



A Multidisciplinary Indexed International Research Journal

ISSN: 23203714

Volume : 5



ADHYAYAN
INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH
ORGANISATION

Discovery of India-A Brief Critical Evaluation

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Nehru wrote "The Discovery of India" in five months during his prison term in Ahmednagar jail from 1942 August to June 1945. It is long prolix book which contains "a vision too complex and subtle, as well too riven with self questioning, to lend itself to an ideology of state". It offered "an intellectual compass for modern India – an indicator of the direction a new, diverse, disparity ridden nation would have to take in order to cohere". Again its intrinsic merit is "unusual in its refusal of exclusivist habits of mind, whether territorial or cultural, as well as in its sustained cool reflective tone. In the words of Sunil Khilnani "The Discovery of India is above all, a remarkable assertion of an individual imagination trying to give his country a unifying sense of itself". "The Discovery of India" is his lengthened autobiography, the discovery of himself.

"The Discovery of India" claimed the attention of all learned people all over the world for its exquisite presentation of India's part with the concern for future. The book has been translated into many languages and everyone read it with absorbing interest. The Author's deep concern with the fate of movements and events is discernible. The book comprises 10

chapters wherein he tried to discover India, the India of past and of the present.

Barring the first three chapters, the fourth chapter unfolds the ancient civilization. Fifth chapter traces Indian history through the ages. The sixth chapter deals with the flowering of Arab culture and contacts with India. The seventh chapter deals with the consolidation of British rule and rise of nationalist movement. The eighth chapter deals with the last phase and nationalism versus imperialism. Chapter ninth depicts the last phase and World War II. Finally the last 10th chapter deals with miscellaneous issues relating to India. A cursory reading of this book by even a lay man would enable a comprehensive understanding of India's past coupled with the present problems confronting India. Nehru describes the events like a historian with the heart of a novelist reminding us a Sir Walter Scott. The book looks like a historical romance. In fact prof.C.D.Narasimhaiah remarks that Nehru has historical sense with the past of India in his bones.

The discovery contains all details in a meticulous manner relating to Indus valley civilization, Muslim invasion and later British rule. Nehru's deep concern for the

future of India and his constant effort is to make past meaningful to the present. His recurring words are “continuity” “vitality” and the “staging power” of Indian culture through the ages.

In the words of C.D.Narasimhaiah again, “all these help to give him and his readers, his Indian readers especially, an idea of the greatness of India in days of Yon and fill them with pride in their past, faith in the present and reassurance for the future of India”.

Nehru depicts certain significant personalities in our history in an intensely moving manner. The portraits of those great men are lovely and poignant. For instance the description of the Buddha “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. His eyes are closed, but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy fills the frame”. Likewise he conveys the advent of Gandhi on Indian seen in a dramatic manner.

“And then Gandhi came. He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breath; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirl wind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people’s minds. He did not descend from the top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition. Get off the backs of these peasants and workers, he told us, all you

who live by their exploitation”. Get rid of the system that produces this poverty and misery. Political freedom took new shape for them and acquired a new content”.

Prof.Iyengar pithily remarks that Nehru’s portrait of Jinnah reminds us Lytton Strachy: “Mr.Jinnah is a lone figure even in the Muslim league, keeping apart from his closest co-workers, widely but distantly respected, more feared than liked with all his strength and tenacity, he is strangely negative person whose appropriate symbol might well be a ‘no’ ”.

Similarly he sketches the lives of eminent sons of India like Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Tagore, Shankara and others. He gave an excellent account of Shankara justifying his role as an advocate of national unity and integration.

“And yet Shankara was a man of amazing energy and vast activity. He was no escapist retiring into his shell or into a corner of the forest, seeking his own individual perfection and oblivious of what happened to others he strove hard to synthesize the diverse currents that were troubling the mind of India of his day and to build a unity of outlook out of that diversity. In a brief life of thirty two years he did the work of many long lives and left such an impress of his powerful mind and rich personality on India that is very evident today”.

His comprehensive treatment pertaining to the ancient sacred scriptures and literature abundantly testifies to the author’s profound insight into the works as well his amazing scholarship.

He discusses threadbare relating to the Vedas, Upanishads and our epics. Regarding the Rigveda, he points out about “glow of poetry, the rapture at nature’s loveliness, and mystery. Prof.C.D.Narasimhaiah compliments Nehru for his description of the Upanishads to mere four pages. He aptly remarks: “similarly if someone is challenged to cover in four pages of print all about the Upanishads, he cannot do better than reproduce the whole section by Jawaharlal Nehru. Such is the author’s insight, understanding and austerity in the use of language”.

Nehru is a robust optimist. He always affirms about the endless continuity of life, the inexorable march of events and the capacity of man and nature to renew themselves constantly. His following passage underlines his innate faith and abiding love for India.

“The stream of life goes on in spite of famine and war, full of its inherent contradictions and finding substance 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 in their storied and remembered pasts and seldom catch up to the present in “The world that neweth every daie ”. And that present slips into the past before we are hardly aware of it; today, child of yesterday, yields place to its own offspring, tomorrow. 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” .

Thus the “Discovery of India” ends on a note of optimism. The 1000 pages of the book dispels the darkness of a lay man about the past of India and provides hope for the future. In fact the author makes an introspective enquiry: “The Discovery of India –what have I discovered?”. In fact he has delved deep into the past and brought out diamonds and the readers are the beneficiaries. The critical analysis coupled with an empathy confers a status which may be labeled as “classic” among Indo-Anglian prose writings /works.