

NEHRU'S *THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA* : A NEW HISTORIC STUDY**Dr. Nisha Gupta**

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ABSTRACT

The New Historic study of *The Discovery of India*, a non-fiction / history book shows that the book can be analyzed not only from historical perspective, its immediate socio-political background, but in today's context also. Written in incarceration at Aga Khan Palace during the Quit India Movement, the book presents before its readers a wide panorama of India's past, moving before the mind's eyes like Kaleidoscopic succession of pictures ; startles them with the vast knowledge and high erudition of the writer who makes ample of references to Indian and Western scholars, thinkers and philosophers. Through its lucid communicative language, the book seeks to dovetail the heritage of past with the challenging needs and burgeoning problems of the present, without losing sight of the future possibilities at the same time. More than seventy years after the publication of this book, we can refer to it not only to discover India but to discover its writer also who was to govern the country as its first prime minister for about seventeen years after independence.

Key Words: New Historicism, incarceration, heritage, culture, nationalism, socialism, science and technology.

Mario Klarer writes in *An Introduction to Literary Studies* that one of the latest developments in the field of contextual approaches has been New Historicism. Like Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, it focuses on text and discourse, but adds a historical dimension to literary texts. It arose in the U.S.A. in 1980's and propounded the theory that history is not regarded as isolated from the literary text in the sense of a "historical background" but rather as a textual phenomenon.(95-96) The New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts colour that critic's conclusions. The New Historicist also acknowledges that his examination of literature is "tainted" by his own culture and environment. New Historicism, thus, underscores the impermanence of literary criticism. Current literary criticism is affected by and reveals the beliefs of our times in much the same way that literature reflects and is reflected by its own historical contexts.

In this paper, an effort will be made to apply the New Historic approach to the widely known and read book, *The Discovery of India* by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. This voluminous book having 600 odd pages was supposed to be about the history of India. After writing about the history of world (*Glimpses of world History*) and about the history of the self (*An Autobiography*), Nehru once more in prison turned, in the third book of his historical writings, *The Discovery of India* (1946), to the history of his own country. Sunil Khilnani in his article "Gandhi and Nehru" describes *The Discovery* as "the most complex of his books, showing most visibly the traces of intellectual effort. It also contains some of his richest writing arising out of his preoccupation with history and culture" (*An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* 153).

To begin with, the historical background or the context in which the book was written needs to be discussed elaborately. In this respect, it is worthwhile to note that like the other two long books of Nehru and a number of letters to his daughter Indira, this book was also written during his incarceration because of his active involvement in Indian national freedom movement. Nehru spent almost a decade in prison. Although incarceration cut him off (as it did with others) from the outside happenings (both in the country and the world), it had its own compensation first in the form of the company of equally worthy people in the prison and secondly in its offering an opportunity to indulge in creative writing. This advantage of incarceration is reiterated by K.R. Srinivas Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English* in the following words :

A patriot's life in a subject nation is a hazardous affair, but there are compensations too. When Sri Aurobindo was lodged in the Alipur Jail, he had "Narayan Darshan"; when Lokmanya Tilak was deported to Mandalay, he wrote his celebrated *Gita Rahasya* ; Maulana Azad wrote his classic commentary on the Koran in rather like circumstances and Jawaharlal too, as a cure for the creeping paralysis of isolation in jail, wrote a series of letters to his daughter Indira An unpremeditated legacy from the British. (298-299)

Years later when Nehru became the Prime Minister and held this office for about seventeen years, he became so busy that he could not spare time for writing. He remembered later with a sense of humour that he would have to go to the prison again in order to write a

book. It was verily a ninth time, during the Quit India movement, that Nehru was put in the Aga Khan Palace with many of his colleagues. The company of these "men of outstanding ability and culture and a wide human outlook which even the passions of the moment did not obscure" (Preface XII) gave him the much needed relief from the dull and monotonous life of prison. Nehru explained the psychology of a person shut within the wall of the prison in the following words :

Time seems to change its nature in prison. The present hardly exists, for there is an absence of feeling and sensation which might separate it from the dead past. Even news of the active, living and dying world outside has a certain dream like unreality, an immobility and unchangeableness as of the past. The outer objective time ceases to be, the inner and subjective sense remains, but at a lower level, except when thought pulls it out of the present and experiences a kind of reality in the past or in the future. (*The Discovery* 67)

He also referred to Auguste Comte, the 19th Century French Philosopher who compared the position of the men in prison with that of the dead men. Carrying forward this analysis of a prisoner's psychological condition, he opined that the only way to find some sustenance for the starved and locked up emotions in the prison was to think about the past and to indulge in fantasizing about future. And Nehru could find no refuge better than the writing. Like the other spells of incarceration, this time also, Nehru felt it imperative to write, "My friends took it for granted that I would write and produce another book, as I had done during previous terms of imprisonment. It had almost become a habit" (*The Discovery* 22).

Yet this impulse to write was not without its fears and doubts which followed in quick succession as to what would be the fate of India and also that of the writing; whether it would remain a manuscript or it would get the form of a printed book. There was another longing which accompanied this uphill task and it was to hit the target audience not only of "today or tomorrow but of an unknown and possibly distant future" (*The Discovery* 22). It was an apparently contradictory presumption that although the writing was to be about the discovery of India, its history, its rich and ancient heritage and culture, religion and philosophy, its geographical and regional differences and the all-pervading oneness and unity, yet it was to

ponder over as to how the nation would be paved on the path of development so that it could cope up with the demands of the fast pacing world.

It was the same urge to discover the past in relation to the present that led Nehru twelve years ago to write *Glimpses of World History* (in the prison) and the similar quest was underlying in his *Autobiography* (though limited to recent and more intimate times and persons). It is only when history has meaningful relation to the present-day thoughts and activities that it brings some relief from the weight and “burden of the past”. Nehru compares this process with psychoanalysis, applied to a race or to humanity itself instead of an individual.

From age to age there have been great men and women who carried on the old tradition and yet ever adapting it to the changing times. In this respect, Nehru mentions the name of the great poet and seer Rabindranath Tagore who was full of the temper and urges of the modern age and yet was rooted in India's past. His personality was a remarkable example of the synthesis of the old and the new. Nehru quotes the following statement of Rabindranath Tagore to corroborate his contention:

I love India not because I cultivate the idolatry of geography not because I have had the chance to be born in her soil but because she saved through tumultuous ages the living words that have issued from the illuminated consciousness of great ones. (*The Discovery* 628)

Nowhere in this book does he lose sight of this basic assumption. The journey to the past that is offered to us in this book is not for the romance of the past or the nostalgia. It is a purposeful journey, a journey to consolidate one's ancient heritage and wisdom to frankly face one's mistakes and failings, and to prepare oneself for the change.

Nehru begins with a frank confession that he "cannot write academically of past events in the manner of a historian or scholar " (*The Discovery* 25). Being the inheritor of a very ancient civilization like India, he feels the "burden of the past, the burden of both good and ill " (*The Discovery* 25), of which he can relieve himself only by touching the surface of it. Thus, begins the description of “The Panorama of India's past.” This journey begins with

the description of the Indus Valley civilization, dating back to some five or six thousand years. Nehru conveys his astonishment at the fact that any culture or civilization should have this continuity, not in a static sense but changing and progressing all the time. During the period between the extinction of this civilization and the influx of the Aryan people, there were a number of other incursions but they all got assimilated into the mainstream of life that came to make what was described as Hinduism. The epics, the Mahabharata, the Bhagwata Gita, Buddha, Ashoka, and through other books and contemporary records of the time, we get a complete picture of India through the ages. The beginning of the medieval period and the golden era of the Gupta dynasty give a good insight of India's foreign relations with the people of other countries. He also discusses the caste system, the continuity of the great Indian culture, emergence of Buddhism and its assimilation into Hinduism. Through the Arabs and the Mangols, we come to the golden time of the Mughal Empire. And the lives of Babar, Akbar and the Marathas are described and we are led to the colonial times of the British rule, with all the minute details. Then there is the beginning of the national movement, and there is no better way to learn about it than through the words of the man who along with Gandhi and other national leaders shook the very roots of the colonial rule. It is as if the reader is actually watching – "The variegated kaleidoscopic succession of comedies and tragedies of unpredictable circumstances played on this vast theatre that is India over a space of 3000 years..." (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 309).

There is a difference between learning the details from the history books and reading the book of a man who has gone through the experience. Nehru's feelings represent the pain, the nationalism, the human spirit and all the feelings that were experienced by the people in the national movement when they gave their lives for the freedom of the country. This takes us to the contextual background of the book. Sunil Khilnani also highlights the background of *The Discovery* in the following words :

The quarter century before 1947 was one of the most eventful and unpredictable in modern Indian history; no one could have anticipated the political sequence or outcome. In such circumstances, Nehru used historical inquiry and evocation as a way to orient the colonized individual and

collective selves during a period of high uncertainty. ("Gandhi and Nehru" 148)

Thus, the book is the product of the times when an ancient civilization encumbered by the burden of its past, shamed by its present status of stagnation and slavery was coming to terms with the harsh realities of the present and intimidating challenges of the future. That was a moment of transition, during which the community as a whole needed some sort of an anchorage and Nehru sought to establish that anchorage through this book. It served as a tool to awaken and arouse the enslaved Indians and fill them with pride for their nation and fellow countrymen, their heritage, culture and achievements.

The Discovery is also construed as a manifesto of Indian National movement. No wonder, the writer was a leading member of the Indian National Congress, and a great patriot whose heart ached to see his country enslaved to an imperialist government of England. He had the mixed feelings of pride over his rich heritage and shame for much that he saw around him, superstitions practices, outworn ideas, and above all the subject and poverty – stricken state. It seemed monstrous to him that “a great country like India, with a rich and immemorial past, should be bound hand and foot to a far-away island which imposed its will upon her” (*The Discovery* 40).

Being a student of Harrow and Cambridge, he was trained to accept the best of all systems of the world. His patriotism inspired him not only to feel proud of his country but to dispel the ills and weaknesses thwarting its progress. He states clearly :

India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic, full of dislike for the present as well as for many relics of the past that I saw. To some extent, I came to her via the West, and looked at her as a friendly Westerner might have done. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. (*The Discovery* 41)

These were the views of the leader who was soon to take the reign of India in his hands. We can get a peep into the mind of a statesman who had a very clear vision regarding

the development model of India. To play upon the title *The Discovery of India*, it is to discover Nehru's life and views that we can turn again and again to this book. According to Iyengar, we approach Nehru's books of history not just "to widen the range of our knowledge", but to:

linger in their company, we return to them again and again, for a very different reason – to know Jawaharlal Nehru, to watch the leaps of his agile intellect, to follow the sinuous moments of his singular sensibility, to exchange pulses with this great son of India who is really the greatest internationalist of our time. (*Indian Writing in English* 309)

This greatest internationalist was not in favour of a narrow concept of nationalism exclusive of the best from others. He knew that it was India's way in the past to welcome and absorb other cultures that is much more necessary today for "we march to the one world of tomorrow where national cultures will be intermingled with the international culture of the human race" (*The Discovery* 631). In seeking wisdom and friendship of others, Indians will keep their heads high. They will not be mere "suppliants for others' favours and patronage" (*The Discovery* 631). The picture of India's future was very clear in his mind. He had declared in the very beginning of this voyage in the discovery of India in the following words, "The future that took shape in mind was one of intimate co-operation politically, economically and culturally between India and other countries of the world" (*The Discovery* 41). He was anxious to take India on the path of progress. He wrote with conviction :

We have a long way to go and much leeway to make up before we can take proper station with others in the van of human civilization and progress. And we have to hurry for the time at our disposal is limited and the pace of the world grows swifter. (*The Discovery* 631)

Every age has its own values and ideals that may or may not be valid for the later ages. The highest ideals of his age, according to Nehru, were humanism and scientific spirit. Apparently the two seem to be in conflict with each other, but gradually that difference is giving way to a growing synthesis between them, resulting in a kind of scientific humanism. With these twin values, Nehru wanted to bring about revolutionary changes in his country.

Nehru put emphasis on the synthesis between worldly life and inner life, between the body and the spirit, between man as part of nature and man as part of society. It is not an easy thing to harmonize these contradictory tendencies, but then striving towards goal is a sign of development because "Perfection is beyond us and it means the end, and we are always journeying, trying to approach something that is ever receding" (*The Discovery* 626).

He promptly welcomed the rapid growth of technology and practical application of vast developments in scientific knowledge. He was fully convinced that "the methods and approach of science have revolutionized human life more than anything else in the long course of history, and have opened doors and avenues of further and even more radical change, leading up to the very portals of what has long been considered the unknown" (*The Discovery* 19).

Nehru had a distinct vision that in the solution of the problems of individual and social life, the way of observation and precise knowledge and deliberate reasoning, according to the methods of science, must be followed. At the same time, he knew that this method had its limitations so far as quest of truth (or for art and poetry and certain psychic experiences) was concerned. In that case, intuition and other methods of sensing truth and reality can be applicable. In short, a "living philosophy", which is a just combination of science and intuition must be used to solve the problems of the day. He also knew that :

The progress of science, unconnected with and isolated from moral discipline and ethical considerations, will lead to the concentration of power and the terrible instruments of destruction which it has made, in the hands of evil and selfish men, seeking the domination of others – and thus to the destruction of its own great achievement. (*The Discovery* 21)

And something of this kind could be seen behind the wars that had affected the whole world. Nehru was with other countries of the world that waged war against imperialism, fascism and Nazism. It was a war for democracy, for securing the rights and dignity of individuals.

Nehru's vision of history and that of current affairs got a new colour and characteristic because of the dominant ideology of the time – Marxian ideology and its outcome in the form of the Russian Revolution which filled Nehru with a hope and, "The long chain of history and of social development appeared to have some meaning, some sequence and the future lost some of its obscurity" (*The Discovery* 16-17). Despite some objections related to the power politics of Russia, he found the practical achievements of this nation as impressive. Nehru was not in favour of the other-worldly approach of the people, their superstitions, irrationalism and unreasonable social prejudices and practices which tend to retrograde the humanity. And the one major reason why he appreciated Marxist approach was that it tried to fit in with the then present state of scientific knowledge, although he disliked the frequent divorce, in communists, as in other practices, between action and these basic principles of Communism. Therefore, while he accepted the fundamentals of the socialist theory, he did not trouble himself about its numerous inner controversies. He also wrote that "I had little patience with Leftist groups in India, spending much of their energy in mutual conflict and recrimination over fine points of doctrine" (*The Discovery* 19).

Shashi Tharoor in *India from Midnight to Millennium* commented upon the socialist leanings of Nehru in the following words: **p** The ideas of Fabian socialism captured an entire generation of English educated Indians; Nehru was no exception. In addition, the seeming success of the Soviet model –which Nehru admired for bringing about the industrialization and modernization of a large, feudal and backward multinational state not unlike his own – appeared to offer a valuable example for India. (28) **p** A writer is always conscious of the future assessment of his book. This concern can be seen in Nehru also. In the Epilogue of the book, he raised a natural question ; "The discovery of India – what have I discovered, It was presumptuous of me to imagine that I could unveil her and find out what she is today and what she was in the long past" (627).

He was also doubtful as to "How have we played our part in this brief interlude that draws to a close? I do not know. Others of a later age will judge" (*The Discovery* 631). It was very natural and apt on his part in those circumstances to nurture such doubts because those were very hard times and the people of his generation had to struggle hard to secure not only freedom, but their self – respect and dignity also. However, he had a pleasing

satisfaction that "In spite of all the mistakes that we may have made, we have saved ourselves from triviality and an inner shame and cowardice" (*The Discovery* 631). Nehru ends this long journey through the discovery of India by quoting Nikolai Ostrovsky, a Soviet socialist realist writer who wrote in *How the Steel was tempered* that man should "so live that dying he can say - All my life and strength were given to the first cause of the world – the liberation of mankind" (*The Discovery* 632).

Sunil Khilnani is quick in perceiving this doubt in Nehru and makes an apt comment in this context : "Nehru had a fixed concern with how his life (and works) would look from the perspective of the future. He was sharply conscious of how what appeared important to the contemporary eye would be dismissed as insignificant by the sterner tribunal of history" ("Gandhi and Nehru" 153). More than seventy years after the publication of *The Discovery of India*, many changes have taken place as is expected to be natural. Even Nehru would have given consent to the changes as he himself was never in favour of a stagnant and isolated development. According to Shashi Tharoor, "Nehru himself as man with an open and questing mind, would have allowed his practical thinking to evolve with times, even while remaining anchored to his core beliefs" ("How does Nehru matter today").

In this context, it is also important to refer to what Sonia Gandhi has written in Foreword to the 2004 edition of the book that though written more than half a century ago, the book addresses many vital issues still relevant today, like:

the choice between non-violence and terrorism to attain political goals, the perilous politics of caste and religion, the struggle to conquer hunger, disease and ignorance, the importance of cultivating a 'scientific temper'. Through these views and other crucial questions emerges Nehru's noble vision for the India of the future. (*The Discovery*)

Nehru had espoused the vision of a democratic state, secular in its functioning, socialistic in its economic structure and non-aligned in foreign relations, as stressed upon in *The Discovery* also. In recent years, India has undergone profound transformation in socio-political and economic system. Nehru's policy of a controlled socialist economy has been replaced by a thriving free-enterprise system and protectionism has been replaced by

globalization. The benefits of development programmes are sought to be percolated to the lowest sections of society. The legacy of democracy and secularism that has been passed on to us, will continue to flourish without any intimidation. As Nehru is perceived rightly or wrongly, to be the founder of a dynasty, a share of any discredit that the present descendants of his family or the Congress party acquires attaches itself to Nehru's name. Despite all this, "his legacy is ours, whether we agree with everything be stood for or not. What we are today, both for good and for ill, we owe in great measure to one man. That's why, his story is not simply history" (Shashi Tharoor, "How does Nehru matter today").

There are many themes that run side by side in this book. Apart from being a history book, it seeks to describe the vital links that connect past with the present and indicate future trajectories. The book, rich with plenty of references (to scholars and thinkers of India as well as of the world) might still surprise contemporary readers with the high erudition possessed by an Indian statesman of 1940's. The book is a celebration of an individual's sense of self and the civilizational values he inhabits. The book also offers us a larger journey and it is the journey of humanity. There are some general messages that are meant to be conveyed to humanity as a whole irrespective of nation and religion, race and colour. Nehru's commitment to the "liberation of mankind" makes it all the more relevant in today's scenario. Analyzing the secret of Nehru's charisma, K. R. Srinivas Iyenagar writes that it was because "his theme was India or India and the world, or humanity's trials and defeats, hopes and achievements" (*Indian Writing in English* 313). The same theme of humanity and its trials and tribulations is evident in *The Discovery* also. This vital issue of humanity has lent a universal appeal to it and has sustained the popularity and charm of the book till today.

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