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REVIEW ARTICLE

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN ENGLISH PROSE

Jawaharlal Nehru's Contribution to Indian English Prose

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Jawaharlal Nehru enjoys an enviable position in Indian English prose in the foreword to *A Study of Nehru*, Dr. Rajendra Prasad writes:

Jawaharlal Nehru 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 men, Indian and foreign. His emotional nature and his innate 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.¹

Indeed, Nehru is a literary artist endowed with rich, poetic imagination. All his writings are an immaculate expression of his active life and deep emotion, soaring imagination, limitless urges and boundless humanity. He presents an artist's vision in what he writes and speaks, and his vision is related to life. Expounding his views on the purposefulness of art Nehru writes that art if it does not spring from the strength of the nation is lifeless art. If it has no connection with problems and reality of life, it is useless and dead like the pictures of women in Ajanta Caves.

As a prose writer Jawaharlal wrote a varied kind of prose which evinces his skill in historical writing in *The Glimpses of World History* and *The Discovery of India*, personal and autobiographical writing in *An Autobiography*, epistolary writing in *A Bunch of Old Letters* and *Letters from A Father to His Daughter* and his multitudinous interests are revealed in his speeches, essays and press statements which have been published in eleven volumes of *The Selected Works*.

Both the ancient culture of India and modern European thought influenced Nehru, the man and writer. Mulkraj Anand says:

There are many strands in the temperament, character and intellectual caliber of Nehru derives from India and Europe, which make his personality rather more like a rich tapestry than like home spun fabric which many of his more simple followers imagine him to be. As the weaver of the tapestry happens to be Jawaharlal himself and the bobbins are moved from one colour to the other inside him, the onlookers can only admire the

cloth and make wild guesses about the inner links in the confusion from which the synthesis of Asia and Europe is arrived at in his being so that any objective knowledge about the cross-currents of events and ideas through which he has become what he is today is extremely difficult.²

As a writer Nehru is the product of East and West.

Nehru is not a politician who gives a literary bias to his writing but about intellectual whom the times which are out of joint have drawn into the vortex of politics. He has the vision of an artist. C.D. Narsimhaiah thinks that "his politics, his religion and philosophy, all seem to issue forth from a vision of life which is essentially that of an artist and his speech, writing and action are all suffused with imagination which makes a dry twig bloom in his hands. He is perhaps the only statesman of the world today who has so satisfactorily the emotional intensity of our troubled generation at a turning point in history and by so doing he has rendered a signal service to India and the world."³ All writings of Nehru are an immaculate expression of his outer active life and deep emotions, soaring imagination, limitless urges and boundless humanity. He presents an artist's vision in what he writes and speaks.

HISTORICAL PROSE

As a prose writer Nehru wrote a varied prose, *The Glimpses of World History* (1934) is epic in scope and it consists of letters written to his daughter Indra, from prison during 1930-33. It is an interesting and engaging survey of world history from the beginning of civilization to nineteen thirties. Although it is not a systematic and methodical survey, yet it is conspicuous for Nehru's historic vision and unlike European historians who concentrate mainly on Europe, Nehru takes a comprehensive view of history and artistically deals with the theme of the origin and development of human history. K.M. Pannikar says:

Glimpses of World History is an attempt to get the perspective right. There is no attempt in it to deprecate the achievements of Europe on the heritage of Greece or Rome. But it lays emphasis equally on the contributions of Persians, Arabs,

Indians and Chinese and of the great non-Christian religions, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism and puts the evolution of mankind in a world perspective.

(A Study of Nehru)

The Discovery of India abounds in literary graces. Nehru's observation of historical facts is minute and penetrating and presentation is purely literary and artistic. C.D. Narsimhaiah rightly remarks:

Indeed, it is Nehru's poetic vision of history and literary graces which abound in the *Glimpses* that invite the attention of the literary critic.⁴

Nehru shows lyrical intensity and exceptional poetic sensibility in describing the achievement of illustrious artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael and the eminent poets-Dante and Patriarch. Nehru conjures up vivid and vigorous pictures of Arno flowing by under medieval bridges, of the ancient city of Benares, of French Revolution and of many other important places and events. We come across minute observation and poetical perception in his descriptions of nature. Sometimes he endows abundant human attributes to nature like Wordsworth as in the description of the tropical jungle of Ceylon and picturesqueness.

In the delineation of the great historical figures of the past Nehru is unsurpassable. He is objective just and fair minded in portraying the great ones. How vividly he portrays Mahatama Gandhi in a few striking touches:

Behind the language of peace and friendship there was power and the quivering shadow of action and the determination not to submit to a wrong.⁵

Buddha's story is told in a few highly suggestive lines, Akbar receives due praise, Napoleon's dominant qualities are admired and his shortcomings are exposed. He displays great artistic vision in portraying Sher Shah Suri and Hummayun, Ashoka is duly extolled.

Nehru writes history like an artist. There is no exaggeration to call him a poet-historian.

The Glimpses of World History is a fine specimen of lucid, simple and clear English and in this respect its place is very high in Indian English prose.

The Discovery of India (1946) was written in 1944 during Nehru's last internment at Ahmednagar Fort. In it he aims at writing about the past "by bringing it in some relation to my present day thoughts and activities." (*Discovery of India*) He does not attempt in it a scholarly history but a vision of the past seen through the eyes of one imbed with a historical sense. It is mainly a story of the Indian people and not a dull and monotonous narrative of local wars and struggles. It is a vision of the past seen through the eyes of one

imbued with a lively historical sense. Commenting on the purpose of writing *The Discovery of India* Mulkraj Anand says:

There is here an attempt to understand the whole of India's past in order to integrate himself with the awareness of patterns which as a socialist he had not sympathized with earlier.⁶

As a historian, Nehru is a poet rather than a scientist. His presentation of history is both artistic and imaginative. In it Nehru wants to discover India's glorious past because both the present and the future emerge out of it.

In *The Discovery of India* Nehru recaptures with a sure but unlaboured artistry 'the variegated kaleidoscopic succession of comedies and tragedies of unpredictable circumstance played on this vast theatre that is India over a space of 3000 years'. He tries to explore ancient India's spiritual foundation and ends up by emphasizing the need for social reform. He intends to remove all those blemishes of Hinduism which have made Indian society the vehicle of torment and suppression. He condemns the perniciousness of the caste system and advocates the need for the abolition of untouchability in all its manifestations. He pleads for political freedom and protests against the denial of elementary human rights to the millions.

The Discovery of India is remarkable for its poetic and artistic quality, Precision and economy of expression, clarity and simplicity, subtle poetic touches and musical flow of language characterize its style. For example, describing India, he writes:

She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet every real and present and pervasive. There are terrifying glimpses of dark corridors which seem to lead back to primeval night, but also there is the fullness and the warmth of the day about her. Shameful and repellent, she is occasionally perverse and obstinate, some times even a little hysteric, this lady with a past. But she is very lovely and none of her children can forget her wherever they go or whatever strange fate befalls them.⁷

The portraits of Vivekananda, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Mahatama Gandhi and many other intellectual and political leaders of India are vividly drawn. Nehru has a delicate feeling for nature. To him Nature's varied moods are symbolic of the changes that man witnesses in the human world. He thinks that the same law operates in both nature and Man, for example:

"The moon is a reminder of the loveliness of this world, of the waxing and waning life, of light following darkness of death and resurrection, following each other in interminable succession."⁸

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROSE

Nehru's *An Autobiography* was written in a continuous spell of about nine months from June 1934 to February 1935. In the Preface, he writes:

The primary object in writing these pages was to occupy myself with a definite task, so necessary in the long solitudes of gaol life, as well as to review past events in India, with which I have been connected, to enable myself to think clearly about them. I began the task in a mood of self-questioning and, to a large extent, this persisted throughout.⁹

It is a crowning achievement of Nehru as a writer and its ranks with the great autobiographies of the world.

In fact, some of the pages read like Dostoviesky's *House of the Dead*. There is even an element of chastity as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The sense of humanity which pervade the book, the naiveté of the emergent Indian English style of writing, the awareness of the poetry of human life, already show the future visionary to whom action is not merely political opportunism but compulsion from the innermost depths of feelings and ideas. I think one can safely say that if Jawaharlal Nehru had not written the *Autobiography*, he would certainly never have achieved the dignity and status of a world statesman long before he was to become Prime Minister of India.¹⁰

An Autobiography is a great book in which Nehru presents a picture both of himself and the nation and merges the two into one entity with the deft and meticulous handling of an artist. It is subjective, personal and impersonal, real and imaginative, lyrical and epical. It is of an inestimable value because it offers insights into the life and work by making available to the reader a rarer dimension of one of the most notable figures of modern history. It reveals many facets of Nehru's complicated personality, his scientific outlook, imaginative temperament, his aversion to superstition and organized religion, his admiration for Marxism, his fervent nationalism always balanced by his intense awareness of internationalism, his love of nature and his boundless humanity, his fondness for books as revealed by the range and variety of quotations in it. It is conspicuous for Nehru's transparent sincerity, objectivity and his capacity for unflinching self analysis. There is in his *Autobiography* 'neither much modesty, nor overstatement' both of which are disastrous in an autobiography. He is never sentimental.

Nehru's autobiography is an outstanding contribution to Indian English prose. In it he finds scope for the excellent exercise of almost every literary gift. Humayun Kabir appreciates it for its literary worth: It is however his autobiography that marks Nehru's

highest achievement in the world of letters. At once lyrical and epic, it displays his manifold qualities as writer and man.

LETTERS

Nehru was a skilled letter writer. He brought skill and beauty to the art of letter writing in the history of Indian English literature. *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, *Glimpses of World History* and *A Bunch of Old Letters* give the most vivid, intimate and candid account of the sorrows, sufferings and heartaches of Nehru. *A Bunch of Old Letters* is a collection of letters written mostly to Nehru and some by him between 1917 and 1948. Some of the letters are political and others in which philosophical speculation and personal musings are interwoven with the urge for social and political action.

Nehru is the most personal of writers but none of them with "the possible exceptions of Gandhi have succeeded in practicing in their letters what T.S. Eliot calls the extinction of personality". His letters are autobiographical and they reveal many important facets of his personality. His letters "confirm our idea of Nehru as artist in public life" and brings to light unflinching purpose which governed his thoughts and actions since the beginning of his political life. They highlight Nehru's forbearance and reveal how strongly he differed at time from men with whom he had close contacts. According to C.D. Narsimahiah *A Bunch of Old Letters* is "in a nature of a classic not merely because we know so much history of our recent past, but also because we are in intimate contact, in times like with spirits like Gandhi and Nehru so pure courageous and humane."²¹

Nehru's *Letters* is par excellence from the stylistic view point. He packs deep and powerful emotions in fewest possible words. His letters to Mahatma Gandhi and Tagore are of great artistic and literary worth. His creative vision and artistic insight are revealed in his letters to G.B. Shaw and Edward Thompson. How modest and self-restraint he is in the following extract in a letter to G.B. Shaw:

If I have the privilege to meet you for awhile, it will be to treasure a memory which will make a little richer than I am.¹²

Nehru's letters display his literary sensibility in an ample measure. They exhibit his sense of humour, tolerance, artistic sensibility, self-restraint, profound knowledge of human nature, creative vision, and ability for self introspection and tenderness of feeling. They are conspicuous for clarity, directness, and precision of expression.

OCCASIONAL WRITINGS

Nehru's occasional writings-*Recent Essays and Writing on the Future of India* (1934), *Communalism and Other Subjects* (1936), *Eighteen Month in India* (1936), *The Unity of India* (Collected Writings 1937 – 40), *Before and After Independence* (Collected Speeches 1946-64), despite their topical significance, are suffused with literary graces. It is their abiding literary charm which calls for a careful consideration of his occasional prose. The essays in *The Unity of India* were hastily written but his treatment of the problems has given us much that is history, expressed with directness and simplicity, yet with a great foresight and imagination. A great part of this work deals with politics and foreign affairs but they are remarkable in establishing Nehru's consistency in social, economic and political affairs. What impresses us most is the directness and clarity of expression. In it Nehru is primarily concerned with his efforts to establish a united India. He says that strength comes not from occasional exhibitions of individual or group violence; but from mass organization and the capacity for action, which to be effective in India, must be peaceful action.

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