

The Art of Autobiography: A Review of Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*

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Autobiography as a literary type, dates to antiquity though the word was used specifically in 1797 by William Taylor, a British scholar. He spoke deprecatingly of the genre suggesting that it lacked originality and was pedantic in essence. It was used in its present sense in 1809 by Robert Southey and a distinction was pointed out between autobiography and diary writing by Roy Pascal in his book *Design and Truth in Autobiography* in 1960 when he noted that 'autobiography is a review of a life from a particular moment in time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time'. This observation turned the tables in favour of autobiography as a worthwhile literary exercise though the practice had been in existence since very early times in literatures all over the world. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, written as early as 400 CE, stands out as unique wherein, Augustine was able to produce, incidentally, through his narrative which was actually centered on Christianity and his own religious conversion, a powerful account of his personal life from youth to adulthood. The *Baburnama* in Persian written in the 15th century ranks as one of the early autobiographies while the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, an Italian sculptor and author has been classified in *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* 3rd ed. as 'one of the most important documents of the 16th century' (p 155). Cellini wrote at the very beginning of his autobiography: 'No matter what sort he is, everyone who has to his credit what are or really seem great achievements, if he cares for truth and goodness, ought to write the story of his own life in his own hand' (p.15)

Autobiography is a powerful medium of self-expression which is an innate human faculty. It is a literature of personal revelation, and its main interest lies in conscious or unconscious self-revelation. In an autobiography great emphasis is laid on self-interception, sincerity, frankness and integrity. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* explains autobiography as, 'the biography of a person written by himself. Its motivations are various- among others self-scrutiny for self-edification, self-justification'. Illustrations of this point can be seen in Cardinal Newman's beautifully written *Apologia Pro Sua Vita* which expresses the nostalgic desire to linger over enchanting memories, in Selma Lagerfof's *Marbacka* which embodies the belief that one's experience may be helpful to others, in Helen Keller's *The Story of my Life* which records an earnest effort to orient the self amid a world of confusion and in Henry Brooks Adams' *The Education of Henry Adams* which reflects the urge for artistic expression or the pure commercial desire to capitalize on fame or position. The aim of autobiography is to open a window to one's moral, spiritual and religious belief or to the truth of worldly or material achievements or to the truth of one's profession. It is a vivid record of the growth and development of human personality in the existing milieu and contains comments on crucial incidents and personages the autobiographer comes across thus presenting a graphic picture of the times the autobiographer lived in.

Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, known also as *Toward Freedom*, published in 1936, finds a place of pride among the prominent autobiographies in any language and brings acclaim not only to the writer but to the category of Indian English writing too, in its excellent use of the English language and in the panorama of the contemporary social and political life it unfolds as well as the exquisite glimpses into Indian history and culture it affords. In fact, the *Autobiography* had such an impact that Walter Crocker, the Australian diplomat and writer commented that even if Nehru had not been famous as the first Prime Minister of India, he would have been for his autobiography. The first edition of the book was

published by the English publishing house The Bodley Head, London and has since then been published in twelve editions by Penguin Books India and has been translated into more than thirty languages. It consists of sixty-eight chapters and six hundred and seventy two pages.

Nehru began to write his autobiography when he was imprisoned in Almora prison between June 1934 and February 1935 which was before he became the Prime Minister of India in 1947. The primary object in writing his autobiography was to engage himself in constructive work to relieve the solitude of gaol life, to utilize the time on hand to review past events in the country, an admirable utilization of opportunity. Nehru aimed his writing for his countrymen, not a foreign audience. As he himself wrote in the preface to the first edition, 'My attempt was to trace my own mental development'. He was not writing for any particular audience, he had in mind only his own countrymen and countrywomen. He says that if he had written with the intention of having foreign readers,

...I would have probably written differently or with a different emphasis, stressing certain aspects which have been slurred over in the narrative and passing over lightly certain other aspects which I have treated at some length.

Written in the gloomy and monotonous atmosphere of the prison, the tone is naturally sombre but far from depressive. Nehru says in the post-script which was written later in October 1935: 'I wrote my autobiography entirely in prison, cut off from outside activity. I suffered from various humours in prison, as every prisoner does, but gradually I developed a mood of introspection and some peace of mind' (p. 599)

Mahatma Gandhi in his famous autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* reveals his spiritual and moral growth. Like Gandhi, Nehru too did not aim at writing a survey of recent Indian history but in both their autobiographies, historical and political events and contemporary personalities are vividly described because it was one of the most turbulent epochs in Indian history. In the Preface to the 1962 edition Nehru wrote: 'Essentially, an autobiography is a personal document and therefore the person who wrote it becomes merged to a large extent in the larger movement and therefore represents in a large measure the feelings of many others'

Nehru begins his autobiography with a striking sentence, 'An only son of prosperous parents is apt to be spoilt, especially so in India' It is reminiscent of the opening lines of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, 'It is a truth universally of a good fortune that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' The effect of the opening line is to impart a fictional character to the narrative which does have ample fictional potential in the creation of elements of expectation, surprise and suspense, in the portrayal of character, in the presentation of situation and in the implicit comment on the socio-political scene. However, Nehru's *Autobiography* is neither fiction nor is it fictionalized. It is a very expressive record of both, the national life and his personal life through the unstable years. It is also a record of his fortitude in the face of adversity, his courage to put up a stoical chin and wade through troubled waters with the determination to overcome. He says:

To me those days have brought one rich gift among many others. More and more I have liked upon life as an adventure of absorbing interest, where there is so much to learn, so much to do. I have continually had a feeling of growing up and that feeling is still with me and gives me a zest to my activities as well as to the reading of books and generally makes life worthwhile. (p.596)

Nehru suffered bouts of loneliness and emptiness in prison. Long terms of imprisonment fostered the spirit of introspection in him. He says:

Perhaps suffering is necessary for clear thought but excess of it may cloud the brain. Gaol encourages introspection and my long years in prison have forced me to look more and more within myself. I was not by nature an introvert, but prison life like strong coffee or strychnine leads to introversion. (p.571)

Nehru has not only dispassionately described political situation and events but also created vivid pen-portraits of contemporary personalities. The most striking and impressive portrait is that of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru's political contemporary, his mentor and guide.

People who do not know Gandhi personally and have only read his writings are apt to think that he is a priestly type, extremely puritanical, long faced, Calvinistic and kill-joy... But his writings do him an injustice: he is far greater than what he writes, and it is not quite fair to quote what he has written and criticise it. He is the very opposite of the Calvinistic priestly type. His smile is delightful, his laughter infectious and he radiates light-heartedness. There is something child-like about him... he brings a breath of fresh air with him which lightens the atmosphere (p.515)

The portrait of Raja Mahendra Pratap whom Nehru had met in Switzerland is equally enduring

He appeared in strange composite attire which might have been suitable on the highlands of Tibet or in the Siberian plains... with high Russian boots, and there were large pockets all bulging with papers, photographs etc.... he had lost a dispatch-box containing valuable papers, in China, and ever since then he had considered it safer to carry his papers on his person. (p.150)

An Autobiography reveals Nehru as a lover of nature. He portrays the various moods of nature and the landscape in picturesque and sensuous terms, rising to heights of poetic prose. His aesthetic sense is untainted by his academic training in botany. His evocation of nature is unpedantic and original because his experience of nature is soothing and at the same time exhilarating. His response to Nature is never imitative or derivative, it is always fresh and immediate. The pages of his *Autobiography* pulsate with the life of nature which had also enlivened and uplifted his mood, lightening the burden of political and social upheaval on his soul. Explaining his reason for writing about nature, he says, 'Prevented from indulging in normal activities, we become more observant of Nature's ways'. His description of the mountain capes is breath-taking:

Higher and higher we went: the gorges deepened: the peaks lost themselves in the cloud: the vegetation changed till the firs and pines covered the hillsides. A turn of the road would bring to our eyes suddenly, a new expanse of hills and valleys with a little river gurgling in the depths below (p.568)

Nehru believes that nature cools 'the fever in the brain and the petty conflicts and intrigues, the lusts and falsehoods of the cities and plains and the cities seemed trivial and far away before their eternal way'. (p.569) His autobiography abounds in such picturesque and poetic descriptions which bring to light Nehru's poetic and emotional nature and his infinite capacity of minute observation. Nehru's significant contribution lies in teaching to the next generation, the great art of living by 'stimulating the mind, extending awareness, enlarging the sympathy and generally in sensitizing the young to the existence of bird, beast, tree, flower, the sun, the moon and the stars'. (Narasimhaiah, p14)

Nehru's prose style is simple, lucid, lyrical and eloquent and a true reflection of his personality. Born in a family in which English manners and values were held in high esteem, Nehru naturally imbibed them to a great extent. He came under the tutelage of a European theosophist, Ferdinand T. Brooks who developed in him a love for English books and poetry as well as theosophical phraseology and ideals. He quotes copiously from English poets like Wordsworth and Eliot, Hopkins and Byron, lines such as, 'the time is out of joint O cursed Sprite! / That ever I was born to set it right (Wordsworth)' or 'This is the way the world ends, / Not with a bang, but a whimper' (Eliot). Commenting on the appropriateness of quotations to situations and mental states in Nehru's *Autobiography*, C.D. Narasimhaiah writes:

To quote as Nehru did is almost a sign of originality... Nehru's reading is so wide and his memory so selective that he can get the aptest quotation in a context. And he would quote only to clinch a point, not to parade his learning and he knew it was best done in lines of poetry, because of their incisiveness and because poetry is a sure source of rhythmic satisfaction under emotional stress (p.19)

Undoubtedly, Nehru's *Autobiography* marks the highest point of his achievement in the world of letters. At once lyrical and epic, it displays his manifold qualities as writer and man

One may come across several kinds of writing in Nehru's *Autobiography* which reflects a style carefully cultivated through copious reading and a ready absorption of all that he read. To Nehru can go the credit of enhancing Indo-Anglican prose and making it a powerful instrument of expression. Nehru assiduously cultivated diverse ways of transmuting his disparate experiences in the crucible of his artistic sensibility. It was not falsely observed that 'a study of these (*An Autobiography*) pages has a tonic and educative and ennobling quality which no student can afford to miss'. Nehru himself did not claim any literary merit for himself calling himself a queer mixture of East and west and out of place everywhere, but it is undeniable that even if he is forgotten as statesman and politician, he will forever be remembered as an outstanding man of letters. His narrative is a rare and awesome mixture of charm, humour, indignance and poignance in turns but consistently human and inspiring.

Nehru's *An Autobiography* touches upon all aspects of his life and times- spiritual, moral, physical and intellectual. He writes with equal alacrity about family disagreements, political differences, personal emotions, public affairs, religion, science love for his family, love for his country and love for the world of animals and plants, even taboo topics like sex. The book which he originally called *In and Out of Prison* with the subtitle *An Autobiographical Narrative with musings on recent events in India* was finally named *Jawaharlal Nehru- An Autobiography* is a proof and testimony to Nehru's cogent observations and impartial inquiries on his self and everything that surrounded him as well as his outstanding literary skills

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