

Perspectives on Nehru's Autobiography**Bhaskar Roy Barman****Abstract**

As the title itself suggests the paper picks on Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography to discuss and searches for a literary merit in this autobiography, because Nehru wrote this autobiography at the time when he involved himself in the freedom movement in its full-fledged swing and it reflects his thoughts and actions surrounding the freedom struggle. During the pre-Independence period other activists like Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad wrote their autobiographies to tell their readers of how they involved themselves in the freedom-struggle, but Nehru's is considered the best in that genre.

Autobiography is a metaphor of the self and a journey from the known to the unknown and contains in itself a history. Hence autobiography is considered a genre linked to literature. The most widespread and flourishing methods of studying literature concern themselves with its setting, its environment, and its external causes. These intrinsic methods are not limited to a study of the past, but are equally applicable to present-day literature which concentrates on its change in time and is centrally preoccupied with the problem of history.

This paper aims to treat of Jawaharlal Nehru's "An Autobiography" in the light of the concept of biography discussed above. It is doubtful how much his autobiography influenced the writing in English. But his autobiography acts as a mirror to reflect Nehru's personal image, the image of his family and the image of other individuals who happen to have established relationship with his family, and tells of his association with the freedom movement. He hints in his autobiography at how the familial atmosphere hovering around him paved the way for him to get involved in the freedom movement.

This article probes deep into Nehru's involvement in politics and the freedom movement, guided by Mahatma Gandhi.

Key Words: autobiography, environment, freedom movement, metaphor, mirror

As the title itself suggests, I have picked on Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography to discuss in this paper. We shall search for a literary merit in this autobiography, because Nehru wrote this autobiography at the time when he involved himself in the freedom movement in its full-fledged swing and it reflects his thoughts and actions surrounding the freedom struggle. During the pre-Independence period other activists like

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Autobiography is undoubtedly a work of art and the most obvious cause of it is its creator, the author himself or herself. We cannot deny its importance as a study of the man of genius – we expect that the man of genius writes an autobiography or has his biography written by another man who takes his genius for granted. Though biography and autobiography are akin in textures, there is a nuance of difference between them: autobiography is infused with the personal feelings of the author and his personal prejudices, but biography is shorn of these. Yet, I shall use in this paper biography in the sense of both biography and autobiography, for both tell of the man of genius, because biographers draw upon a series of public documents, interviews and personal reminiscences and even are granted access to private documents of the man of genius.

Biography can be judged in relation to the light it throws on the production of a particular work. It is universally conceived of as a study of the man of genius, of his moral, intellectual and economical development which carries a hint of intimate interest, and is finally thought of as affording materials for a systematic study of the man of genius and his literary and poetic process. Biography, an ancient literary genre, is chronologically and logically a part of historiography and makes no

methodological distinction between a statesman, a general, an architect, a lawyer and a man who plays no public role. Coleridge somewhere said that any life, however insignificant, would, if it were told truthfully, be sound enough. But many biographers are of the opinion that the man of whom to write a biography, be he a poet, be he a novelist, be he a social activist, is just another man whose moral and intellectual development, external career and emotional life can be reconstructed and evaluated as well by reference to the standards, usually drawn from some ethical system or code of manners.

I shall treat of Jawaharlal Nehru's "An Autobiography" in the light of the concept of biography discussed above. It is doubtful how much his autobiography influenced the writing in English. But his autobiography acts as a mirror to reflect Nehru's personal image, the image of his family and the image of other individuals who happen to have established relationship with his family, and tells of his association with the freedom movement. He hints in his autobiography (1980) at how the familial atmosphere hovering around him paved the way for him to get involved in the freedom movement.

My childhood was...a sheltered and uneventful one. I listened to the grown-up talk of my cousins without always understanding all of it. Often this talk related to the overbearing character and insulting manner of the English people as well as Eurasians towards Indians, and how it was the duty of every Indian to stand up to this and not to tolerate it. (Ch. II: P. 06).

The question is likely to raise itself how the Nehru family imbibed the spirit of protest. The first chapter tells of this. Nehru belonged to a Kashmiri Pundit family and this sense of belongingness always persisted in his mind, even though his ancestor, Raj Kaul who was a great scholar in Persian and Sanskrit had migrated from the fair valley of Kashmir about the year 1716. The erudition of Raj Kaul attracted the attention of Emperor Farrukhsiar, which resulted in an invitation being sent out to Raj Kaul to reside in his capital, Delhi. Raj Kaul accepted the royal invitation and the family stayed in the capital, basking in the royal patronage until the breaking-out of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 and the consequent suppression of the Mutiny by the Government of the East-India Company. Jawaharlal informs the reader of how his family name got to Nehru, as in the following passage.

A jagir with a house situated in the banks of a canal had been granted to Raj Kaul. and, from this fact of residence “Nehru” (from nahar, a canal) came to be attached to his name. Kaul had been the family name; this changed to Kaul-Nehru; and, in later years, Kaul dropped out and we became simply Nehrus. (Ch. I: 01).

The Sepoy Mutiny put an end to his family connection with Delhi and all his family papers and documents were destroyed, and, shorn of all their possessions, they moved to Agra. His father, Motilal Nehru was not born then. The scanty knowledge of one of his two uncles and some other members of their family saved them from “a sudden and ignominious end”. While they were living in

Agra, Motilal Nehru was born a posthumous child on 6 May 1861, as his father, Jawaharlal Nehru’s grandfather, had died three months earlier. His English-knowing uncle “attached himself to the newly established High Court and when this court moved to Allahabad from Agra and the family moved with it.”

Apropos of his father who grew up under the sheltering care of his uncle, Nehru says:

...my father was going through school and college in Cawnpore and Allahabad. His early education was confined entirely to Persian and Arabic and he only began learning English in his early teens. But at that age he was considered to be a good Persian scholar, and knew some Arabic also, and because of this knowledge was treated with respect by much older people. (Ch.1:03).

A bit farther down the same page in the following passage he refers to his father’s capriciousness and hauteur which he may have inherited.

He got through various university examinations without any special distinction, and then he appeared for the final, the B.A. He had not taken the trouble to work much for it and he was greatly dissatisfied with the way he had done his first paper. Not expecting to pass the examination, as he thought he had spoiled the first paper, he decided to boycott the rest of the examination and he spent the time instead at the Tajmahal. (The university examinations were held then at Agra). Later his professor

scolded him by saying that he had done well in the first paper. Anyhow this ended my father's university career. He never graduated. (Ch. I:04).

However, after having served his apprenticeship for three years in the district court of Cawnpore, Motilal Nehru moved to Allahabad to work in the High Court.

In the footnote to the last line of the first chapter, "Such was our home in the early days of my childhood." (P. 05). Says Jawaharlal Nehru, "I was born in Allahabad on the 14th November 1889, or according to the Samvat Calendar, Margshirsh Badi 7, 1946."

It was Motilal Nehru who contributed a great deal to his becoming what he was, a nationalist. Jawaharlal Nehru admired him tremendously and regarded him as an embodiment of strength and courage and cleverness, "far above all the other men I saw" (Ch.II: 07). His advent to Indian politics could be compared to Prince Siddhartha's renunciation of the world. On the eve of his going out to London with his parents and his baby sister to study at Harrow and Cambridge, when he was just fourteen, the spirit of nationalism budded forth, as he says, "Nationalistic ideas filled my mind. I mused of Indian freedom and Asiatic freedom from the thralldom of Europe. I dreamt of brave deeds, of how, sword in hand, I would fight for India and help in freeing her."(Ch.III: 16). On returning from England, a cultivated flower of Harrow and Cambridge, he cast his lot, though the son of an affluent father, with the humble and the lowly and dedicated the rest

of his life to achieving complete freedom of India.

He was extremely delighted when Gandhiji announced his decision to plunge into a direct action against the Rowlatt act. When he read about the decision in the newspapers, "my reaction was one of tremendous relief. Here at last was a way out of the tangle, a method of action which was straight and open and possibly effective." (Ch.VII:41). Afire with enthusiasm, he had decided to join the Satyagraha Sabha. But his father Motilal was dead opposed to his decision and requested Gandhiji to come over to Allahabad to talk Jawaharlal out of his decision and Gandhiji accepted his invitation.

Gandhiji came to Allahabad at father's request and they had long talks at which I was not present. As a result Gandhiji advised me not to precipitate matters or to do anything which might upset father. I was not happy at this, but other events took place in India which changed the whole situation, and the Satyagraha Sabha stopped its activities. (Ch.VII: 42).

But there were many factors that contributed to tilting the scale heavily in favour of Nehru's joining politics, though. Added to his own innate pride that rebelled at the subordination of his people to an alien and unsympathetic authority, he inherited his father's attitude towards men and women. Motilal Nehru was not wont to bow his head to any one in obeisance. He experienced the nature of his father's temper in his childhood. For a venial fault of taking one of

his pens lying on the table when his father was not home, he gave him a “tremendous thrashing” (Ch. II: 07). He did not bear any grudge against his father for having thrashed him unjustly, for he felt that “it was a just punishment, though perhaps overdone.”

Politics always fascinated him, but in his time there is nothing in politics to stimulate his enthusiasm. The Nehru family was distinguished for its pugnacity; but Jawaharlal Nehru knew not how to take on the adversary. He saw the futility of an armed insurrection, for the bulk of a disarmed and dispirited people are weighed down by grinding poverty. Nehru gathered first-hand knowledge of the peasantry of India, while wandering among the peasants. His wandering among the peasants, feeding with them and talking to them, confirmed the futility of an armed insurrection, and terrorism was, in his view, equally futile. But he did not give at the same time an absolute allegiance to the doctrine of non-violence propagated by Gandhiji, nor did he accept it forever. Even congress politics appeared to him insipid and dull. Though he admired Gokhale and felt to a great extent attracted to the great institution, the Servants of India Society, he did not desire to join it partly because its politics were too moderate for him to embrace and partly because he had no idea of giving up his legal profession. Congress was still controlled by the men who not only believed in the good intentions of Britain in the matter of India’s political enfranchisement but also in the doctrine of the inevitability of gradualness. When Gandhi gained the leadership of the Congress and transformed it into a vital organisation, most of them left it to form a

separate party and called themselves Liberals and Jawaharlal Nehru on every opportunity lashed out at them. He targeted his attack at V.D. Srinivas Shastri, one of the most illustrious sons of India. Shastri “shocked” him in a matter quite unconnected with politics. Mr. Srinivas Shastri, however, says he, “gave me a great shock in a little matter unconnected with politics. He was addressing a students’ meeting in Allahabad and told them to be respectful and obedient to their teachers and professors and observe carefully all the rules and regulations laid down by constituted authority. All this goody-goody talk did not appeal to me much; it seems very platitudinous and somewhat undesirable, with all its stress on authoritarianism.” (Ch.V: 30).

Jawaharlal Nehru found himself enthused for a while by Dr Anne Besant’s All-India Home Rule League founded in September 1916. When she visited Allahabad in October of the following year after his internment, she was accorded a cordial welcome by the people of Allahabad. Though Anne Besant was doubtless a dynamic personality, her leadership was only confined to the urban elite. India’s salvation lay in the support of the masses. The intellectual classes could give effective leadership, but they would never deliver the goods. In the early years of the British rule the framers of India’s educational policy put forward what came to be known as filtration theory meant to enlighten the masses group by group on Western arts and sciences. This attempt was doomed to an utter failure. In politics, too, mass action alone would bring forth the desired results.

Nehru found in Gandhiji the true leader who could marshal the masses and their irresistible power to the cause of winning the Swaraj. He met Gandhiji for the first time at the Lucknow session of the Congress during Christmas 1916. Apropos of his first meeting with Gandhiji, he says, "My first meeting with Gandhiji was about the time of Lucknow Congress 1916. All of us admired him for his heroic fight in South Africa. He seemed very distant and different and impolitical to many of us young men. He refused to take part in Congress or national politics then and confined himself to the South African Indian question. Soon afterwards his adventures and victory in Champaran, on behalf of the tenants of the planters, filled us with enthusiasm. We saw that he was prepared to apply his methods in India also and they promised success." (Ch.V:35).

In this connection it deserves to be mentioned that over the thirty years Nehru stayed in close and active association with Gandhi, he had never wavered in his allegiance to Gandhiji, even though he had had many occasions to dissent from Gandhi's approach to certain aspects of the Country's political, economic and social problems. To the close relationship between Gandhi and Nehru, a hard-hearted civilian who rose to distinguished positions both in British and free India, testified in the following words quoted by V. B. Kulkarni (1967: 460) from "Intimate Glimpse of Panditji" by "one who worked with him" in the Nehru Supplement dated 14 November 1949 in the defunct English daily, Bharat, Bombay :

I have seen him (Nehru) at the end of a long day – tired, feeling harassed and looking worn – drive over to see Mahatma Gandhi.; and I have seen him come out full of buoyancy and eager to work for several more hours when all Delhi was asleep. On one occasion towards the end of 1947 the Prime Minister said to me; "I do not think I could have carried on if Gandhiji had not been in Delhi. Night after night I went to see him; and he gave me hope, courage and strength."

The year nineteen twenty-one turned out to be a turning point in the political life of Jawaharlal Nehru, for it was characterised by a strange mixture of nationalism and politics and spiritualism and mysticism and behind all this were an agrarian upheaval in villages and a rising working-class movement in big cities. Nationalism and a vague but intense country-wide idealism sought to, in the words of Nehru, "bring together all these various, and sometimes mutually contradictory, discontents, and succeeded to a remarkable degree" (Ch XI:75). Yet this nationalism proved to be a composite force encompassing, as it did, Hindu and Muslim nationalisms partly looking beyond the frontiers of India. The two separate and distinct nationalisms commingled into an Indian nationalism in consonance with the spirit of the times. For the time being they overlapped and pulled together. Referring to the commingling of these two separate nationalisms says Jawaharlal Nehru:

It was Hindu-Musalman ki jai everywhere. It was remarkable how Gandhiji seemed to cast a spell on all

classes and groups of people and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction. He became, indeed (to use a phrase which has been applied to another leader), “a symbolic expression of the confused desires of the people.” (Ch. XI:75).

All freedom fighters, particularly those who gave leadership to different movements, were keen on political imprisonments with a view to boosting up the morals of their followers. Jawaharlal Nehru also voluntarily courted imprisonment. He had already paved the way for the Government

to imprison him, suffice it to say. Imprisonment was not a new thing in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-one. Since the time of the Bengal partition agitation there had been a continuous stream of men and women flowing into prison, sentenced often to long terms. About his imprisonment and that of other leaders Nehru says:

We had come to prison of our own accord, many of the volunteers indeed having pushed their way in almost uninvited. There was thus hardly any question of any one of them trying to escape. If he had any desire to go out, he could do so easily by expressing his regret for his action or giving an undertaking that he would refrain from such activity in future. An attempt to escape would only bring a measure of ignominy, and in itself was tantamount to a withdrawal from political activity of civil resistance variety. (Ch. XIII:91).

In course of time down through his personal history Nehru tells us of how he got appointed secretary of All-India Congress at its annual session. In his speech Maulana Mohamad Ali, then president of the All-India Congress, delivered at the annual session held in December 1923 at Coronada in the South, he “traced the growth of political and communal feeling among the Moslems and showed how the famous Moslem deputation to the Viceroy in 1908, under the leadership of the Aga Khan, which led to the first official declaration in favour of separate electorates, was a command performance and had been engineered by the Government itself.” (Ch. XVII:107).

On the heels of assuming his office, he tried to synthesise the communal identities and this demonstrates his true nationalistic feeling. He had introduced in the A.I.C.C. office “a practice of addressing all our members by their names only without any prefixes or suffixes, honorific titles and the like.” But he could not adhere to this practice for long, for Maulana Mohamad Ali directed him on the strength of his office to “revert to the old practice”.

Early in 1924 Gandhiji fell ill, while in prison, and was removed to a hospital and underwent an operation. As he was convalescing in the hospital the Government remitted the rest of his sentence. He had just served about two years out of the six years he had been sentenced to. He went over to Juhu, by the sea-side near Bombay, to recuperate. Nehru’s family trekked over to Juhu and stayed for a while in a cottage with a view to talking Gandhiji into at least passively co-operating with them in the Swarajist movement. The talks Motilal

Nehru had had with Gandhiji were doomed to a failure, as is evident in the following passage.

The Juhu talks, as far as the Swarajists are concerned, did not succeed in winning Gandhiji, or even in influencing him to any degree. Behind all the friendly talk, and the courteous gestures, the fact remained that there was no compromise. They agreed to differ, and statements to this effect were issued to the Press. (Ch. XVIII:124).

Jawaharlal Nehru returned a little disappointed from Juhu, for Gandhiji had not resolved any of his doubts, As is usual with him, he sort of disdained looking into the future and laying down any long-distance programmes. Says Nehru, "We were to carry on patiently 'serving' the people, working for the constructive and social reform programme of the Congress, and await the time for the aggressive activity. The real difficulty, of course, was that even when that time came, would not that incident like Chauri Chaura upset all our calculations and again hold us up? To that he gave no answer then. Nor was he at all definite in regard to our objectives. Many of us wanted to be clear in our own minds what we were driving at, although the Congress did not then need to make any formal declaration on that subject. Were we going to hold out for independence and some measure of social change, or were our leaders going to compromise for something much less?" (Ch. XVIII: 124-125).

These doubts gave rise to the conflicts of opinions and attitudes within the Congress.

While Nehru and other like-minded leaders wanted to make the issue of independence clear in the Congress, the Liberals had drifted so far that "they publicly gloried in pomp and power of the Empire, although that Empire might treat our countrymen as a doormat, and its dominions keep our countrymen as helots or refuse them all admittance."(ibid:125).

This drifting away in course of time contributed to toning down the Swarajist movement. Some Swarajists became ministers, some Executive Councillors in the provinces. Even some congressmen who had been to prison with Jawaharlal Nehru did not even, so to say, shilly-shally to become ministers and hold high offices in the Government.

Another conflict appeared between Gandhiji and the Swarajists at a meeting of the All-India Congress Committee held at Allahabad sometime in the middle of 1924. Gandhiji proposed at the meeting a fundamental change in the Congress constitution, changing the franchise and the rules for membership; he insisted on limiting membership to those who gave a certain amount of self-spun yarn instead of the four annas which the Swarajist would pay to become members. This was a serious limitation of the franchise and the AICC was not competent enough to agree to this proposal. The Swarajists mounted pressure on Gandhiji to repeal the proposal. Though Gandhiji did not bow down to their pressure, he adjusted himself to them by agreeing to accept the spinning franchise as an alternative form, the old four-anna franchise remaining. The conflict, though temporarily

patched up, led to the drifting of some Swarajists away.

I should not elongate the elasticity of the reader's patience; I shall conclude my discussion by talking about the Hindu-Muslim conflict which culminated in the partitioning of India. There occurred during this time a progressive deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations, in North especially. In the bigger cities a number of riots "brutal and callous in the extreme" took place. There hovered an atmosphere of distrust and anger which bred causes of distrust which "most of us had never heard of before." The following passages are worth quoting to illustrate how the Hindu-Muslim relations deteriorated.

Previously a fruitful source of discord had been the question of cow sacrifice, especially on the Bakr-id-day. There was also a tension when Hindu and Muslim festivals clashed as, for instance, when the Moharram fell on the days when the Ram Lila was celebrated. The Moharram revived the memory of a past tragedy and brought sorrow and tears; the Ram Lila was the festival of joy and the celebration of victory of good over evil. The two did not fit in. Fortunately they came together once in about thirty years, for the Ram Lila is celebrated according to the solar calendar at a fixed time of a year, while the Moharram moves round the seasons, following a lunar year. (Ch. XIX: 134-135).

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It seems amazing that a question which could be settled with mutual consideration for each other's feelings and a little adjustment should give rise to great bitterness and rioting. But religious passions have little to do with reason or consideration or adjustments, and they are easy to fan when a third party in control can play off one group against another. (ibid, P. 135).

The communal conflict over the Hindu and Muslim festivals that synchronised with each other foreboded the partitioning of India close on the heels of India's achieving freedom. Before plunging into the freedom struggle the Swarajists and their followers need to have reoriented themselves to the needs of India when it achieved freedom and to what they were actually aiming for. Jawaharlal Nehru himself confessed to his inability to fit in with the developments leading to this communal discontent. (Reference Ch. X IX:134). He seems to have reconciled himself to the developments paralysing the communal harmony inch by inch. Perhaps it was beyond him to check the developments surging forward. Earlier on, while speaking of Gandhiji's personality, Nehru said, "As is usual with him, he refused to look into the future, or lay down any long-distance programme." (Ch, XVIII:124).

The biography reveals Jawaharlal Nehru as a true nationalist.