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A Poetically Vision With an Imaginative Ideas by a Writer Jawaharlal Nehru: A Literary Gaolbird

Satpal Manda¹ Dr. Anand Sawroop²

¹Research Scholar of Bhagwant University, Ajmer (Raj.) India

²Rtd. HOD, DAV College, Ambala

Abstract – Nehru, like some great poets, had also a “negative capability”. On the occasion of the holy festival at Vishwa Bharati in April 1936, Rabindra Nath Tagore referred to Jawaharlal as the “Rituraj”, representing the season of youth and triumphant joy. Subsequently, in a letter written to Nehru in May 1936, he spoke of Nehru’s Autobiography as a book through which “there runs a deep current of humanity which overpasses the tangles of facts and leads us to the person who is greater than his deeds and truer than his surroundings”. It was a rare tribute from one of our greatest poets and artists.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: A LITERARY GAOLBIRD

In August 1933, in his last letter to his daughter from gaol, subsequently published in Glimpses of World History (1934), Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

“There have been many famous gaolbirds, the two best known perhaps being the Spaniard, Cervantes, who wrote Don Quixote, and the Englishman, John Bunyan, the author of The Pilgrim’s Progress. I am not a man of letters, and I am not prepared to say that the many years that I have helped me wonderfully to get through them. I am not a literary man, and I am not an historian; what indeed am I? I find it difficult answer that question.”

Nehru was not a professional man of letters, nor a professional historian. He is known more as a great leader, a wise world statesman, the first Prime Minister and architect of independent India, who 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 uniqueness as an imaginative writer with poetic vision, as an intellectual with a deep sense and knowledge of the pageant of world unquestioned. He has a strong claim to be included among the “famous literary gaolbirds”.

In him was a rare combination of a creative, perceptive artist, a poet and a visionary, a romantic as well as a realist, a patrician as well as a commoner, a statesman and an active politician who could view the political scene with detachment, an actor on the world stage, who could be behind the dazzling footlights and floodlights as well as in the audience in the darkened auditorium. These seemingly paradoxical elements combined in him to form an integrated whole, which

was his peculiar genius, and which reflects an outlook on life consistent with his personality.

HE TELLS US IN HIS DISCOVERY OF INDIA:

“I made my mood receptive to impressions and to waves of thought and feelings that came to me from living beings as well as those who had long since ceased to be. I tried to identify my self for a while with the unending procession at the tail-end of which I too was struggling along. And then I would separate myself, and from a hilltop apart, look down at the valley below.

“I fear there is too much of a volcano in me for real detachment. But in the midst of the activity, I could separate myself from it, and look at it as a thing apart.....retire into that cloistered chamber of my mind and live for a while another life.”

Nehru, like some great poets, had also a “negative capability”. On the occasion of the holy festival at Vishwa Bharati in April 1936, Rabindra Nath Tagore referred to Jawaharlal as the “Rituraj”, representing the season of youth and triumphant joy. Subsequently, in a letter written to Nehru in May 1936, he spoke of Nehru’s Autobiography as a book through which “there runs a deep current of humanity which overpasses the tangles of facts and leads us to the person who is greater than his deeds and truer than his surroundings”. It was a rare tribute from one of our greatest poets and artists.

Much has already been written and said about perhaps every significant aspect of Nehru’s work and thought and his brilliant and colorful life and personality, and it is hardly possible to say anything new or original about his life and work. What I propose to do is to analyze and illustrate briefly some

striking features of his literary merit, which have not received enough attention.

Nehru's own writings and speeches run into volumes, each piece of his writing, in some measure or another, being characteristic of his fine aesthetic sensibility, his poetic vision, and his artistic and imaginative use of language. He did not write poetry, but he was well and widely read in poetry, and much of the prose he wrote is poetic, and is skill fully modulated to suit every mood and moment. His writings, whether introspective, descriptive, narrative or expository, have the ring of spontaneity and deep sincerity, an intensely personal note with immediacy and poignancy, a pensive lyricism, very dominant in his natural descriptions, and at times, powerful rhetoric. They abound with instances of artful narration, rich imagery, irony, wit, humour and pathos. In them, one, who has personally heard Nehru on some occasions, can hear again that vibrant, wistful voice, sombre and sometimes sad, sweet in its sadness. I always like to read passages from Nehru aloud, just as my enjoyment and understanding of good poetry is deepened when read aloud.

In illustrating the artistic and literary merit of Nehru's writings, I shall concentrate largely on his writings before Independence, all written from behind prison bars, that is on *Glimpses of World History* (1934), *An Autobiography* (1936), and *Discovery of India* (1946). I shall also refer to *The Unity of India* (1941), which as V. K. Krishna Menon says in the foreword to it, "shares with the Autobiography the outstanding qualities of powerful writing". In many of his writings and speeches, after he held office, he might have been assisted by his speech writers, but some of his speeches on critical and momentous occasions such as on the midnight of 14th of August 1947, or on the death of Gandhiji or of Sarojini Naidu, and his last will and testament, have the unmistakable mark of his literary and poetic genius.

Glimpses of World History, first published in 1934, is a collection in book form of letters written by Nehru to his young daughter, Indira Priyadarshini, from various prisons, between October 1930 and August 1933. It is, as V. K. Krishna Menon says in the foreword to its revised edition published in 1939, "no mere narrative of events...but a reflection of the author's personality". Besides the illuminating glimpses it gives of the march of history since the dawn of human civilization, it also reveals Nehru's narrative and descriptive skill, his language, virtuosity and his potential as a good story teller. Even in the first letter in this book, "A Birthday Letter", we get a taste of Nehru's prose, charged with force and feeling. He writes:

"Ordinary men and women are not usually heroic...but a time comes when a whole people become full of faith for a good cause, and then even simple, ordinary men and women become heroes, and history becomes stirring and epoch-making. Great leaders have

something in them which inspires a whole people and makes them do great deeds."

Nehru himself was one such great leader.

Benares or Kashi, "that most ancient of cities" is described by him as:

"Old and hoary, decrepit, dirty, smelly, and yet alive and full of the strength of ages is Benares. Full of charm and wonder is Kashi, for in her eyes you can see the past of India, and in the murmur of her waters you can hear the voices of ages long gone by". (p. 31)

Notice the pungent satire in his reference to the exploitation of the faithful by the so-called specialists in religion, the priests in the temples, the pandas, the maulavis, the mullas, and the like:

"Where a long beard or tuft of hair on the crown of the head, or a long mark on the forehead, or a fakir's dress, or a sanyasin's yellow or ochre robe is a passport to holiness, it is not difficult to impose on the public".

Consider the verbal artistry and economy in the pithy description of conditions in France during the times of Louis XIV, both of the splendour at the top and the misery and suffering under its thin covering:

"It was a world of beautiful wings and lace cuffs and fine clothing, covering body that was seldom washed and was full of dirt and filth".

Notice the insightful comment on the French Revolution, and the analogy:

"The French Revolution burst like a volcano, and yet revolutions and volcanoes do not break out without reason or long evolution. We see the sudden burst and are surprised, but underneath the surface of the earth many forces play against each other for long ages, and fires gather together, till the crust on the surface can no longer hold them down, and they burst forth in mighty flames shooting up to the sky, and molten lava rolls down the mountain side. Even so the forces that ultimately break out in revolution play for long under the surface of society. Water boils when you hear it, but you know that it has reached the boiling point only after getting hotter and hotter. Ideas and economic conditions make revolutions".

"The politics of prices and statesmen have their home in the closet and the private room. A discrete veil hides many sins, and decorous language conceals the conflict of rival ambitions and greed...But a revolution is very different. It has its home on the field and the street and the marketplace, and its methods are rough and coarse...politics in a revolution ceases to be the sport of kings or professional politicians. They deal with re-

alities, and behind them are stomachs of the hungry...”
(p. 368)

Glimpses of World History gives a kaleidoscopic view of the pageant of history through the ages. Nehru attempts to fill the dry bones of history with flesh and blood. He writes:

“History is not a magic show, but there is plenty of magic in it for those who have eyes to see... History is a record of the martyrdom of man”.

Glimpses of World History enables one to see this magic and martyrdom. But more than his sense of history and political idealism, what is noticeable even here is his imaginative reach, his verbal felicity, the telling phrases with balanced structure, the sledge-hammer strokes of forceful sentences to drive the truth home, and above all the sheer poetic beauty of much of the writing whether expository or emotive.

Notice the directness with which he castigates the selfishness of the labour leaders in Britain after the First World War, who made the Labour Movement a stepping stone to gratify personal ambition:

“Opportunism there is unhappily in every department of human activity; but the opportunism which exploits the hopes and ideals and sacrifice of the down-trodden and suffering millions for personal advantages is one of the greatest of human tragedies.”

We are witnessing this tragedy in the politics of today.

Here are passages of highly imaginative and emotive prose:

“Of the writing of letters there is no end so long as pen and paper and ink hold out. And of writing on world happenings there is no end, for this world of ours rolls on, and the men and women and children in it laugh and weep, and love and hate, and fight each other unceasingly. It is a story that goes on and on and has no ending...The river of life is never still, it flows on, and sometimes, as now, it rushes pitilessly, with a demon energy, ignoring our petty selves, and tossing us about like straws on its turbulent waters, pushing on and on no one knows whether to a precipice which will shatter it into a thousand bits, or to the vast and inscrutable, stately and calm, ever changing and yet changeless sea.”

“History teaches us of growth and progress and the possibility of an infinite advance for men. And life is rich and varied, and though it has many swamps and marshes and muddy places, it has also the great sea, and the mountains, and snow and glaciers, and wonderful starlit nights (especially in gaol).”