

Review: The Discovery of India

The Discovery of India is, in fact, the discovery of Nehru's rich and graceful personality. It gives us glimpses into the manifold aspects of this great man symbolised for many years the youth of our rejuvenated race awakened after long slumber. What was the essential self of Pandit Nehru? He was a politician by accident as he himself confessed, a thinker and a humanist by instinct, a patriot who fought without rest or respite for freedom till it was realised. He was not an erudite scholar, yet his versatile genius had much to teach professional historians, sociologists and economists. He had no literary ambitions, yet he displays in all his writings rare literary merits and flavour. It is this many-sided and rich personality of Pandit Nehru, one of India's greatest men, that we discover in *The Discovery of India*.

The Discovery of India considered as a whole is a curious jumble of historical facts, philosophical speculations and reflective essays on divergent themes couched in pleasant prose often rising to poetic heights. It is a thesis on Indian culture and history by the catholic and cosmopolitan mind of Nehru. He approaches India like a "friendly foreigner", appreciates her wisdom, condemns her follies and studies her past to make it a spring-board of action, to push and direct the current of history in creative future *channels*. But it is impossible to count it entirely as a book of history or culture, for what interests us more in *The Discovery* is its intimate autobiographical tone, its lucid style and literary graces, above all, its expression of the ideas and opinions, tastes and temperament, refined sentiments and noble passions of our beloved leader and the chief disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.

Considered as a book of history *The Discovery* has many merits, but also a few failings. It can be understood and appreciated as an introduction to the cultural history of India, as a study of the various phases in the gradual development of the national mind from the early dawn of civilization to the feverish, twentieth century when British India stood at the threshold of liberty and light. It is only a general introduction meant for the general reader. Nehru is not an academic historian, and his aim is not to narrate the facts of history with meticulous care. He is rather a philosopher of history, and his aim is to make constructive suggestions on the basis of historical knowledge. To a philosopher of history the future counts; the past only provides light and experience for the skilful shaping of the future events. But his knowledge of the past must be sound, and his attitude to it dispassionate; he may omit minute details, but he should not misunderstand the main facts of history, for otherwise all his futurist conclusions may be falsified. Nehru is well-qualified for such a task—the task of the narration and interpretation of history. His reading is vast and versatile; his approach is sane, sympathetic and objective; his account of the national events is sincere and faithful; his judgment is sound, and his suggestions are progressive. Only here and there we feel that he is driven by certain innate prejudices and dominated by pragmatic considerations. For example, he paints the British India as the darkest period of Indian history. Here the prejudices of a patriot fighting the British empire mar the sound judgment and objectivity of a historian. The British were a democratic people, and despite our exploitation by them, they have done us much good. Is it not significant that India

was awakened into modernity and largely freed from the self-forged shackles of slavery and superstitions in the British times only? In the Moslem period to keep the lamp of culture ever burning, the pandits of the Northern India had to migrate to the South. Yet they could not save from the sweeping destruction all that ought to be saved. Under the Afghans fearless thought and expression became impossible for such a long period that the lack of inquisitiveness which Nehru so much deploras became a permanent nature of Indian people, and the cultural life came to a standstill. The stupor broke under the British, India recovered her lost confidence and stirred up to new activities in all directions. Cultural renaissance and political movement for freedom started. Yet Nehru is less sympathetic to the British than to the Afghan rulers of India. Why? Subtle dislike for the British is patent in the chapters delineating and discussing the British India. Such prejudice, however slight, is undesirable in a historian or a philosopher of history.

Nehru says that Afghans after being settled in India were Indianised. The fact is they never were. They did not, of course, like the British drag away India's wealth into a foreign country. But they lived in a conquered country like the robbers who also ruled. Ruling over India from Delhi does not Indianise them. They considered themselves the Moslem masters of Hindu population. They identified themselves with the wandering tribes of Arabia, and hated the culture of India. The Afghan period in the history of India is the darkest period, the period of chaos where might passed as right, where brutal bloodshed of kafirs who refused to be converted was the only ideal. What does jajia tax signify? Hindus for being what they were had to pay taxes and pay heavily. Afghans physically lived in India, but their spiritual home was abroad. Their descendents continued to cherish the same mentality till India was divided and Pakistan came into existence. The roots of Pakistan were deep in the minds of Indian Moslems, and after the division of India nobody will agree with Nehru in maintaining that Afghans, their descendents, their convert followers were ever Indianised. Nehru reaches the extremity of naivete and wishful vision when he describes lusty Allauddin Khilji's forced marriage with the kidnapped queen of Karna Dev Vaghela of Gujarat, and his son's similar marriage with her daughter, as a sign of synthesis between Afghans and Indians. Can Nehru really be so naive? I do not think so. Here is a plain distortion of facts and blatantly wrong interpretation of history. It was perhaps because he was over-anxious to prove that all foreign invaders including Afghans succumbed to the fascination of Indian civilization and her absorbing power, even when they did not, perhaps because the Hindu-Moslem problem at the time *The Discovery* was written had become very acute. The pragmatic politician in Nehru perhaps feared that his frank and fearless treatment of Moslem period in India might aggravate the tension which already existed, for he knew that the Moslems identified themselves with their invader ancestors like Ghoris and Khiljies, and their criticism by him may embitter them against him. The pragmatic consideration has dominated Nehru here. But what may be pragmatically right cannot be justified in an honest historian.

But such instances are rare where a historian's objectivity in Nehru suffers. He has never had scholastic claims on history. Besides, we do not read *The Discovery* for the historical information it contains. We read it precisely for the savour which his pleasant personal touches add to it. His mystic love for India often gushes forth disturbing his detachment which

nonetheless he manages to keep up. His humane patriotism while defensive of India is never offensive to others. Objective sympathy is elevated into positive favour for India against the attacks on her. But generally it does not seriously injure or distort the facts of history, for with him sentiments are always guided and restrained by reason. Often he condemns in harsh words the follies and pitfalls of India. But one who loves has also the right to be harsh and critical. Nehru has achieved mystic identification with India, and through him it seems as it were she is becoming self-conscious, introspective and critical of herself. All this makes *The Discovery* much more than mere cultural history. Whether it is really a discovery of India or not it is for the specialised scholars of history and culture to decide. To us, to a general reader, it is really the discovery of Nehru's large, comprehensive and catholic self—the self that has read widely, thought deeply and lost itself through love in the lives of the oppressed millions of India. It has power and appeal which are literary in character, and it evokes emotional response from us. Therefore it ought to be considered as a book of literature also, and judged accordingly from its criteria. Prof. C. D. Narasimhaiah rightly observes:

"The Discovery is not merely a chronicle of historical events or a treatise of Indian culture, it is a piece of literature conceived and executed by one who is probably India's greatest writer of English prose." (Foreword, *India Rediscovered*, Oxford University Press)

Nehru never presumed that he was writing literature. His purpose in *The Discovery* was to discover India for himself, and he tries to achieve it with all his power and penetration. But while at the work of writing, the unconscious artist in him possesses all his other faculties so completely that he instinctively displays literary excellences. *The Discovery* cannot be classed into one particular branch of literature. It is a formless piece written with no literary intentions. The students of literature study it just as they study Ruskin's *Unto the Last* or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of Roman Empire* or Russell's or Radhakrishnan's philosophical works, all of which have literary appeal but are not composed with literary intentions.

The Discovery has the elements of autobiography in it. In the autobiography which was written some ten or twelve years earlier, we see how a child of Motilal grows into a distinguished personality whose whole being expands, embraces and becomes one with India, whose voice becomes the articulate utterance of her vaguely felt dreams and aspirations. Only the first half of the autobiography deals with the facts and events of his personal life. The second half turns into the chronicle of the times and deals with the national events and freedom struggle. It is because his individual existence merges into the collective existence of his poverty-struck fellow-creatures reeling under the foreign yoke. He had nothing to say about his own life. He had much to say about the life of India.

In *The Discovery* we find the further developing and deepening of the same self of Nehru. Here he travels into the past to arrive at the roots of his existence, his India, and writes what he finds from the twilight past stretched up to the complete dark of antiquity. It is in a way an extension and continuation of his autobiography. Only it is a more mature and more comprehensive work than the earlier one.

The first three chapters of the book are an outright autobiography. Nehru is imprisoned in the Ahmadnagar Fort while the country is struck with famine and the world is torn in war. In leisurely mood he rambles into the past of India and her present, reflects on life's philosophy and the future of democracy, and begins writing. In the second chapter he narrates the events of his life after his term of imprisonment at Almora in 1935, the illness and death of his wife, his journey to Switzerland and back from there. "The Quest" the third chapter is the real beginning of the discovery of India. Still, even here he is busy clearing his approach of India, her appeal to him, and lapsing once more into the stray reflections on nationalism and internationalism, his journeys and general elections. The first three chapters thus have distinctly autobiographical content and flavour.

Even afterwards Nehru continues to be the centre and the style autobiographical. The only unity which the book has is the unity imparted by his personality pervading all throughout. We see his vision and learn his views. There is never a straightway developing and to the point method in Nehru's writings. He frequently digresses and forgets the main thread. He narrates the past, but leaps back to present drawn by a remotely relevant thought current. He considers India, but in slow and pleasant digression would retreat into himself and go on thinking aloud as if talking to himself. He freely rambles now in past, now in present and dreams of the future. He is not bothered by the sense of a unified mode of writing and therefore does not care to avoid the irrelevant. He is aware that he himself is more interesting to his readers than the merits of his writing. Consequently every felt thought and emotion of Nehru finds expression in thousand threads loosely kept together. We feel that Nehru is talking out to us in confidence all that he knows and all that he feels. Except in the first three chapters *The Discovery* does not relate the events of Nehru's life. Yet it is autobiographical for it reveals his inner existence and clears many facets of his personality.

Nehru displays in *The Discovery* the qualities of a master essayist. As it does not have wholeness and harmony of a single literary piece, some of the portions are intended to be and may easily be treated as separate, disconnected essays. If they are omitted from the book, it will not suffer. No context is needed to read them separately and enjoy.

Some of the essays are reflective and thought-provoking. *The past in its relation to the present* is one such. Nehru ponders here over past and present and realises their relationship. There are aphoristic sentences here which stick fast to the mind, and which are the result of the ripened wisdom of a contemplative mind:

"The past becomes something that leads up to the present, the moment of action, the future something that flows from it; and all three are inextricably intertwined and interrelated." (*The Discovery of India*, Signet Press, p. 7.)

The essay *Religion, Philosophy and Science* is more profound and philosophical. Nehru is not a professor of philosophy like Dr Radhakrishnan. Yet his insight in philosophy is rare and remarkable. Consider for example the following passage in the above quoted essay:

“Truth as ultimate reality, if such there is, must be eternal, imperishable and unchanging. But that infinite, eternal, unchanging truth cannot be apprehended in its fullness by the finite mind of man which can only grasp, at most, some small aspect of it limited by time and space, and by the state of development of that mind and the prevailing ideology of the period. As the mind develops and enlarges its scope, as ideologies change and new symbols are used to express that truth, new aspects of it come to light though the core of it may yet be the same. And so, truth has ever to be sought and renewed, reshaped and developed, so that, as understood by man, it might keep in line with the growth of his thought and the development of human life. Only then does it become a living truth for humanity, supplying the essential need for which it craves, and offering guidance in the present and for the future.”

(Ibid, P. 431)

And here he apprises science:

“Science ignored the ultimate purposes and looked at fact alone. It made the world jump forward with a leap, built up a glittering civilization, opened up innumerable avenues for the growth of knowledge, and added to the power of man to such an extent that for the first time it was possible to conceive that man could triumph over and shape his physical environment. Yet.....there was some essential lack and some vital element was missing. There was no knowledge of ultimate purposes and not even an understanding of the immediate purpose, for science had told us nothing about any purpose in life.”

(Ibid, P. 432)

How simply and delightfully he is writing! Such essays have depth, but no jarring jargon. The essays *The Upanishads*, *The Bhagavadgita*, *The Epics*, *History, Tradition and Myth*, *Six Systems of Philosophy*, etc., have similar taste and style.

There are essays on social and economic themes too. He had thoroughly understood the defective social set up of India and her deplorably backward economy. He had also discovered the causes of such defects, and was anxious to change society and advance its economy. *The Theory and Practice of Caste* is a sociological essay, well-informed and well-studied. Here he considers the origin and development of caste system in India from mere vocational divisions into rigid walls dividing man from man, joint family with all its advantages and disadvantages. *The Destruction of India's Industry and the Decay of Her Agriculture*, *The Economic Backwardness of India*, *India becomes for the First Time a Political and Economic Appendage to Another Country*, etc., are the essays on Economics. They are as technical as they are interesting, and they display Nehru's sound study and understanding of Indian economy.

Then there are vivid and delightful pen-portraits in *The Discovery*. He recalls from the misty past India's great heroes and saints and re-creates them before our mind's eyes. See for example the following portrait of Buddha coloured with Nehru's personal emotions:

“Seated on the lotus flower, calm and impassive, above passion and desire, beyond the storm and strife of this world, so far away he seems, out of reach, unattainable. Yet again we

look and behind those still, unmoving features there is a passion and an emotion, strange and more powerful than the passions and emotions we have known. His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy feels the frame. The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement.”

(ibid, P. 100)

Here is the portrait of Vivekananda, the leonine Sanyasin of the resurgent India:

“He was a fine figure of a man, imposing, full of poise and dignity, sure of himself and his mission, and at the same time full of a dynamic and fiery energy and a passion to push India forward. He came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralised Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past.”

(ibid, P. 280)

There are similar portraits of Chanakya and Chandra Gupta, Asoka and Akbar, Ramkrishna Paramahansa and Rabindranath Tagore and many others.

Nehru had the heart of a poet although he was eminently a man of action and a political leader. His essay like prose narration achieves lyrical heights whenever soft and subtle emotional states are worked up in his mind and expressed with unaffected spontaneity. The portrait of Buddha just quoted is sweet and poetic. In the following passage Nehru’s robust optimism and love of life finds unforced expression; the stream of life despite its evils seem beautiful to him:

“The stream of life goes on in spite of famine and war, full of its inherent contradictions, and finding sustenance even in those contradictions and the disasters that follow in their train. Nature renews itself and covers yesterday’s battlefield with flowers and green grass, and the blood that was shed feeds the soil and gives strength and colour to new life. Human beings with their unique quality of possessing memory live on in their storied and remembered pasts and seldom catch up to the present in ‘The worlde that neweth every daie.’ And that present slips into the past before we are hardly aware of it.....Winged victory ends in a welter of blood and mud, and out of the heavy trials of seeming defeat the spirit emerges with new strength and wider vision. The weak in spirit yield and are eliminated, but others carry the torch forward and hand it to the standard bearers of tomorrow.”

(ibid, P. 422)

The same passage cast into suitable verse would have been a soft and good lyric. But if metre is no necessity of lyric, this certainly is one. There are innumerable such passages in *The Discovery* where sentiments mingle with ideas and essays turn into poetry. Death in famine for example is described as “a slow creeping thing of horror with nothing to redeem it, life, merging and fading into death, with death looking out of the shrunken eyes and withered frame while life still lingered for a while.” (ibid, P. 2) The moon is “a reminder of the loveliness of this world,

of the waxing and waning of life, of light following darkness, of death and resurrection following each other in interminable succession.” (ibid, P. 1)

In *The Discovery* facts, thoughts and feelings co-exist and create a sort of artistic harmony. Honeyed muse makes whatever Nehru writes pleasant and interesting. He writes English with exceptional mastery, grace and ease. Although he is a lover of words, his style does not suffer from verbosity. It is always limpid, lucid and unaffected. Words are at his command, and he employs them to present his sincere thought and experience in the clearest language. He never aims at artificial glow or forced beauty of words, and is as simple and unassuming in writing as he was in life. The famous dictum “style is the man” is true at least in the case of Nehru. Let me sum up now in the same note with which I started: the style together with the content makes *The Discovery of India* in fact the discovery of Nehru’s rich and graceful personality.

P.S.

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