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**EPISTLE IN INDO-ANGLIAN LITERATURE: A
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Epistle in Indo–Anglian Literature: A Critical Evaluation with Special Reference to Jawaharlal Nehru’s writing

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Abstract – Nehru has converted his gaol into an open university and dispatched lessons through epistles on a variety of topics ranging from the “Alphabet of Nature” to tumultuous, significant events pertaining to battles, revolutions and allied topics. I wish to call him the harbinger and precursor of Modern Distance Education. His epistles reveal the concealed teacher in his personality, apart from being a statesman and a poet in politics.

Keywords: Epistle, Indo-Anglian, Precursor, trio logy, Religion, Alphabet, Education, parochialist, jingoist.....

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INTRODUCTION

During 19th and 20th centuries, epistle has assumed a vital significance serving multifold purposes. In Indo-Anglian literature, the epistle relates to personal, political, social and cultural aspects of our country. Among the epistle writers, it is surprising to read the autobiographies of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Kasi Prasad Ghose in the epistle form. Perhaps, these writers of prose stand out prominently for their unique contribution to genre of epistle by choosing the form and technique for their autobiographies. What Richardson is to the epistolary Novel, so are the two writers for epistolary autobiography. Among the writers of Indo-Anglian Literature, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Tagore are noted for their prolific epistolary writing. Gandhi, Gokhale and others may also be mentioned. But among all epistolary writers, Nehru stands out like a colossus and his epistles look like lessons dispatched by an open university for their students. His letters have intrinsic educational value and they are not meant for hourly reading. They are to be studied with absorbing interest for “Chewing and Digesting” the material, for widening the horizon of understanding of the world. His language is crisp, limpid and graceful. In his “Letters of Father to his Daughter” he tends to be informal, sometime using interrogative enquiries to give a personal touch. Throughout his 30 letters, one forgets the statesman but remembers a competent teacher in a class room. His explanation is vivid and enlivening, not a single paragraph chills our interest or strains our eyes. The book rouses one’s curiosity and keeps the flame of enthusiasm unextinguished. The book has become a children’s classic and a sources of delight for the youth. His epistolary trilogy is a mine of information and a gift to lovers of knowledge. One can read his

“Letters of Father to his Daughter” and “Glimpses of World History” to gain an access into modern knowledge with pleasure and profit. The two epistolary books are full of anecdotes, events pertaining to the origin of the earth, evolution of mankind as well as their languages and allied topics which provide an encyclopedic range of political, historical and cultural events. In the whole of world literature, no one offers such a variety of topics through letters. It is apt to describe Nehru as the one who heralded the advent of Open University System and “The Precursor of Distance Education”. The letters are singularly free from bias and stand the scientific scrutiny. Some of the letters reveal the various facets of Nehru’s personality. One can gauge the temperament, out-look of the writer with ease by analyzing his aphoristic lines scattered through his epistles. Gandhi hailed him as “Prince of India” and by reading his “Mountain of letters” one can unhesitatingly label him as “Prince of Epistles” Even though women have been acclaimed to be great epistle writers, none can come near to Nehru either in the matter of content , range or style. He has out surpassed all the epistle writers with his profound erudition and amazing output.

His universal outlook:

Nehru is neither a parochialist nor a jingoist. Like Socrates, “He is a citizen of the world”. He never felt that he belonged to a small, insignificant part of the globe but always regarded himself as a universal man. The following line collaborate his point of view: “But that little, I hope, will interest you and make you think of the world as a whole, and of other people in it as our brothers and sisters.”

In his elucidation about the relationships of languages, he stresses upon universal brotherhood. The following line vividly conform his wholesome, altruistic outlook: "But we must not forget that we belong to the larger family of the world and the people living in other countries are after all our cousins. It would be such an excellent thing if all the people in the world were happy and contented. We have therefore to try to make the whole world a happier place to live in." He echoes our Indian sentiment "**Sarve Janah sukhino Bhavanthu**". In his letter captioned "what is civilization?" He defines and describes the true qualities of a civilized man. He elaborates on this: "But even better sign is a fine man who is unselfish and works with others for the good of all. To work together is better than to work singly, and to work together for the common good is the best of all."

Nehru's subtle sarcasm

In thirty letters addressed to his daughter, there are occasional lines, which contain a tone of sarcasm. Writing about the evolution of man, he says that "people think therefore that man is descended from ape". In a lighter and sarcastic vein, he remarks "But it is good to remember that we are cousins of the ape and the monkey, and even now many of us, I am afraid, behave like the monkeys do!" Describing the causes of colour among men, he feels that people who work in the hot sun for longer hours tend to be come dark complexioned but rich people who don't work in the open sun may not be dark colored. Here he sarcastically comments: "But not to work one and to live on the work of others is nothing to be proud of". Again teaching about Indians, he candidly avers; "Indians imagine that India is in many ways the greatest country in the world, this is conceit"

Regarding the rich and the poor, he makes a few acrid remarks with ruthless analysis: "The rich people today are those who have plenty of these surpluses, the poor have none at all".

Class Division

Nehru felt that man was not selfish during the period of hunting but with the discovery of agriculture, man split into various group and consequently arose the concept of hoarding in view of surplus food and the feudal order. He points out "But, as I told you, the men and women of the first tribe did not think in this way. Everything belonged to the tribe". The moment patriarch became powerful; there arose the difference between the rich and the poor.

In this context, Nehru speaks about our Indian Maharajas who spend the money of the people on their own pleasures. "While they live in luxury their people, who work hard and give them the money starve and their children have no schools to go to". Perhaps these lines might have profoundly influenced young Indira who later happened to abolish the privy

purses granted to the Maharajas at the time of Independence.

NEHRU'S IDEAS ABOUT RELIGION AND GOD

Nehru believes that man's concept of god or angels have had its root in his imaginary fears. He asserts "so religion first came as fear, and anything that is done because of fear is bad. Religion, as you know, tells us many beautiful things. When you grow up, you will read about the religions of the world and of the good things and the bad things that have been done in their name. it is interesting to notice here, however much it may have grown, we see even today that people fight and break each other's heads in the name of religion. And for many people it is still something to be afraid of. They spend their time in trying to please some imaginary being by making presents in temples and even sacrifices of animals". Nehru consistently wrote: "I have told you before that the idea of religion first came through the fear of the unknown." Because of this irrational fear, people used to throw their children into the rivers as well as sacrifice men and women to appease these imaginary spirits.

Nehru, in these letters, seems to be an agnostic about God and he could hardly impute an anthropomorphic stature to him. He simply felt that religion had its beginning in the imaginary irrational fears. Religion was born of fear and created differences among them. He never postulated a theory of his own nor even adhered to a single faith as handed down by his ancestors. We discern a peculiar streak of agnosticism in his outlook coupled with an interrogative attitude towards the maker of universe, but he has a large measure of innate goodness bordering on altruism which saves him from being dubbed as a cynic.

According to Nehru, cow has only utilitarian value in agriculture and similarly the rivers have the same significance. But people have invested a great religious value to them and thus the cow has become a holy cow and the river a sacred river. But people "forgetting the real reason for the care of the cow, started worshipping her as if that was any good to anybody".

Nehru's teaches "Alphabet of Nature"

Perhaps, Nehru believes in Wordsworths' dictum "Let Nature Be Your Teacher" He found "Books in brooks and sermons in stones" (As you like it). He advises his daughter "to go to the great Book of Nature itself" and adds that she will "soon begin to learn how to read this story from the rocks and mountains." He remarks that every little stone "may be a little page in Nature's book". He exhorts his daughter to learn the Alphabet of Nature. He explains in detail how a pebble became "a little round shiny pebble."

Nehru's Abhorrence of War

Will Durant remarked “Modern war is nothing but cooperative suicide” Nehru has a despicable contempt for war and war –mongers are mere savages. He states “that fighting and killing each other are about the most stupid things that people can do. It does good to nobody” when two countries are at war, it looks like “two savages fighting in the jungles. And if the savages are called barbarous, how much more barbarous are the countries that behave in that way?.

SUMMING UP

He tests everything on the scale of his scientific knowledge and social justice. He ridicules the obnoxious, pernicious caste system. He dubs it as “perfectly ridiculous”. He has no religious mooring except human concern for the well-being of humanity. He wails over “man’s inhumanity to man”. He pooh-poohs the idea of attaching any religious significance to the worship of cow or river and treats them as mere objects of utility.

Thus he explains and inspires his daughter in the acquisition of knowledge of Nature, men and events in the world. The concealed teacher in the personality of Nehru is discovered in his epistles. His ideas and ideals are clothed in limpid and elegant prose. The following remarks of Johnson on Addison can be aptly applied to Nehru: “whosoever wishes to attain English style familiar but not coarse, elegant but not ostentatious must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison”.