

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*- A study

Sujatha lokanadham , Prof.Y.Somalatha

Andhra university

The magnificence of horror in human drama is never-ending. Across the continents, humanity rises to every challenge and sinks to any depth of chaos. We cherish each heartbeat and murder at will. We bless nature's miracles, yet trash the hood. We are the true victims of our deeds. Not least, so many suffer relentless poverty, each day wondering at living another. So many are refugees from disaster or violence, escaping under unfamiliar skies to avoid a closer death, grasping whatever it is they have left the child with his ragged clothes, a pot to cook in; so many are victims of injustice, of the vagaries of despotism or ill luck, with no legal system to which they can bring their wisps of hope. As we realize, we need to spend time rethinking and restructuring our lives with introspection. We need to deeply take care of our common future as Indians, and the role of each individual to make a positive difference is the need of the hour.

The humanity of contemporary society is in search of a solution that can put an end to the suffering of Humanity. In this regard, the first solution that comes to mind is 'God'. We attach a lot of importance to the notion of God that according to many thinkers like Voltaire, even if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent Him. According to them, God is a psychological necessity for "the mind of man has always been trying to fashion some such mental image or conception which grew with the mind's growth".

In addition, it is our natural tendency to depend on someone else - who we consider to be superior to us in all aspects - in knowledge, competence, power, and perfection, for instance. God is the paradigm of virtues and ideals cherished, on whom we can rely in times of crisis and whom we can blame for our failures. Countering the argument of those who upheld the necessity of God or a God-like concept, Nehru argued, "Even if God exists, it may be desirable not to look up to Him or to rely upon Him." He continued "Too much dependence on supernatural factors may lead, and has often led, to a loss of self-reliance in man." It would, according to him, ultimately result in "blunting of his capacity and creative ability". Nehru had a tremendous faith in the human. To show the supremacy of man over God he argued, "God we may deny, but what hope is there for us if we deny man and thus reduce everything to futility."

The attitude and vision of Nehru towards the downtrodden and their problems are the driving force behind the progress of this research and its outcome.

Jawaharlal Nehru's imprint on the history of postcolonial India has been extraordinary. The contingencies that put Nehru at the helm of India's fledgling polity after the departure of the British in 1947 ensured that the decisions he took on behalf of the Indian nation-state had far-reaching ramifications. Nehru's view of the historical possibilities available to India at the dawn of its independence was shaped by his understanding of the West's historical trajectory, in which he saw universal significance. At the heart of this view lay his belief that independent India's national state should direct economic development; but also construct a constitutional, secular government, build economic opportunities for its predominantly agrarian population, and maintain sovereignty in the international arena through a policy of "non-alignment" in the Cold War. That this vision was constantly forced to make adjustments and compromises in the face of political instability is now a moot point. What emerges from a perusal of Nehru's voluminous writings is a sense of how, as a political leader, he was forced to be imaginative and creative with his worldview.

Instead of having faith in God and religion, Nehru advocated humanism - which he termed as 'scientific humanism'. It represents a 'synthesis between humanism and scientific spirit'. Scientific humanism advocated by Nehru "is practical and pragmatic, ethical and social, altruistic and humanitarian. It is governed by practical idealism for social betterment". Establishing scientific humanism is the Ultimate goal of Nehru. Nehru was jailed several

times by the British government but he didn't show any bitterness towards the British. Because he said several times that his fight was against British imperialism and not against the British race as such.

Nehru talked about the prison life and how the Prisoners were treated. He spent a good amount of time in jail. In total, he spent more than ten years in jail for India's freedom.

An Autobiography of his was written by him in prison between 1934 and 1935. The three great classics of Nehru were authored in the Prison only.

It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write about himself. It grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise for him (Cowley).

The toughness of the task of writing an autobiography is perhaps best summed up in Cowley's words. Jawaharlal Nehru very frankly reveals to us his dreams and desires, hopes and aspirations, doubts and conflicts, frustrations and triumphs. However, the book does not exclusively trace the growth and development of the personality of its author. That is because the book was not originally intended to be a full-fledged autobiography. As such there has been, in this book, "a fusion of the personal history of Nehru with our national history and we can watch the evolution of Nehru's personality in the context of the drama of our national struggle." Nehru's task was indeed a hard one and as Dr. Srinivasa Iyengar puts it:

It was a razor's edge that Jawaharlal trod upon; to expose one's innermost feelings, to uncover one's wounds as it were to the public, to judge one's contemporaries, to measure a Mahatma, to assess one's father, to feel the pulse of one's love to one's mother. It was fatally easy to stumble, to slip, and to fall. But Jawaharlal kept steady and seldom stumbled and never slipped or fell. (Iyengar 35).

In his Preface to his book, Nehru remarks:

My attempt was to trace as far as I could, my own mental development and not to write a survey of recent Indian history. (Nehru, Preface)

Nehru was not a professional man of letters, nor a professional historian. He is known more as a great leader, a wise statesman of world status, the first Prime Minister, and an architect of independent India. He dominated the Indian, rather the Asian political scene like a colossus for many decades. While there may be a difference of opinion about his political contribution, his unique consciousness as an imaginative writer with poetic vision, and as an intellectual with a deep sense and knowledge of the pageant of the world remain unquestioned.

His Book *An Autobiography* is divided into several chapters. It has been acclaimed as not merely the quest of an individual for freedom, but also as an insight into the making of the mind of new India. The literary contributions of Jawaharlal Nehru have moulded a whole generation of Indians and inspired persons from many other countries. About the bonding of Nehru with literature his daughter Indira Gandhi states that...

Books fascinated Jawaharlal Nehru. He sought out ideas. He was extraordinarily sensitive to literary beauty. In his writings, he aimed to describe his motives and appraisals as meticulously as possible. The purpose was not self-justification or rationalization, but to show the rightness and inevitability of the actions and events in which he was a prime participant. He was a luminous man and his writings reflected the radiance of his spirit." (*An Autobiography*, Foreword).

The perception and receptivity of Indians mostly depend on the country's multicultural, multilingual existence that has a rich diversity of thought as its strong foundation and it has a great impact on its literature standards, ethics, and aspirations. In the process of Indian English Literature attaining its creditable stature today, the significant contribution of Jawaharlal Nehru can never be ignored. Nehru's Imaginative use of prose to communicate truth, the thoughtful ideology of socialism, and subtlety in expression have made his writing unique of its kind in the world of literature.

Nehru's *An Autobiography* was published by John Lane Badley in April 1936. The purpose of writing this book, says Nehru, is twofold. The First is to give himself a definite task that fills in the long solitude of jail life and diverts

his mind from worry and dispersion. The second is an attempt to understand his responses to the past events with which he has been connected.

Nehru's prose works were adorned with unique characteristics. The first one is the Imaginative use of prose to communicate truth, the Thoughtful ideology of socialism, the Great personality revealed through his narration and the Subtlety of expression. These unique qualities are seen in all three great classics: *An Autobiography*, *Discovery of India*, and *Glimpses of World History* of Jawaharlal Nehru. The Story Starts from his childhood to the extreme heights he reached in his political arena narrated with a poetic touch. Though Nehru does not directly express anywhere, the whole book could be seen as a refutation of traditional wisdom. The first sentence of the narrative could be called epigrammatic

An Only son of prosperous parents is apt to be spoilt especially so in India. And when that son happens to have been an only child for the first eleven years of his existence there is little hope for him to escape this spoiling (*An Autobiography* 01).

The young Jawaharlal Nehru's mind was shaped by two sets of parental influences that he never saw as contradictory-- the traditional Hinduism of his mother and other women folk of the Nehru household, the modernist, secular cosmopolitanism of his father. The women, especially Nehru's widowed aunt Rajvathi told him tales from Hindu mythology, took him regularly to temples, and immersed him in baths in the holy river Ganga. On the other side, Motilal Nehru could see the hope of real progress for India in Western science and English reasoning, rather than in Hindu Religion or rituals.

Nehru 's quest and pleasure in writing about his Childhood stories and experiences is visible in the style of writing. Childhood is not just a phase that is so beautiful and precious but an opportunity for human beings to understand the world around them. The subtle expressions he uses make the readers cherish the most beautiful part of their lives. In Nehru's words.

My Childhood was thus a sheltered and uneventful one. I listened to the grown-up talk of my cousins without always understanding all of it. Often this talk related to the overbearing character and insulting manners of the English people, as well as Eurasians, towards Indians and how it was the duty of every Indian to stand up to this and to tolerate it (*An Autobiography* 6).

Nehru's experiences as a child of a statesman have provided him a greater opportunity to have a kind of understanding regarding the status of India and its future requirements. It enabled him to foresee the future of India and to have such a great vision to resolve the intense problems of free India in the later years. His opinions on English individuals and his family's Westernized lifestyle made us understand how Nehru could look at the few positives of the same. Sharing his opinion in this regard he wrote...

Much I began to resent the presence and behaviour of the alien rulers; I had no feeling whatever, so far as I can remember, against individual English men. I had had English governesses and occasionally I saw English friends of my father's visiting him. In my heart, I rather admired the English. (*An Autobiography* 6).

The subtle nature of his expressions makes Nehru a unique writer in the literary world. Childhood itself is a tender part of everyone's life with quirky and spunky nature. Nehru adds his flavour to the beauty of childhood. The way he describes and cherishes his childhood is immense and dazzling. His love for children can be seen in the way he loved his childhood. Nehru's love, affection, and admiration towards his father Motilal Nehru were quite immense. The experiences and situations that made him feel sheltered, frightened, and equipped are described in a very poetic rendering his imagination with deep feelings.

In the evenings usually, many of his friends came to visit Father and he would relax after the tension of the day and the house would resound with his tremendous laughter. His laugh became famous in Allahabad. Sometimes I would peep at him and his friends from behind a curtain trying to make out what these great big people said to each other. If I were caught in the act I would be dragged out and, rather frightened, made to sit for a while on father's knee. Once I saw him drinking claret or some other red wine.

Whisky I knew. I had often seen him and his friends drink it. But the new red stuff filled me with horror and I rushed to my mother to tell her that my father was drinking blood. (AA, 6)

Nehru's inaugural address while assuming the office of the Prime Minister - "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny" is famous for its poetic charm. Nehru's long tenure was significant in shaping the political traditions and economic policies of Independent India. His contribution to international politics was in the form of the Non-Aligned Movement. Nehru was 47 when he wrote *An Autobiography* (1936). The autobiography has 68 chapters and 616 pages in total. Praising Nehru's *An Autobiography*, C D Narasimhaiah says that it is:

The most distinguished Indian autobiography ... indeed unsurpassed by autobiography coming out of the heat and dust of public life anywhere in living history. (Narasimhaiah, 3)

Dissociation is the first quality observed in Nehru's *An Autobiography*. Jawaharlal Nehru, an Indian politician was brought up in school and college on Chemistry, Botany, and Geography. He uses Abraham Cowley's words for the epigraph to his autobiography: It is a hard and nice subject for a man to write of himself: it grates his heart to say anything of disparagement and the readers' ears to hear anything of praise of him.

The much-famed autobiography opens with the wealthy Nehru heir's anxiety as "An only son of prosperous parents is apt to be spoilt." In Narasimhaiah's view, the above words remind one of the openings of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* prepare the readers for a good laugh as the autobiographer displays a great capacity for self-introspection and has a good laugh in the opening sentence of the volume. Such a rare capacity to discover and digest truths only could have inspired the famous painter friend of Nehru, to sum up her response to Nehru's autobiography when he wrote:

I like your autobiography; where others would have said 'The sea saw me', you say 'I saw the sea. (Narasimhaiah 5)

Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, thus, shares uniformity in form and content with those of St. Augustine, Rousseau, Hume, Franklin, Gibbon, and John Stuart Mill. It is considered one of the most outstanding prose works in the annals of Indian writing in English. *An Autobiography* is a literary expression of a man at the height of his powers. John Gunther, a journalist of world renown, thinks Nehru writes English as hardly half a dozen men alive can match. In addition to revealing several facets of Nehru's personality, the autobiography also gives us an unmistakable sense of the growth of the writer's mind. *An Autobiography* consistently focuses on the important role that Nehru played in contemporary public affairs. It's an evident document of all that happened during the tenure of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

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