



Jawaharlal Nehru's 'The Discovery of India': A Quest for Self

RAMESH B.PATEL

Head,

Department of English

M. A. Parikh Fine Arts & Arts College,
Palanpur, (B.K)

Abstract:

Jawaharlal Nehru's 'The Discovery of India', a Modern Classics, is a work of prodigious scope and scholarship. It is a monumental work which covers the history, philosophy, art, religion, science, economy, society and movements of one of the ancient cultures of the world. Nehru delves deep into India's rich and complex past from the Vedic history to the British rule in India to arrive at the roots of his existence as well as his India. Nehru restudies and analyses the greatest texts of India from the Vedas to the Upanishads and the great Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata only to satisfy his quest. The great personalities of India like Buddha, Chanakya and Mahatma Gandhi who played a very vital role for the construction of nation have been also paid a tribute by him. Nehru's sincerest efforts to reach to the roots of his own existence puts him among the forefront prose writers of the world.

Keywords: *Discovery, History, Philosophy, Quest, Roots*

*"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past."*

Jawaharlal Nehru has obliged the world literature by penning down 'The Discovery of India' which proves to be the testimonial to his capacity as a writer of historical as well as autobiographical book. Writing history is like walking on a tight rope as the writer may prone to be influenced by his personal prejudices and dogmas but fortunately Nehru comes out as an exception, barring some portions. Nehru, the first prime minister of India, was one of the greatest figures of the modern India. He was a multifaceted personality-a statesman, a politician, a writer, a thinker, a philosopher, and a visionary artist. He combined a fine sensitivity of mind, a rare delicacy of feelings with large and generous impulses. He was indeed, a great emancipator of the human race, who had given all his life and energy to the liberty of human beings from all the bondages of mind. It has been rightly observed,

*"The Discovery of India considered as a whole is a curious jumble of historical facts, philosophical speculations and reflective essays on divergent themes couched in pleasant prose often rising to poetic heights. It is a thesis on Indian culture and history by the catholic and cosmopolitan mind of Nehru. He approaches India like a "friendly foreigner", appreciates her wisdom, condemns her follies and studies her past to make it a spring-board of action, to push and direct the current of history in creative future channels. But it is impossible to count it entirely as a book of history or culture, for what interests us more in The Discovery is its intimate autobiographical tone, its lucid style and literary graces, above all, its expression of the ideas and opinions, tastes and temperament, refined sentiments and noble passions of our beloved leader and the chief disciple of Mahatma Gandhi."*¹

Jawaharlal Nehru occupies an enviable position in Indian writing in English. He was a prose writer of distinction. The literary genius of Nehru has been acclaimed not only in India but also in the world by scholars. His reputation as a creative artist and literary personality rests on his major works –

- ➔ *An Autobiography*
- ➔ *The Discovery of India(1946)*
- ➔ *Glimpses of World History – A Series of Letters to His Daughter Indira(1934)*

Nehru was a born visionary. He was writer of par excellence as well. Commenting on the greatness of Nehru as a writer Dr Rajendra Prasad writes,

“Jawaharlal is a man of culture in the widest and best sense of the expression. He is a man with ideas born of study of books and widespread contact with man, Indian and foreign. His emotional nature and his inmate independence of thought have helped him in developing a style of expression which is direct and captivating. He is a gifted writer wielding the pen as an artist.”²

Nehru has been widely acclaimed for his exceptional command over English language. His English is profoundly rich yet lucid. There is a free flow of poetic narration in his works. Even his prose works sound melodious to our ears. It must have been a challenging task for Nehru to manifest Indian sensibility in a foreign language but he succeeded by his creative genius. Nehru is the superb master of narration. He brings before us the vivid images of the great leaders and saints of resplendent India. The following narration of Buddha portrayed by Nehru is evidence in itself:

“Seated on the lotus flower, calm and impassive, above passion and desire, beyond the storm and strife of this world, so far away he seems, out of reach, unattainable. Yet again we look and behind those still, unmoving features there is a passion and an emotion, strange and more powerful than the passions and emotions we have known. His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy feels the frame. The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement.”³

Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘The Discovery of India’ rejuvenates one of the world’s ancient cultures covering all its aspects- history, philosophy, art, religion, science, economy, society and its movements. It is a monumental work. It has brought him world wide fame as a writer. It was translated into major European, Asian and Indian languages. It has been widely regarded as a ‘Modern classics.’ It is also remarkable for its beautiful use of English. It was the masterpiece of Nehru in which his approach to history is both realistic and philosophical. Nehru writes about his motherland with pride. He acknowledges the heritage and success as well as weaknesses and failures of her people. Albert Einstein, the great scientist rightly said that ‘The Discovery of India’,

*“Gives an understanding of the glorious intellectual and spiritual tradition of
(a) great country.”⁴*

‘The Discovery of India’ has been labeled as a historical book which deals with India’s rich and complex past from the pre history to the British rule in India but it is very difficult to put it under a particular branch of literature as it is a disarray of historical facts, philosophical views and reflective essays. It is a work of prodigious scope and scholarship which unfolds the Indian culture and history. It also analyses the greatest texts of India from the Vedas to the Upanishads and the great Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He also tries to throw light on the great personalities of India like Buddha, Chanakya and Mahatma Gandhi. Sunil Khilnani in introduction to the book writes,

“The Discovery of India feels distinctly modern in its mixing of genres. memoir interleaved with political commentary and philosophical musings,

and all this is contained within a narrative that spans Indian history from the Indus Valley to the Quit India movement of 1942. It is not a work of original historical scholarship. It is an act of political and literary imagination.”⁵

Nehru's treatise 'The Discovery of India' was written over five months when he was imprisoned at Ahmednagar fort in 1942-1946 for his participation in the Quit India movement along with the great leaders of India. He used the time of monotony and boredom of jail life to write down his thoughts and learning about India's past for he believed that the past which shapes the present, is an integral part of life. He says,

“The past becomes something that leads up to the present, the moment of action, the future something that flows from it; and all three are inextricably intertwined and interrelated.”⁶

Nehru has already tried to discover the past in relation to present in his "The Glimpses of World History". The same urge once again tempted him to concentrate again on the past in a deeper sense and he made up his mind to write about India's Past. In leisurely mood, Nehru roams into the past of India to arrive at the roots of his existence as well as his India and writes what he finds from the twilight past stretched up to the complete dark of antiquity. The Discovery of India is divided into ten chapters as,

(1) Ahmadnagar Fort (2) Badenweiler Lausanne (3) The Quest (4) The Discovery of India (5) Through the ages (6) New Problems (7) The Last Phase-(1): Consolidation of British Rule and Rise of Nationalist Movement (8) The Last Phase-(2) Nationalism Versus Imperialism (9) The Last Phase-(3) World War II (10) Ahmadnagar Fort Again.

This voluminous book, in spite of being a work of history, has some autobiographical content and flavour in it. The first chapter narrates the imprisoned life of Nehru in Ahmednagar fort, his complete detachment from the outside world, his concern for the country as it was struck with famine and for the world as it was torn in war. The second chapter extensively covers his personal life i.e the story of his relationship with his wife Kamla, her illness and her death and his own philosophical speculations about death.

The third chapter 'The Quest' is considered to be the real beginning of 'The Discovery of India'. The panorama of India's past, India's strength and Weakness, the search for India, Bharatmata, The variety and Unity of India, all these sub chapters in the third chapter reflect Nehru's approach towards India and her appeal to him.

In 'The Discovery of India' Nehru begins to read the history of India from the beginning of the Indus valley civilisation with the outline of the geography of the country and the introduction of the Dravidians who were probably representative of the Indus valley civilisation. Nehru mentions that the Aryans were the first to invade India who poured into the country in successive waves from the north – west in about a thousand years. They merged with the native tribes. Nehru says that out of this cultural synthesis and fusion of the Aryans with the Dravidians, the Indian races and her basic culture grew out. Later on other races like Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Bactrians, Huns, Turkish and Mongols etc also came to India and were absorbed.

The Discovery of India is Nehru's sincere effort to outline the historical events. He explained the term 'Hinduism' in detail which means "all things to all men" and its quintessence is to live and let live. He also tells us about the earlier records, scripture, and mythology which display his own readings of Vedas, Arthshastra, Upanishadas, and Indian epics. The growth of new religions and religious sects

such as Buddhism and Jainism as well as the changing social structure and the beginning of the caste system is explained in detail.

The Discovery of India presents detailed picture of the dawn of the medieval period and the golden era of the Guptas. Here Nehru also gives a good sight of India's foreign relationships with people of China, Iran and Greece as well as Indian's foreign trade which was wide spread and the merchants of India dominated many foreign markets. Then the most perplexing question of Buddhism in India, its effect on Hinduism, and its philosophy is explained extensively.

The Discovery of India also focuses on the problems that occurred with coming of Islam into India both as a religious and political force and the flowering of the Arab culture as well as Mughal empire. Nehru tells that the Mughal, though outsiders and strangers in India, fitted into the Indian structure with remarkable speed and thus cultivated the feelings of assimilation and indianisation. Here Nehru seems to be much more sympathetic to the Afghans and tries to give a better picture of the Indo-Mughal period which is slightly different from what we learn from the history of India. Jadish .V.Dave rightly said,

“Nehru says that Afghans after being settled in India were Indianised. The fact is they never were. They did not, of course, like the British drag away India's wealth into a foreign country. But they lived in a conquered country like the robbers who also ruled. Ruling over India from Delhi does not Indianise them. They considered themselves the Moslem masters of Hindu population. They identified themselves with the wandering tribes of Arabia, and hated the culture of India. The Afghan period in the history of India is the darkest period, the period of chaos where might passed as right, where brutal bloodshed of kafirs who refused to be converted was the only ideal. What does jajia tax signify? Hindus for being what they were had to pay taxes and pay heavily. Afghans physically lived in India, but their spiritual home was abroad. Their descendents continued to cherish the same mentality till India was divided and Pakistan came into existence. The roots of Pakistan were deep in the minds of Indian Moslems, and after the division of India nobody will agree with Nehru in maintaining that Afghans, their descendents, their convert followers were ever Indianised. Nehru reaches the extremity of naivete and wishful vision when he describes lusty Allauddin Khilji's forced marriage with the kidnapped queen of Karna Dev Vaghela of Gujarat, and his son's similar marriage with her daughter, as a sign of synthesis between Afghans and Indians. Can Nehru really be so naive? I do not think so. Here is a plain distortion of facts and blatantly wrong interpretation of history.”⁷

Nehru might have presented the rosy picture of the Moslem period in India due to the Hindu Moslem problem at the time. Being a politician, he was very much aware that the frank picture of the Moslem period might stir up the already burning issue as the Moslems of India identified themselves with their invader ancestors.

The Mughal empire gradually disintegrated. The Marathas who had previously emerged as a dominant power weakened and we are led to the path where the British came to India as traders under the 'East India Company' and established a colonial empire. India became weak and backward. The British power took the advantage of India's internal differences.

'The Discovery of India' also presents a detailed picture of the British rule in India. It denotes that the East India Company laid the foundation of British rule in India. The British who first settled in Bengal gradually captured the Indian coastline. Many states of India, once very rich and prosperous, became very poor during the British rule. The Indian Industrial set up collapsed and agriculture also immensely suffered. India for the first time became a political and economic appendage of another

country. Though there were princely states in India during the British rule, they were subservient to the British government.

The spread of the education in India, the introduction of printing presses and the new technical and scientific inventions brought about a revolutionary change in Indian mind and outlook and gave rise to modern consciousness. Some noble man like Chaitanya, Ramkrishna and Raja Ram Mohan Roy played a vital role in religious and social reforms. The influence of Education also stirred up the minds of some great leaders and for the first time the leaders of Bengal stood out as the leaders of cultural and political matters to the rest of India. The efforts of these leaders took the shape of the new nationalistic movement.

The Discovery of India throws light on the role of the national congress which was a new type of leadership for the political freedom of India. The congress which was tottering in the beginning, become a dynamic organisation under Gandhiji's leadership. He made the congress democratic and mass organisation. Peasants and industrial workers joined it. Nehru describes the emergence of Gandhiji on India's political horizon in the following words,

“He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and keep deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things , but most of all the working of people 's minds.....Political freedom took new shape and acquired a new content.”⁸

The Discovery of India pictures the real scenario of the Indian freedom movement during 1940's. The national congress unquestionably played a vital role in the freedom fight of India. The congress party first came into power in the provincial elections of 1937 held under the government of India act of 1935. The congress tried their best to solve the problems of the provinces but the act of 1935 was a great hindrance. In spite of all these barriers and limitations, Indians were enthusiastic and had an overwhelming desire for complete independence. The congress, which remained entirely engrossed in internal politics, gradually started to pay little attention to the foreign developments. It developed its foreign policy and demanded that India should not be committed to any war without the consent of the representatives of the people but the British viceroy without taking the consult of the elected representatives, declared India's belligerent in world war – II which resulted into the resignation of the provincial government out of protest.

The resignation of congress provincial government resulted in chaos and disorder. The situation all over the country was tense. The British government suppressed all attempts of the Indian people to free themselves. All the eminent leaders were put behind the bars. The people of the country were frustrated, but the writing of Gandhiji had given them new direction. The congress resolution, sponsored by Gandhiji, declared that India should spend all her resources in struggle for freedom. Following this the A.T.C.C passed the Quit India resolution on August 8, 1942. The whole nation was in turmoil. All great leaders were imprisoned. All over India the younger generation played a vital role. The British government killed countless Indians to suppress the mass upsurge. They used fierce and ruthless force against the Indians which resulted into misery and degradation.

After giving the comprehensive picture of the freedom movement of India from the time it had begun to the time when it gained momentum and the final years of the movement, Nehru turns his mind towards the future of India as he foresaw the freedom of India in near future. Though India was in a very critical condition, he was very much hopeful for India's new life. He writes,

“There is a great deal of pessimism in India today and a sense of frustration and both can be understood, for events have dealt harshly with our people and the future is

not promising. But there is also below the surface a stirring and a pushing, signs of new life and vitality, and unknown forces at work.”⁹

Nehru believes that if India wants progress, she must learn about industrial and scientific advancement from the west at the same time, she must break with the dead wood of the past which has encumbered its progress. It doesn't imply a break from the vital and life giving in the past.

The Discovery of India is an account of the journey of Nehru to discover India for himself. It was in a real sense “the discovery of Nehru's large, comprehensive and catholic self—the self that has read widely, thought deeply and lost itself through love in the lives of the oppressed millions of India.”¹⁰ During the course of his journey, he discovered what India was and envisaged what she would be. Nehru discovers India in the following words,

“India is a geographical and economic entity, a cultural unity amidst diversity, a bundle of contradictions had together by strong but invisible threads. Overwhelmed again and again, her spirit was never conquered, and today when she appears to be the plaything of a proud conqueror, she remains unsubdued and unconquered.....From age to age she has produced great men and women carrying on the old tradition and yet ever adapting it to changing times.”¹¹

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