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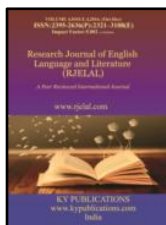
UNDERSTANDING THE INTROSPECTIVE AND INTELLECTUAL NATURE OF NEHRU
THROUGH HIS SELF-TITLED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

An Autobiography (1936) by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of an independent and democratic India, is one of the most influential autobiographies ever written by a world-renowned statesman. Jawaharlal Nehru was at the forefront of the freedom struggle in India, despite many hardships and years in prison he never renounced the freedom struggle. Being born and brought up in an elite family, he could have avoided the hardships and lived affluently in the safety of his family's heritage, but Jawaharlal Nehru was not a man to take discrimination and oppression silently. He became intertwined with India's destiny and ultimately took up the mantle of prime minister when she gained freedom in 1947. Nehru was an intellectual man with deep insight and acumen, his autobiography leaves behind a lasting sketch of this great man's introspective nature and charming personality. Nehru began the task of penning down his autobiography in a mood of self-questioning, his attempt was to trace as far as he could his own mental development. Nehru's candour coupled with incredible literary eloquence grips the reader throughout the book. It takes an amazing amount of self-confidence, honesty, determination and courage to reveal one's innermost thoughts and feelings. Nehru bares his soul in *Autobiography*, not in the conventional confessional mode most autobiographies are usually written, but in a more self-effacing and contemplative nature. The sheer personality of Nehru has catapulted his autobiography to the top of its genre, where it has garnered critical acclaim and praise.

Keywords: Jawaharlal Nehru, autobiography, introspective, intellectual, statesman, prime minister

An autobiography is a self-written (or conjointly written with the help of a collaborator) account of the life and times of an individual and it usually follows a chronological order. Every autobiographical work tends to be a cry for the expression of identity and every autobiographical study yearns to understand the evolution of the individual. A few sociologists and psychologists have noted that autobiography offers the author a chance to reimagine history. This raises the ethical question

of autobiography as a form of witnessing or testimony, an autobiography is only as good as a memory and though discrepancies are unavoidable (and difficult to refute) while considering the personal aspect, authors more or less tend to make use of accurate historical, political, economic, social and the cultural norms prevailing in their times. Writing an autobiography also tends to be highly cathartic for the author, it gives the author a chance

to redefine the 'self' critically and arrive at a place of acceptance.

The eminent poet, naturalist, and author Henry David Thoreau once said, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live" (ed. Wikiquote). This quote rings quite true when considering the self-titled autobiography of one of the most influential men of the 20th century, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of an independent and democratic India. Nehru's autobiography was first published in London in 1936 by John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd. The book was first published in the Indian Subcontinent, New Delhi by the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, Teen Murti House in 1980. Jawaharlal Nehru dedicates this book to his beloved wife Kamala, who was also a freedom fighter and a passionate social activist. In the preface, Nehru states that his autobiography was penned entirely in prison and as such reflects a "particularly distasteful period" of his existence. Nehru took up the task of writing an autobiography as a way to occupy himself with 'the long solitudes of goal life' and to enable himself to think clearly of his active participation in the long struggle for freedom of his country, that led to his imprisonment.

Nehru was the quintessential man; highly learned and erudite, forthright and disciplined, a thinker and a man of action, a compassionate and temperamental being, witty yet shy and to top it all gifted with an athletic frame. Such men of substance and integrity are rare these days and in the current political scenario almost obsolete. Nehru had absorbed the best of a vibrant Indian culture while discarding irrelevant notions of social and religious dogma that stifled the nation and her people; he is forever etched into the heart of the Indian public as the renowned and beloved first leader of independent India. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography is more introspective than informative in nature. His keen observational skills coupled with his lucid thinking and razor-sharp wit makes this autobiography immensely popular and engaging. A defining trait in this great man is his ability to see things as they are and not as they appear to be. Nehru's autobiography aligns his individual life with the history of a nation on the

brink of freedom from colonial rule. As Nehru describes his development and his involvement in the struggle for freedom, many facets of our country's defining history is clearly traced.

Nehru is a gifted writer and through this eloquent piece of literature his complex personality is revealed; his simple yet highly intellectual soul, his moral & ethical values, his intense compassion and his exquisite literary taste are all clearly revealed. Nehru began the task of penning down his autobiography in a mood of self-questioning, his attempt was to trace as far as he could his own mental development. He wanted to review the events he had been a part of, in connection with India's indefinite struggle for freedom, he wanted to be able to think clearly about them. Here one sees the contemplative nature of Nehru, he was forever running strategies and thinking of ways to organise and make the freedom struggle more effective. And when he ended up in prison, he used the quiet solitude to ponder over all the things that were taking place in the world and in his personal life. Nehru wrote to enable him to think clearly, to put things into perspective and ultimately through his captivating autobiography, the reader discovers that Nehru possessed a compassionate and resilient soul.

Nehru was influenced to a large degree by his remarkable father Motilal Nehru; in fact Nehru seems to have inherited the same traits, characteristics and temperament of his famous and well respected father. Upon his return from Europe, Motilal Nehru, refused to perform any purification ceremony; he was not the kind of person to heed such superstitious customs. This attitude did not seem to go down well with the high class Kashmiri Brahman community, but Motilal, never really one to be bothered by what society thinks, was rather disdainful and aggressive towards such religious practices. This moderate and forward approach to living life on one's own terms, appears to have greatly influenced the young Nehru who would become the most secular and pragmatic leader to govern India till date. Nehru was the most astute leader, who keenly read the winds of change from every corner of the world.

For nobility of nature, for modernity of outlook, for a combination of physical and

mental endurance, for harmonizing the temper of science with the spirit of art, for chivalry and humanity, for consistency of vision, he was the greatest of them all. It was the combination of many qualities in such a degree that made him the finest possible instrument of historical forces. (Rau 44)

Nehru was quite frank and forthright in his opinions, he spoke out against various practices or propaganda that alienated or drove a wedge between communities and did not spur the struggle for freedom along the right path. He was intolerant of communal communities that incited violence and broke the harmony of the country, thereby playing directly into the hands of the British government which thrived on such disturbances. He was skeptical of fanaticism in the name of religion and he was aggrieved that people blindly followed the majority with no clear thoughts, he knew that true religion was supposed to liberate and enlighten, not enslave the soul. Ironically, he notes that "religion and the spirit of religion have much to answer for" because communal discord formed a major wedge in India's struggle for freedom (149). He abhorred using the sacred name of religion to gain mass sympathy and support for programs that had absolutely nothing to do with the masses or the lower class of people who blindly followed such propaganda. Nehru was not passionate about religion, the closest he came to feeling anything akin to spiritualism was when he was surrounded by the pristine beauty of nature. Even though he was born a Brahmin, and later dabbled in transcendentalism he didn't really practice any religion, he was far too practical to be swayed by religious sentiments.

Nehru was fascinated with history and literature, when he was too tired to write, there was always something to read. Nehru was an erudite soul who read profusely and was quite adept at wielding the pen too. Writing came naturally to him, he recorded life and the myriad thoughts that crossed his mind with passion and an alacrity that still manages to rivet the reader and turn them into more than a reader. One feels kindred reading the works of Nehru, it's almost like having a deep intellectual conversation with a close friend.

Nehru ... loved literature and art unreservedly, and he became one of the supreme prose stylists in English of the twentieth century. ... He was also a master of public rhetoric, as is evident in the famous "tryst with destiny" speech marking the nation's independence on August 14-15, 1947. (Nussbaum 109)

Even though Nehru showed an acute distaste for institutional worship, he continued to admire the great Hindu scriptures. These ancient texts impressed him "more as literature and historical testimony than as revelation" (Gopal 93). He saw communal discord as striking at the very root of national unity and Indian freedom. He felt that it was "important to release India from the chains of complex ideology of custom, convention and superstition" (Gopal 93). Nehru was a man who spoke and thought in the language of modernity and reason, a sharp contrast to the spartan attitude that Gandhi advocated and practised. *Autobiography* is saturated with the author's personality, Nehru's intellectual and resilient spirit seeps through, disarming the reader with his refined and humane outlook. He was not exceedingly demonstrative or an exhibitionist, his character forms the main proponent in *Autobiography*:

Tortured by doubt, impressive in his indecision, agonizing over all sides of every question, always asking to what end was the long, wearying struggle, he provided a picture of warm and vulnerable humanity. (Gopal106)

Nehru's candour coupled with incredible literary eloquence grips the reader throughout the book. It takes an amazing amount of self-confidence, honesty, determination and courage to reveal one's innermost thoughts and feelings. Nehru bares his soul in *Autobiography*, at most times it seems as though he is writing to himself, to clear his thoughts. He therefore warns the reader that his account of the details and events in the book are wholly one-sided and that his "autobiographical narrative remains a sketchy, personal, and incomplete account of the past, verging on the present, but cautiously avoiding contact with it" (xv). Through his thoughts and perceptions, one gets the feeling that

Nehru was mentally more evolved and aware of his surroundings than most people. He was a logical person who undertook every task with careful consideration. He had the uncanny ability to see all sides of a problem, and though he tried his best to deal with political strategies in a rational and honourable way, the mediocre mentality that was and still is prevalent in the bureaucracy and the common man did not provide a fertile ground for his ideas and thoughts to take root. Appraising the general consciousness of India, Nehru remarks that "the atmosphere was not intellectually stimulating", and that he felt stifled by the "utter insipidity" he encountered on his return from England (31).

In *Autobiography*, it is evident that Nehru didn't really feel like he truly belonged anywhere. When in England, even though he liked the people and the place, he never really felt one with them and in India, in the midst of his own countrymen he still didn't seem to fit in. He was an intellectual whose thinking was far above the petty politics, the narrow mindedness and the varied superstitions that was and still is prevalent in India. Despite all these drawbacks in India, Nehru was completely entwined with her destiny; the poor and the downtrodden struck a chord within him and he was fully devoted to their cause. Nehru shares his feeling of shame and sorrow at their plight; shame at his easy-going and comfortable life when the vast multitude of semi-naked sons and daughters of India were ignored and sorrow at the degradation and overwhelming poverty of India. Nehru is touched by their outward display of gratitude and affection and he is filled with a new sense of responsibility that frightens him. Nehru's real conflict lay within himself, "a conflict of ideas, desires and loyalties, of subconscious depths struggling with outer circumstances, of an inner hunger unsatisfied" (219). Nehru was a highly intellectual man, and there were hardly any people of his caliber he could talk to on equal terms. He concedes that he "became a battleground, where many forces contended for mastery" (219). Such was the turmoil that raged in his mind, that he took to writing down his feelings and experiences as a way to process events and attain some peace and psychic satisfaction along the way.

Nehru reiterates his faith in science and progress many times throughout his autobiography, as opposed to Gandhiji's deep faith in an aesthetic and simple life devoid of all the modern inventions of science. The Nehruvian years were the building blocks of the nation, whence industries and institutions took roots in a fledgling country. This was the time when scientific temper and open mindedness took priority over petty matters of religion, caste and creed, in stark contrast to the narrow mindedness that plagues most areas of the governing bodies today. If India has to become a name to reckon with on the global scale, this scientific temper has to be brought back, to keep the secular fabric of the nation intact. The very term scientific temper can be attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru who wrote,

[What is needed] is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind—all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems." (The Discovery of India 512)

Nehru considers science to be the greatest gift India has received from the west, he further goes on to state that we have to be grateful to the British for one splendid gift of which they were the bearers, the gift of science and its offspring. Gandhiji's ideas that romanticized poverty and the simple way of life, was not favoured by Nehru. He often criticized Gandhiji for being blind to scientific progress and for denouncing anything to do with scientific development and industrialization. Nehru knew that science and industrialization contributed to the future development of the country but Gandhiji wanted India to be a simple nation that took care of its own needs through cottage and small-scale industries. It is a daunting task to criticize the man who had his pulse on the nation, the Mahatma, but Nehru never one to mince words,

said exactly what he felt and witnessed. But in all his criticism and opinions, Nehru never once crossed the line of dignity and respect that a person like Gandhiji deserves. Nehru understood that Gandhiji was in a totally different spiritual sphere, and that he undertook each and every task keeping the peasants in mind. In *Autobiography*, it's obvious that Nehru and Gandhiji differed considerably in their outlook on life, politics and economics. Nehru emphatically states, "I felt that I was drifting further and further away from him mentally, in spite of my strong emotional attachment to him" (391). There is no doubt that Nehru liked working with Gandhiji towards the common goal of independence, but concedes that when the necessity arose different roads would have to be followed. But their partnership was quite phenomenal

Despite differences of thought, temperament and style, Gandhi and Nehru stood together for more than a quarter of a century. The younger Nehru was imbued with the revolutionary spirit, socialist rhetoric, and the teachings of Karl Marx. Gandhi, however, although trained as a lawyer in South Africa, was more like an Indian ascetic with a profound spiritual view of the world. Nehru cared little for Gandhi's ashram lifestyle and considered his preoccupation with ancient Hindu ideals outdated and impractical. Gandhi taught that nonviolence must be the strategy employed to rid the British. Nehru, on the other hand, felt that armed revolution was inevitable. (Williams 85)

Nehru was an avid reader and his autobiography is littered with insightful literary quotes and verses of poetry from well-known authors. These interspersing quotes reveal how knowledgeable and erudite Nehru was, he has carefully chosen verses and quotes to depict his mood and make a point. His taste in books is quite eclectic and astonishing ranging from the works of Shakespeare, T.S.Eliot, Wordsworth, Bernard Shaw, Dickens, Browning and Robert Frost to books on philosophy, psychology, economics, politics, history, religion and just about any topic he could get his hands on. Reading was a passion and Nehru read

voraciously, accumulating knowledge over a wide range of topics. Even though he was incarcerated for many years in prison (most of his well-known works were written behind bars), he gleaned strength by revelling in the aesthetics of the written word. The fine quality of his soul sought liberation from the stuffy dingy prisons by engaging in the wholesome joy of reading and writing. Michael Brecher, a political scientist and teacher, writes that books were a constant companion to Nehru

the literature of science is, indeed his favourite reading -- almost a passion with him. In part this may be traced to his education at Cambridge, as indicated in a chance remark over lunch: 'Where I differ from Indian Socialists is that I have a scientific background and am more aware of the impact of science on social evolution.' ... He continues to find time almost daily for a half-hour or more before he retires and while travelling [as the Prime Minister]. (10)

Another significant aspect of Nehru's personality was his internationalism; he was interested in world affairs and tried to access their impact on India. He regularly followed the various political situations taking place around the globe and tried to ascertain how helpful or destructive communism, socialism and fascism could be. Nehru's power of retaining historical information is quite legendary. While he was in prison he wrote a series of letters to his young daughter, hoping to educate her on the history of humankind and these letters are a

remarkable testament to Jawaharlal Nehru's intellect and his sense of humanity. Written over three years in jail, without research assistance of any kind, and published in one volume under the title *Glimpses of World History*, the letters transcended their stated purpose to stand for something rarely seen in the political world - the revelation of those insights into human history that inspired the worldview of an uncommon statesman. (Tharoor 82)

Being extremely proficient in the language Nehru subtly employs sarcasm to ridicule or depict scorn at

events or situations that marred the progress of the people and the liberation of the country. Talking about the Britishers, especially the British Liberals and the new socialists of the British Labour Party, and their condescending way of dealing with the freedom struggle in India, Nehru rightfully puts them in place by this deftly penned mockery containing biblical overtures:

I wondered how it was that Britishers who strain at a gnat in England could swallow a camel in India without turning a hair. Indeed I have always wondered and admired the astonishing knack of the British people of making their moral standards correspond with their material interests, and of seeing virtue in everything that advances their imperial designs. Mussolini and Hitler are condemned by them in perfect good faith and with righteous indignation for their attacks on liberty and democracy; and, in equal good faith, similar attacks and deprivation of liberty in India seem to them as necessary, and the highest moral reasons are advanced to show that true disinterested behaviour on their part demands them. (356)

Such were his thinly veiled barbs and scathing attacks on religion, that said exactly what he wanted to convey in an engagingly witty manner making his autobiography highly relatable.

Nehru had a keen aesthetic sense that revealed itself when surrounded by nature, art and literature. Nehru describes the shifting images of cloud, the expanse of the blue skies, the snow-covered mountain peaks and the beauty of changing seasons in such poetic splendour, that the reader is suddenly transported to these magnificent places of surreal beauty. Nehru has set a high bar in the genre of autobiographies with his simple yet erudite prose, his unflinching self-analysis, his innate sincerity and his ethical and moral values that give an inspiring insight into the soul of this great man. His autobiography feels personal, in the sense, the reader gets the impression that they are actually conversing with the author who speaks directly from his heart. By the end of the book, Nehru feels more like a friend than a distant historical personality. "His

thoughts have sometime a depth which is not easy to fathom, but underlying them all is a transparent sincerity and a robustness of youth which endear him to everyone without distinction of caste and creed, race or religion." (Pandita 12)The sheer personality of Nehru has catapulted his autobiography to the top of its genre, where it has garnered critical acclaim and praise.

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