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## Jawahar Lal Nehru: The Man of Letters

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### ABSTRACT

Jawahar Lal Nehru ,the first Prime minister of free India was a statesman, a freedom fighter, a politician and together with this he was an orator a man who had full control over language and a voracious reader. In this article I shall throw light upon his literary genius. A scholar who had studied both in India and abroad, he spread the light of his country to the west. His works were mostly written when he was in prison. His aspirations were not limited to the freedom of the country but he wanted to establish his country as a land of immense potential. His works proclaimed that he was a historian with excellent writing skills prominently Edwardian that has given him a unique place in Indian Literature in English. His major works under consideration are *Letters from Father to Daughter*, *Glimpses of World History*, *Autobiography and Discovery of India*, besides some collection of speeches.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the bard of Allahabad, who rose to the greatest height in India's political scenario as the first in Prime Minister of free India was also one of the greatest prose writers of Indian writing in English. His prose works *Glimpses of World History (1934)*, *The Discovery of India (1944)*, *Autobiography (1935)* ,his speeches, not to mention the inflammable articles in news dailies *Independent* and *Leader* that shook the nation, his *Letters from Father to Daughter* all are renderings close to his heart and spring up like a rainbow on the sky of Indian English Literature. It is not the content alone that makes one spellbound but the artistic sensibility that draws widespread applause from all alike, both men with a literary bent as well as common reading public. "His works merge with his life" says Iyengar "and his life with the life of the nation"<sup>1</sup>. This makes his works as enigmatic as his personality .He was a man who captured the times with the power of his

pen. But for him India's history would have been different. Indeed he was the man of the moment!

The two major influences on Nehru's life especially to his literary abilities were of his father the giant personality Moti Lal Nehru and the dynamic artist Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore. In his autobiography he writes "Walter Pater, in one of his books, mentions how the saint and the epicure, starting from opposite points, traveling different paths, one with religious temper, the other opposed to it and yet both with an outlook which in the stress and earnestness, is very unlike any lower development of temper, often understand each other better than either would understand the mere man of the world and sometimes they actually touch."<sup>2</sup> The others who did have considerable impact on his early writing were Marx and Lenin.

Nehru's family legacy too had an impact on his creative ability and literary sensibility. His father was an ambitious lawyer who came from a family

well bred in language of power. The family had been employed in the Mughal administration and after the decline of the Mughal Empire in 1857, they gained proficiency in the English language and Literature. His father Moti Lal ensured that his son's early instruction was in English. In 1905 he was sent to Harrow School and later became a student of Natural Sciences at Cambridge and then Law School, London. Young Nehru had been an avid reader and his letters from Harrow to Allahabad were fluent exuberated talent of writing. The years that followed his return from England occupied him in domestic, professional and national affairs which made him withdraw from all reading .His association with friends had a long break. Early in 1919 he helped his father to start the *Independent* to compete with the local Moderate newspaper *Leader* .This provided him a means to connect to the world. It was only after his going to prison that he once again enjoyed his passion for books. His taste in reading had always been superior, Lewis Carol, Kipling, Scott, Dickens, Wells, Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell were his favourites. Writing about Nehru's style Sunil Khilnani says" This literary sensibility is perhaps best described as Edwardian formed before the rise of literary modernism."<sup>3</sup> As a writer Nehru achieved maturity during 1930s. All the writers of this era H.G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, Cole, Leonardo Woolf, were busy writing about politics, history, philosophy, science and their books were becoming popular. Encouraged by their works he too took the same course and was more specifically located alongside Indian political scenario of the 1920s and 1930s. Like the books of his contemporaries M.N. Roy's *India in Transition (1922)* Krishana Menon's *Conditions of India (1933)* R.P. Dutt's *India Today (1940)* and Edward J. Thompson's *The Reconstruction of India (1930)*. Nehru wrote numerous articles , essays and pamphlets on political, cultural and literary subjects. He was a great master of letter writing in English but his fame rests on *Glimpses of World History*, *An Autobiography* and *The Discovery of India*. All are narrative histories both public and personal, and have been written during confinement over a period of almost two decades. Khilnani says that the books were not driven primarily by curiosity about the past

but were impelled by anxieties about the present and future. When Sri Aurobindo was in Alipur Jail, he had 'Narayan Darshan' when Lokmanya Tilak was deported to Mandalay, he wrote his *Gita Rahasya*, likewise when Jawahar Lal was in prison he wrote a series of his letters to his daughter Indu better known as Indira Gandhi. These were letters in simple language for a daughter of ten years delineating the early days of the world .They were written by Nehru in the summer of 1928 when she was in Mussoorie and he in Allahabad. Nehru had written these letters only for his daughter but when he was persuaded he agreed to publish them as he felt that other boys and girls could benefit and enjoy reading them.As she grew from a child to a girl the letter's gained in content and depth. Thus was written the *Letters from Father to Daughter* and *Glimpses of World History*. Both were therefore written in epistolary form not the usual form for writing history. The literary masterpiece of Nehru is *Glimpses of World History* which is history of Humankind itself and establishes him both as a creator of History and a professional historian. 196 letters comprising the *Glimpses* were written between October 1930 and August 1933 in about 1000 days. At the onset of the book ,Nehru claims that he is no historian and therefore the faults incurred are numerous. His books have an edge over Macaulay and Gibbon, the masters of English history .In April 1930 the Salt Satyagrah brought Jawahar Lal back to prison. He was released in October rearrested after a week, and convicted for sedition. This was his fifth term. As he prepared himself to settle in prison he decided to utilise his time in writing a new series of letters to his daughter by then thirteen. This time he intended a broad survey of world history which began on 26 October 1930 but was interrupted by his sudden release in January 1931, just before Gandhi- Irwin Pact. Coming back to prison after Civil Disobedience, he wrote 176 letters running almost 1000 pages in a span of four months. He did not have ready access to archives and libraries as the prison laws permitted only six books at a time.

B.R. Nanda, founder Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and a leading historian of modern India says " Jawaharlal Nehru shared this faith, but as an Indian nationalist, he saw

what Wells and indeed most European writers had failed to see clearly that their image of the past was excessively centered on Europe and America, that it did less than justice to Asia and Africa and that western domination of these continents was not going to dominate permanently<sup>4</sup>. He did not in any way look down upon the achievements of European Civilization. He asserts that non-Christian States should get equal value. Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam should be equally respected. His hatred for violence, racial discrimination, religious fanaticism and authoritarian rule can easily be understood on a reading of *Glimpses*. A reading of French Revolution, American War of Independence, Russian Revolution we easily know that he was against the ruling class. More than one third of the history of mankind is taken up by the twentieth century. About *Glimpses* he writes "These letters of mine are superficial sketches joined together by a thin thread"<sup>5</sup>. It was not history but glimpses of events that were more meaningful for a growing daughter. He took the book for publication to England in 1935 where he had gone with his ailing wife because as he feared the book would be banned if published in India. The book was well received in England. Horace Alexander wrote in *Friends*. "If thousands of Englishmen and women read this book they will see Anglo - Indian Relations in a new and finer light than they have ever done."<sup>6</sup> The *New Statesman* wrote "He is a man who is one of us, by his culture, his humanity and his scientific vision".

The sensational success of *Autobiography* established Nehru as a writer. Mahatma Gandhi recognized him as a statesman but also as a man of letters. After reading the manuscript he wrote, "It is needless to say that it is a brilliantly written book a great literary production. There are parts which I would like to criticize, but will not so as it is scarcely necessary or useful. For when all is said and done it is a highly introspective narrative, containing an experience of your innermost thoughts and convictions"<sup>7</sup> The book abounds in introspection. He, time and again analyses his actions and thoughts. "My real comfort lays within me a comfort of ideas, desires and loyalties of sub-conscious depths, struggling with outer circumstances, of an inner hunger unsatisfied. Why

am I writing all this sitting here in prison".<sup>8</sup> This was the time when in English Literature, Psychology had successfully paved its way and psychoanalysis of characters, their roles and their deeds were explicitly unfurled by analysis of their psyche. Writers like Dorothy Richardson, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence had experimented with psychological novels and gained recognition and popularity. It is not known whether it was the wave of the time that had affected him or had he formerly studied it but his autobiography is more than any thing else a book with psychological insight. In the account of his life he bravely searched his heart and mind. The important thing that he later confessed was that the autobiography did not record what happened but the impression that the events had on his mind. "I write as an individual about an individual, but I may claim to have represented the mental conflicts of large numbers of others who worked in our freedom movement. Thorough understanding between friends as well as opponents comes through this psychological insight"<sup>9</sup> B.R. Nanda in his apt remark on the *Autobiography* says, "It was the psychological insight of the author combined with his literary skill which lifted this long chronicle of India's freedom struggle in the 1920 and 1930 to the level of literature the succeeds in transmuting his inner conflicts and anguish artistically as to appeal to the readers head and heart."<sup>10</sup> It is however, this autobiography which is his greatest achievement as a man of letters. It has the qualities of the epic which gives it a musical tone, its sonorous grandiloquence makes it unique, its lilting music highlighting his qualities both as a man and a writer. The story of his own life is fused with the story of the nation and its struggle for freedom and fraternity. He was so completely absorbed in the national movement that it is a biography of modern India as much as that of Nehru. *Autobiography* was, written in a continuous spell of nine months (June 1934 to February 1935). He writes in the Preface "The primary object in writing these pages was to occupy myself with a solitude of goal life, as well as to review past events in India, with which I have been connected, to enable my self to think clearly about them. I began the task in a mood of self questioning and to a large

extents this persisted throughout."<sup>11</sup> Nehru's personal involvements rarely affected his writings but his wife Kamla's death after a long illness, made him desolate but he soon worked towards its publication and dedicated it to his wife " To Kamla, who is no more." When the *Autobiography* was published it was natural to be compared with Mahatma's *My Experiments with Truth*. There were many differences in style and tone from the Mahatma's yet it was applauded as a personal book. That carried the spirit of the youth of that time the aspirations and the points of view of a generation that was struggling to evolve afresh, dismiss the old order and give rise to a new world. It as a book that sensed the pulse of the time, that revealed to the people the sores of the nation and how it could be healed. He judged his contemporaries assessed their personality, his parents, his people around and the leaders of the freedom struggle. In the postscript he says:"To me these years have brought one rich gift, among many others, More and more I have looked upon life as an adventure of observing interest, where there is so much to learn, so much to do. I have continuously had a feeling of growing up, and that feeling is still with me and gives a zest to my activities as well as to the reading of books and generally makes life worth while."<sup>12</sup>

This eagerness for the adventure of life is continuously revealed in the book. One of the most touching chapters is where he narrates his first experience of lathi charge in 1927, the year of Simon commission. What was he to do "My own instinct had urged me to seek safety when I saw the horses charging down upon us; it was a discouraging sight. But then, some other instinct held me to my place and I survived the first charge, which had been checked by the volunteers behind me. I found, myself alone in the middle of the road, a few yards always from me, in various directions, were the policemen beating down our volunteers. Automatically I began moving slowly to the side of the road to be less conspicuous, but again I stopped and had a little argument with myself, and decided that it would be unbecoming for me to move away.... The line between cowardice and courage was a thin one."<sup>13</sup> The passage is brilliant not only for its literary skills but it even highlights the

inherent characteristics of Nehru, his sensitivity to the issues of the nation, his urge to struggle for the nation above all it reveals the golden heart of Nehru, his natural instincts, his shortcomings his detachment with himself and how much he perpetually tried to analyse himself. With the publication of the *Autobiography* ended the first phase of his writings. Motilal Nehru and Kamla Nehru were no more and daughter Indira was growing up.

The speeches and articles of Jawahar Lal Nehru that shook the world of colonizers and the colonized alike were collected by V.K. Krishna Menon into *Unity of India*. These speeches show the capacity to see both sides of the issues of the national movement with ease. The language question that was sore up and emerged as one that could be a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation. He stated that the regional languages Tamil, Telgu, Kannad, Bengali" are ancient languages, with a rich inheritance each spoken by many millions of persons each tied up inextricably with the life, culture and ideas of the masses, as well as of upper classes"<sup>14</sup>. None of the regional languages- not even Hindi- should be newly put in the position of superiority. He chose English as suitable for official purposes. How correct he was cannot be assessed today because the conditions change with time and so do their solutions but one thing about him is clear that his own political interests were not the only reasons behind his statements. He worked for the cause of the nation not only his personal political gains.

The spice of wit and humour spiced his writings. His speeches were charged with power and purpose and there is one that is very close to my heart is he enthralled the people with at a function at Allahabad University on 13th December, 1947:"A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duty adequately then all is well with the nation and the people. But if the temple of learning itself becomes a home of narrow bigotry and petty objectives, how

then will the nation prosper or a people grow in stature. <sup>15</sup>

His speeches were at all times graceful and genuine, with sincere feelings. His commitment could never be questioned and his love for masses overflowed. Rajaji once remarked that love could never be damaged but deserved and Nehruji deserved it the most. As a Prime Minister his speeches left people spell bound. Even his policy making speeches could hold the crowd endlessly as they had the combination of Nehru the man in them where he would even amuse people with his wit and humour. Bal Gangadhar Kher called his speeches the "Flute of Krishna". On his visit to America, *Shankar's Weekly* showed a cartoon of Niagara Falls feeling puny before the stalwart Nehru because Nehru had immense impact on the Americans as he had tirelessly spoken in America and the men were left enchanted.

Nehru's last book *The Discovery of India* (1946) is in a way the history of India. It is the most complex of this books and is a discourse on culture history and heritage of India, the glory that had not reached the world or had been purposely ignored. It has a gravity along with melancholy. The book was written in Ahmadnagar Fort prison. "What is my inheritance?" he asked "To what am I heir?" It was in the true sense a discovery—it were the thoughts of a young man steeped in freedom struggle who thought and felt about the nation for which he had devoted his whole life, a nation that was every thing to him. Discovery did not give new facts, but it gave valuable new insight and points of view. Nehru's question in *Discovery* was one that could be asked of an individual life as of the life of a society or nation to what extent is past a burden and to what degree can one escape it? His reply was that the best way to escape one's past was to make it up a new, to invent or discover a different past for oneself. The principal merit of the *Discovery* as Iyenger puts it is "It lets us see the mind of its author, helps us to forge the links of our racial memory, and firmly turns our face to the future but only after a long, affectionate, understanding, an almost lingering gaze at the past." <sup>16</sup>

Nehru captures three thousand years of India's past- its culture, its history, its literature,

clashes of races, fall of empires, marvels of architecture, the epics and dramas, folk art and developments of the recent past. He wrote about personalities and Jinnah was one of them: "Mr Jinnah is a lone figure even in the Muslim League, keeping apart from his closest co-workers, wide but distantly respected more feared than liked.... He seems to have hatred for the congress which has grown with the years. His aversions and dislikes are obvious but what does he like? With all his strength and tenacity, he is a strangely negative person whose appropriate symbol might well be a 'no' " <sup>17</sup>

Soon after he published *Discovery* he became first Vice-President of the Governor General's Executive Council and then the Prime Minister for seventeen years. Nehru excelled in making speeches and the most striking is the brief but memorable speech at midnight on 15th August 1947. "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to light and freedom. A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation long suppressed, finds utterance. It is fitting that at this moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity." <sup>18</sup>

This is the epitome of his literary ability! There is he was truly a statesman and a man of letters We read him not only for knowledge, but it is a pleasure to read the language and the ease with which he presents his views and emotions. This has given him a distinctive place in Indian English Literature. He skilled in revealing the truth with thought that appealed to everyone's intellect, a style that kept one glued to his writings, a content that was inclusive in ideology and touched the heart and mind of one and all, that revealed his consciousness and emerged him as a man of the masses.

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