilal. As Nehru could not find any other book dealing with the hunger- strikers in Ireland, he sent his father a little book by Dan Breen.¹⁷ Dan Breen was an Irish guerilla fighter who had played an active role in the Irish War for independence and also the Civil War. His book, 'My Fight for Irish Freedom,'(published in 1924) had become very famous in India and had been translated into Gurmukhi by Bhagat Singh; and avidly read by Bengal's revolutionaries. Regarding Breen's book Jawaharlal confessed to Motilal, he was not sure if the book contained an account of hunger-strikers but he felt that it would definitely give an idea of the violence with which the *Sinn Feiners* waged war.¹⁸

Conclusion

Thus, Nehru, while being a great admirer of the Irish freedom fighters and their techniques of resistance against British rule could not wholeheartedly support them. Irish obstructionism, no matter how attractive and noble it was did not suit Indian conditions and mindset. Like Gandhi, his mentor he abhorred violence with which the *Sinn Féinism* had become identified with. For Nehru, knowledge of Irish nationalist developments and its revolutionary heroes was necessary to dissuade Indians from copying the Irish example which could only lead to unprecedented violence and more repression by the British government. Throughout his comments on Ireland, Nehru did not lack behind in describing what he saw as positive features of the Irish freedom struggle but he was quick to retort how irrelevant its adoption would be in India as under the leadership of Gandhi, a path of non-violence had already been chosen to achieve India's goal towards independence.

The Irish Example: Jawaharlal Nehru's Perception of Obstructionism and *Sinn Féinism* in relation to India's Nationalist Movement

Notes and References

¹ Somerset Fry, Peter and Fione, A History of Ireland, London: Routledge, 1988, p.248.

² O'Brien, R Barry, The Life of Charles Stewart Parnell, Volume 1, London: Smith, Elder, and Co. 1898, p.92.

³ MacDonagh, Oliver, Ireland the Union and Its Aftermath, London: G Allen and Unwin, 1977, p.77

⁴ Nehru, Jawaharlal, Autobiography, New Delhi: Penguin, 2004, pp.15-17.

⁵ Letter dated 7th November, 1907 Selected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, Volume 1, in Gopal, Sarvepalli (ed.) New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976, pp.37-38.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Nehru, Autobiography, p.27.

⁸ Roger Casement sought German guns during World War I to allow Irishmen in Ireland to fight against the British. No German plot or German gold was involved. Yet he had to stand trial and was executed. A few lines may be quoted from his famous speech:-

".....Self-government is our right, a thing born in us at birth; a thing no more to be doled out to us or withheld from us by another people than the right to life itself- that the right to feel the sun or smell the flowers or to love our kind....." cited in Inglis, Brian, Roger Casement, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973.

⁹ Cited Nehru, Autobiography, pp.38-39.

¹⁰ Interview with Fenner Brockway, quoted in Brasted, Howard, "Irish models and the Indian National Congress 1870-1922", in Masselos, Jim (ed.), Struggling and Ruling The Indian National Congress 1885-1985, New Delhi: Oriental University Press, 1987, p.35.

¹¹ Gandhi, Mahatma, 'The Doctrine of the Sword,' Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 21, New Delhi: Government of India, 1999, p.95.

¹² Tarachand, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Volume 4, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1992, p.139.

¹³ Nehru, Autobiography, pp.106-107.

¹⁴ Nehru, "The Volunteer" January, 1925, in Gopal, Sarvepalli (ed.), Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Volume II, Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1988, pp.83-84.

¹⁵ "India and the need for international contacts," 13th May, 1928, *The New Era*, in Gopal, S, op.cit, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988, p.380.

¹⁶ Letter dated 22 February, 1929 in Gopal, S, op.cit., Volume III, Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988, p.427.

¹⁷ Letter dated 10th September, 1929, in Gopal, S, op.cit., Volume IV, 1973, New Delhi: Orient Longman, p.71.

¹⁸ Ibid.