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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU (1889–1964)

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Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was an Indian politician who spent many years in British colonial prisons, a situation which can be viewed as the epitome of loss. Rather than languishing in these prisons, he mustered the energy to write two memorable historical works there—a history of the world and a history of India—which are still widely read today.

Before anything else, Nehru was a politician who *made* history, first as a nationalist leader of the Indian National Congress for 30 years, when he fought for India's independence from Great Britain, and later as its first prime minister from 1947 until his death. But like his contemporary, opponent, and admirer, Winston Churchill, Nehru not only made history; he also *wrote* it. In fact, he was mesmerized by history. Only few political leaders have displayed a historical awareness that equalled his.

This unusual fixation on the past had a reason. Nehru's nationalist activities brought him into permanent conflict with the colonial authorities. Between 1921 and 1945, he spent almost nine years in prison and passed much of the rest with the prospect of detention or, conversely, of reintegration into normal life. All these prison terms, except the last, were preceded by trials, often for sedition.¹ To beat the solitude of prison and stay mentally fit, Nehru started writing and completed a history of the world, an autobiography, and a history of India while incarcerated. He observed that whereas his turbulent life as history-maker absorbed him too much to reflect, read, and write, it was in prison that he found serenity in abundance. Nehru the historian spoke when Nehru the politician was silent. Paradoxically, the loss of freedom was a precondition for his creativity as a historian. And in contrast to many other political leaders who wrote history, he penned his works before he led his country, and not after his political career. His politics as prime minister were imbued with his historical views from the outset.

Although far from enviable, the British prison system in India allowed some categories of inmates to do intellectual work. Nehru may not have had access to a library with reference books, but he still read voraciously the books he could borrow, making copious reading notes despite the irregular supply of writing materials. In addition, the prospect of unexpected early release or of not being able to finish a manuscript before regular release, and the associated risk of dramatic loss of interest in his own writings, always worried him and forced upon him a steady work rhythm in prison that also bears traces of haste.

In these adverse circumstances, he wrote *Glimpses of World History* during his fifth and sixth prison terms (October 1930–January 1931 and December 1931–August 1933). The idea for it arose when he was still a free man. Over the summer in 1928, while travelling for his political work, he had written 30 letters to his daughter, Indira, who was ten at the time (and would also become a prime minister, as Indira Gandhi). As he had earned degrees in natural science and law, Nehru told her about the genesis of life and civilization on earth. They were published in 1929. When he was in prison from 1930 to 1933, then, he again turned to the epistolary form. He wrote nearly two hundred long letters to Indira, each describing one episode of world history. Nehru saw them as glimpses to awaken Indira's curiosity for history, as "little talks *entre nous*." Prison conditions, however, did not permit him to send them one by one, he had to keep the bundle of letters on him, with "many hundreds of hours of my prison life . . . locked up in them."²

Although intimate at times, the letters did not stay private for long because Nehru emerged as a much sought-after storyteller and national educator. They were quickly published in 1934 as a book of thousand pages. Unusual for the time, *Glimpses* was less Eurocentric than its mostly Western counterparts (like H.G. Wells, with whom Nehru shared a belief in science and progress and whose 1920 *Outline of History* he had thoroughly read, and Oswald Spengler, whom he disapproved of for his praise of violence). It made Nehru one of the first non-Western world historians. He frequently used prison metaphors as when he wrote that we "shall . . . have to break through the prison of tradition wherever it prevents us from our onward march,"³ and "India herself is still in prison and her freedom is yet to come. What is our freedom worth if India is not free?"⁴

Curiously, Nehru was not the first to write a world history in prison. He followed the footsteps of Walter Raleigh (1554–1618), who drafted an unfinished *History of the World* (1614) in the Tower of London, and Condorcet (1743–94), who penned *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* in hiding before he was captured (it was published posthumously in 1795). Raleigh was eventually beheaded and Condorcet died in prison (see chapters in this book by Nicholas Popper and Simona Pisanelli), while Nehru spent three more terms in detention, eventually becoming the well-known political leaders who, despite four known assassination attempts and unlike his daughter (who would be assassinated in 1984), died in his own bed.

In August 1942, when Congress passed the Quit India Resolution asking the British to leave India, Nehru was again imprisoned with other leading Congress

members, this time for the better part of the Second World War. Most of this ninth, last, and longest imprisonment was spent in Ahmednagar Fort prison, Maharashtra, where he wrote *Discovery of India* between April and September 1944. As with *Glimpses*, this new, and more contemplative, historical exercise was also intended to prepare his future leadership. The central question that haunted him in *Discovery* was how to revitalize India's history plagued by internal backwardness due to racism and caste, gender, and class differences, and by external dependence caused by British imperialism. Nehru was driven to history because he desperately wanted to reverse India's plight, but he quickly lost interest in those parts of the past that seemed to contribute little to solve his central question. Prison provided him with sufficient time to find answers.

His quest was of epic proportions. Intrigued by the inexorable passage of time, Nehru aspired to nothing less than to sort out the past, the present, and the future. He wanted to organize the past with the help of a historicist approach to understand what he called India's spirit as it manifested itself in millennial continuity, distinguishing periods of growth, slumber, exhaustion, and decay, and carefully selecting those traditions that he thought stimulated progress. Armed with these historical insights, he wanted to also organize the present by embracing a secular and parliamentary democracy and humanist values at home, and an internationalist, non-aligned outlook abroad. Finally, he wanted to organize the future by introducing socialist planning in order to eradicate poverty and modernize economic development. With this triple approach of time, he justified his future actions.

Although Nehru denied that he saw India as an anthropomorphic entity,⁵ that was exactly how he approached his country in *Discovery*: he engaged in a dialogue with Bharat Mata, Mother India, and, in the epilogue, in a lyrical celebration of her. This abstract love for India he shared with his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi, who was barely interested in history's vicissitudes. However, Nehru managed to remain self-critical and avoid self-glorification and self-pity. In a way, *Discovery*, published as a book of more than 700 pages in March 1946, 16 months before independence, can be seen as Nehru's gift to India. Remarkably, there is one other example of this. When historian Eric Williams, author of the seminal *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), became the first prime minister of Trinidad and Tobago, he published *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago*, on 31 August 1962, the day his country achieved independence. Coincidentally, Williams was an admirer of Nehru, though not uncritically.⁶

Nehru's prison writings were revised by family members, but their content stayed largely unaltered. Although very critical of the British, they were generally praised for their lack of resentment despite their author's years of captivity. Consequently, they were not censored and in fact became bestsellers from their first publication. Nehru used prefaces and postscripts to update the various editions. His works captivated generations, still finding avid readers in many languages today. In 1988, 42 years after its first appearance, *Discovery* was even adapted into a 53-part television series. Nevertheless, Nehru's critics were not blind to his

deficiencies. They pointed out his simplifications and romanticism, and his soft spot for certain authoritarian historical figures. Nehru himself, however, anticipated many of these shortcomings in his writings, conceding that he was not a professional historian.

When young and imprisoned, Nehru was full of hope about the future and determined to sacrifice his life for it, but with age and political responsibility came pessimism and his historical views slowly changed. He was devastated by the Second World War and the destructive possibilities of the atomic bomb, by the violence unleashed by the Partition of India in 1947, and by the 1962 war with China. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence principle, he increasingly came to see violence as a factor in world history antithetical to his political goals. He was nominated 13 times for the Nobel Peace Prize between 1950 and 1961.

A secular humanist, Nehru also advocated a scientific approach to India's problems. He perceived religion and communalism as forces that on the whole kept India backward. He condemned the hate speech that often came with them.⁷ In *Discovery*, he argued that "scientific temper" was needed to combat superstition, religious bigotry, and pseudo-science.⁸ This formula, and the belief in science it conveyed, became a dominant motto to the extent that India included in its 1976 constitution a citizen's duty "to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform."

Nehru's antagonism towards radical Hindu nationalism was not quickly forgotten, however. In 2004, Gopinath Munde, president of the radical Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Maharashtra, demanded that the state government either ban *Discovery of India* (58 years after its first appearance) or delete its "defamatory" references to Maratha King Shivaji (1630–1680). Historians were quick to point out that Nehru's treatment of Shivaji was laudatory rather than defamatory.⁹ Since assuming office as prime minister in 2014, BJP leader Narendra Modi has repeatedly criticized Nehru's role and legacy, including in the Lok Sabha (parliament).¹⁰ In addition, distorted depictions of, and falsified sources about, Nehru's life abound on the internet, feeding conspiracy theories and a certain cult of Nehru vilification.¹¹ This fitted into a broader trend in which some BJP politicians perceived secular historians, including Romila Thapar (see Chapter 29 by Sanne van der Kaaij-Gandhi), as "intellectual terrorists." Nonetheless, Nehru is still widely revered.

On balance, Nehru turned his prison reflections into a historically informed overall view of Indian society in order to steer it as its first prime minister through its early years of independence as the world's "largest democracy." In so doing, he transformed the disadvantage of prison into an advantage and proved that an initial position of loss could ultimately be beneficial for him and his country. However, his overwhelming passion for history probably had contradictory effects. Nobody understood the historical background of India's problems better than he did. But he was also humbled by the frightening responsibilities of representing a civilization that had survived millennia. Nehru's historical awareness spurred him to action while at the same time slowing him down.

Extract

From Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* [written in prison in 1944] (Calcutta: The Signet Press, 1946), 7–12. In the public domain and available at www.indian-culture.gov.in/discovery-india.

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 an 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. We live, as Auguste Comte said, dead men's lives, encased in our pasts, but this is especially so in prison where we try to find some sustenance for our starved and locked-up emotions in memory of the past or fancies of the future.

There is a stillness and everlastingness about the past; it changes not and has a touch of eternity, like a painted picture or a statue in bronze or marble. Unaffected by the storms and upheavals of the present, it maintains its dignity and repose and tempts the troubled spirit and the tortured mind to seek shelter in its vaulted catacombs. There is peace there and security, and one may even sense a spiritual quality.

But it is not life, unless we can find the vital links between it and the present with all its conflicts and problems. It is a kind of art for art's sake, without the passion and the urge to action which are the very stuff of life. Without that passion and urge, there is a gradual oozing out of hope and vitality, a settling down on lower levels of existence, a slow merging into non-existence. We become prisoners of the past and some part of its immobility sticks to us. . . .

Yet the past is ever with us and all that we are and that we have comes from the past. We are its products and we live immersed in it. Not to understand it and feel it as something living within us is not to understand the present. To combine it with the present and extend it to the future, to break from it where it cannot be so united, to make of all this the pulsating and vibrating material for thought and action—that is life. . . .

There was a time, many years ago, when I lived for considerable periods in a state of emotional exaltation, wrapped up in the action which absorbed me. Those days of my youth seem far away now, not merely because of the passage of years but far more so because of the ocean of experience and painful thought that separates them from today. The old exuberance is much less now, the almost uncontrollable impulses have toned down, and passion and feeling are more in check. The burden of thought is often a hindrance, and in the mind where there was once certainty, doubt creeps in. Perhaps it is just age, or the common temper of our day. . . .

When actual action has been denied me I have sought some such approach to the past and to history. Because my own personal experiences have often touched historic events and sometimes I have even had something to do with the influencing of such events in my own sphere, it has not been difficult for me to envisage history as a living process with which I could identify myself to some extent.

I came late to history and, even then, not through the usual direct road of learning a mass of facts and dates and drawing conclusions and inferences from them, unrelated to my life's course. So long as I did this, history had little significance for me. I was still less interested in the supernatural or problems of a future life. Science and the problems of today and of our present life attracted me far more. . . .

The roots of that present lay in the past and so I made voyages of discovery into the past, ever seeking a clue in it, if any such existed, to the understanding of the present. The domination of the present never left me even when I lost myself in musings of past events and of persons far away and long ago, forgetting where or what I was. If I felt occasionally that I belonged to the past, I felt also that the whole of the past belonged to me in the present. Past history merged into contemporary history: it became a living reality tied up with sensations of pain and pleasure.

If the past had a tendency to become the present, the present also sometimes receded into the distant past and assumed its immobile, statuesque appearance. In the midst of an intensity of action itself, there would suddenly come a feeling as if it was some past event and one was looking at it, as it were, in retrospect.

It was this attempt to discover the past in its relation to the present that led me twelve years ago to write *Glimpses of World History* in the form of letters to my daughter. . . .

I suppose I have changed a good deal during these twelve years. I have grown more contemplative. There is perhaps a little more poise and equilibrium, some sense of detachment, a greater calmness of spirit. I am not overcome now to the same extent as I used to be by tragedy or what I conceived to be tragedy. The turmoil and disturbance are less and are more temporary, even though the tragedies have been on a far greater scale.

Is this, I have wondered, the growth of a spirit of resignation, or is it a toughening of the texture? Is it just age and a lessening of vitality and of the passion of life? Or is it due to long periods in prison and life slowly ebbing away, and the thoughts that fill the mind passing through, after a brief stay, leaving only ripples behind?

Notes

- 1 For an overview of Nehru's prison terms: <https://nehruportal.nic.in/prison>; for an overview of his trials: Ram Gopal, *Trials of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Bombay: The Book Centre, 1962).
- 2 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, [1934] 1989): 274.
- 3 Nehru, *Glimpses*, 21.
- 4 Nehru, *Glimpses*, 54.
- 5 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1981): 59.
- 6 Eric Williams, "A Tribute to Nehru", (1964), in *Forged from the Love of Liberty: Selected Speeches of Dr. Eric Williams*, edited by Paul Sutton (Port of Spain: Longman Caribbean, 1981): 229–33.
- 7 Nehru, *Discovery*, 563–64.
- 8 Nehru, *Discovery*, 512.
- 9 Nehru, *Discovery*, 272–73; Vaishnavi Sekhar, "Has Mr. Munde Got His History Wrong?" *Times of India*, 21 March 2004.

- 10 Shekhar Gupta, “Why Modi Is Using Nehru to Try and Demolish the Gandhi Dynasty and Congress”, *The Print*, 8 February 2020.
- 11 Amulya Gopalakrishnan, “The Nehru You Don’t Know”, *Times of India*, 15 May 2016; Romila Thapar, “They Peddle Myths and Call It History”, *New York Times*, 17 May 2019.

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Glimpses of World History, Being Further Letters to His Daughter, Written in Prison, and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People. Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1934 (vol 1) and 1935 (vol 2) (Numerous reprints, most recently in 2017).

The Discovery of India. Calcutta: The Signet Press, 1946 (Numerous reprints, most recently in 2020).

Note: Most of Nehru’s writings are freely available at: <https://nehruportal.nic.in>, <https://nehruselectedworks.com>, and <https://archive.org>.

Further Readings

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