

Chapter 10

Nehru and Internationalism

The word “philosophy” in its narrow sense is defined as the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge of reality, the principles of existence, the physical world around us and how we perceive and understand this world. In a practical sense it can mean a way to look at our world. It is a framework through which we may look at the world outside as well as ourselves and our relation with that world so that we can make partial sense of the motley contradictions that life presents to us every day. Through the meandering journey of life, with its ups and downs, each individual is compelled to evolve some philosophy of life. Many of us are unable to articulate our philosophy, but upon the few that can, we impress the label “philosopher”.

It may seem odd to present Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, as a philosopher since he is not viewed by most as such. Our world is still imprisoned in numerous intellectual categories. The general public views him as a politician and so his thought and his world view are seldom studied from the standpoint of philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to show that Nehru was indeed a philosopher, a bridge between ancient India and the new India that emerged after its independence from British colonial rule. My main thesis is that he had a larger vision of a “world civilization” when he laid the foundations of a philosophy of internationalism. This is evident in his later writings especially when he championed the non-aligned movement in a world polarized by mighty military powers. I maintain that his philosophy of internationalism is what the world needs as it moves closer to the possibility of nuclear conflicts.

We urgently need to study these ideas of internationalism and mutual co-operation in this age now being torn apart by nationalisms and insular outlooks. Poised as we are on the brink of self-destruction, it is a matter of survival that we study how to bring about a global community of nations working for the greater good and well-being of all people on the planet. If we do not, we may have to dismiss Planet Earth as a failed experiment in the history of the cosmos. There is no Planet B.

The significance and meaning of the twentieth century is best understood by realizing that it marked the end of widespread colonial exploitation, at least as an official government policy. In this episode of the annals of history, India occupies a significant place in its independence struggle against British colonial rule through Gandhian idealism which was characterized by non-violent resistance. The colonial powers saw that it was no longer viable to oppress other nations while the whole world was watching. Also, the end of colonialism was against the backdrop of the Second World War in which the colonial powers fought amongst themselves for the supremacy of the world. There are of course deep meanings in the events of this global tragedy. Inspired by these episodes in his own struggle to eliminate racial inequality in America, Martin Luther King Jr. saw a powerful philosophy in the methods adopted by Gandhi and was keenly aware of the significance of his movement. He wrote in his autobiography that "Gandhi was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his lifetime than any other person in the history of this world. And just with a little love and understanding, goodwill and a refusal to co-operate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British Empire. This I think was one of the most significant things that ever happened in the history of the world. More than 300 million people achieved their freedom and they achieved it non-violently."¹

If Gandhi represented the philosophical idealism of ancient India, Nehru embodied the new India of the 21st century. In many ways, he gave expression to the aspirations of all oppressed and suppressed people of the human race in their dream to build a better world. In this context, he advocated a scientific humanism in some contrast to Tagore's aesthetic humanism. He saw the power of science to lift humanity out of poverty but at the same time could see the dangers of uncontrolled science and its potential to wipe out the human race. Science and scientific discoveries should be used for the development of human life and not for its destruction. He clearly perceived this cusp in human history when he said, "We are on the verge, I think, of a tremendous development in some direction of the human race."² And again in a broadcast on the BBC in January 1951, he said, "Our task is the preservation of peace, and indeed, of our civilization. To this task let us bend our energies and find fellowship and strength in each other."³

Nehru was a shaper of India's destiny who defined her role on the global stage. The foundation of his political acumen was his deep knowledge of India's past and her extensive contributions to human civilization, her strengths and her weaknesses and the causes of her decline during the periods of foreign invasions. From this perspective, not only was Nehru a

¹ Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Warner Books, New York, 1998, p. 129.

² M.N. Das, *The Political Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru*, George Allen and Unwin Limited, London, 1961, p. 236.

³ *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, 1949-1953*, Publications Division, Government of India, 1954, p. 136.

philosopher, but also a historian, a consummate scholar who could view her past dispassionately and use this knowledge to shape her future direction. In addition to this, Nehru was a world visionary who laid the foundations of a truly global civilization. This vision was shared by many, and may explain his immense popularity in the west as symbolized by the iconic photograph of him walking in stride along with President John F. Kennedy. The photograph epitomized a post-war optimism to build a better world synthesizing the wisdom of the East and the West. With today's world more polarized than before, we must revive Nehru's perspective on the future of the world as well as his philosophy of non-alignment. In the current world divided by nationalist ideologies, Nehru's philosophy of internationalism is relevant and will be highlighted below.

In the opening chapter of *Karma Yoga*, Swami Vivekananda wrote "All the actions that we see in the world, all the movements in human society, all the works that we have around us, are simply the display of thought, the manifestation of the will of man."⁴ So, in order to understand the life story of any human being, we must enter into their thought process. What inspired them to action? What was the catalyst that gave birth to their world view? To some extent, this is easier to do if we analyze their writings and thus describe the trajectory of their thought and experience. Undoubtedly, the writings represent a faint shadow of the person's thought. However, they offer some window through which we can gain a partial impression of their intellectual landscape. In Nehru's case, he has left behind voluminous output.

Four works stand out. The first is his "Discovery of India". The second is his "Glimpses of World History" and third is his "Autobiography". We might also make mention of his earliest book "A Children's History of India." All of these books were written in prison. During the course of the independence struggle, Nehru was imprisoned nine times and held at various prisons throughout the country. The total time spent in prison was about nine years.⁵ Much like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru found the prison a place to ponder, to learn and to write. With some sarcasm and humour, Nehru would say, "All my major works have been written in prison. I would recommend prison not only for aspiring writers but to aspiring politicians too."⁶

Indeed, the solitude of imprisonment formed the crucible for Nehru's writings and reflections. The chronology of his books is significant. His first book was "A Children's History of India" published in 1930. This book was a compilation of his letters to his daughter, Indira Gandhi when she was

⁴ The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 1, Mayavati Memorial Edition, 1962, p.30.

⁵ See preface to M.N. Das, *The Political Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru*, George Allen and Unwin Limited, London, 1961.

⁶ It seems difficult to find the source of this remarkable quotation of Nehru. It has been reproduced in many books on writing. For instance, it appears on page 74 of "For Writers Only" by Sophy Burnham, Ballantine Books, New York, 1994.

only twelve years old. He was evidently concerned about her education and the book represents the love and concern of a father to his daughter in her growth and well-being. His second book was "Glimpses of World History" which is again a compilation of essays to his then teen-age daughter and this book was published in 1934 in two volumes. It makes for a fascinating and panoramic world view. Both of these books reflect Nehru's mental dichotomy: on the one hand, he was concerned with Indira's education, her knowledge of history, and on the other, the writings represent his own musings on the meaning of the zeitgeist. To discover the meaning of the present, one had to have a sense of the past, both nationally and internationally. In my view, the significance of these two books is at the heart of Nehru's philosophy of internationalism. For him, he needed to know about India's past, but at the same time, he had to know about world history and India's place in it. Indira could not have had a better teacher than Nehru. Fortunately, these books are now available to all and make for fascinating reading.

His third book in prison was his autobiography, completed in 1936. After an analysis of national and international history, it was only natural for him to ponder and reflect about his own personal history, the meaning of his life's successes and tragedies, their lessons for the future and his own place in the Himalayan landscape of India. Being more than six hundred printed pages, his autobiography is a prodigious account of events and movements, and we can clearly discern in them his progression of thought, his analytic skill in parsing the causes of calamities and diagnosing remedies for the age.

The fourth and final book is the celebrated "Discovery of India", being now a more mature and academic reflection on the history of India. It represents a reflective journey from India's venerable past to her independence struggle and makes for engaging reading. It was later serialized as a documentary series for Indian television; such was its impact on the national consciousness.

These four books represent Nehru's meditations in prison and explain his strength and resolve in giving shape to the new India of the 21st century. Aware of India's past, her successes and failures, he could chart the course of her future direction. In his famous speech on August 15, 1947 when India formally gained independence from British rule, he said, "At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and grandeur of her success and her failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again. The achievement we celebrate today is but a step, an opening of opportunity, to the greater triumphs and achievements that await us. Are we brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?"⁷

⁷ See page 336 of Volume 2 of Nehru, *The First Sixty Years*, edited by Dorothy Norman, The Bodley Head, London, 1965.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Nehru realised the gravity of the task of leading India into the future. In the same speech on Independence Day, Nehru reminded all Indians that "freedom and power bring responsibility. That responsibility rests upon this Assembly, a sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India. Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of these pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now."⁸

Nehru was in and out of prison countless times during India's freedom struggle. "During that period he underwent nine terms of imprisonment, amounting to nine years less twenty three days."⁹

The same cycles of imprisonment were true of his father, Motilal Nehru. The same was true of Mahatma Gandhi who was viewed by many as the father of the nation. Jawaharlal Nehru, in many ways, stands between these two towering personalities, literally and figuratively. Indeed, Nehru was often at odds with the views of his father as well as those of Gandhi. Gandhi represented the ancient tradition while the thoroughly westernized Motilal wanted massive industrialization for the future India. There still persists a rumor which we hope is not true that Motilal sent his laundry to England deeming that the work there was of higher quality. In any case, caught between these two strong-headed individuals, neither path seemed right for the young Nehru regarding India's future.

While in prison, Nehru was able to reflect and learn. He had a chance to meet other scholars who were also jailed for their views and writings, often labeled seditious by the ruling British. He conversed and learned from many. His "Discovery of India" is a colourful journey through India's past unencumbered by professorial pedantry. In writing this book, Nehru was himself discovering India as he journeyed into her past. His style of writing as well as the book's detailed accounts reveal the mind of a scholar searching for meaning, and wondering how the future of India will be. His reflections seemed to be a foreboding of things to come. Neither will India regress to some fabled golden age of her past nor will she plunge headlong into westernization. Rather, she would forge a new path, a middle path which would extract the greatness of the past with a bold and optimistic view of the future to build a truly global society. Based on the copious references found in his writings, his reading was prodigious.

Upon a careful study of Nehru's writings, several themes emerge as contributing to an overall philosophy. These are a philosophy of national unity, democracy and secularism, industrialisation and scientific development and finally non-alignment and internationalism. These themes are not airtight compartments of his world view but were intertwined and inter-related. For example, national unity is fostered by a secular view in which all religions

⁸ Ibid, p. 336.

⁹ See p. 9 of M.N.Das, *The Political Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1961.

and minority rights are respected. Non-alignment was seen as essential if India were to be an independent and sovereign nation. As each individual must grow according to their own psychological disposition, nations must also grow but within the framework of mutual harmony and peaceful co-existence. Indeed, his three books give a panoramic survey of not only India's past, but of world history, with an emphasis on India's place in it and his autobiographical work signifies his ruminations of his own role both within India and in the larger world outside.

In his psychological journey into India's past, Nehru discovered that India never had a centralised government and that this was a contributing cause of its vulnerability to foreign invasions. At the same time, he observed each period of her past revealed a cultural cohesion. Nehru traced such cohesion to a sense of unity among all people. He writes, "Partly because the great majority of Moslems in India were converts from Hinduism, partly because of long contact, Hindus and Moslems in India developed numerous common traits, habits, ways of living and artistic tastes, especially in northern India in music, painting, architecture, food, clothes and common traditions. They lived together peacefully as one people, joined each others festivals and celebrations, spoke the same language, lived in more or less the same way, and faced identical economic problems."¹⁰

For Nehru, the problem of national unity could not be separated from the industrialisation of India. The natural resources existing in different parts of India had to be brought together and thus there would be an economic interdependence among the various regions of India. No region should feel excluded from this economic growth and each region should feel that they are a vital part of the process. To this end, he availed of every opportunity to travel widely to the different parts of India and convey his vision of India's future. This was indeed a radical vision. Earlier, nations had been united under a common religion, a common culture and ethnic factors. This could not be in India. Indeed, in the past it did achieve a certain unity with diversity, but he observed that due to a lack of a strong central government, India had become vulnerable to foreign conquests. In Mahatma Gandhi, he saw a visionary who managed to unite all people from diverse religions and cultures for the good of the new India, where the ideal was unity in diversity.

In this context, it is clear that Nehru was familiar with Vivekananda's thought. Several times in his *Discovery of India*, Vivekananda is quoted sometimes with attribution and sometimes not. On page 18 of his *Discovery*, he discusses the underlying unity of the cosmos. After having given the testimony of modern physicists who are discovering this underlying unity at the atomic level, he writes, "Old as this belief is in Asia and Europe, it is interesting to compare some of the latest conclusions of science with the fundamental ideas underlying the Advaita Vedantic theory. These ideas were that the universe is made of one substance whose form is perpetually chang-

¹⁰ *The Discovery of India*, p. 170.

ing and further that the sum total of energies remains always the same. Also, that “the explanation of things are to be found within their own nature, and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going in the universe,” with its corollary of a self-evolving universe.”¹¹ This quotation comes from Vivekanandas essay entitled “Reason and Religion”. Analysing the principles of knowledge, Vivekananda wrote that there are two principles of reasoning. The first is the principle of generalization. That is, the particular is explained by the general. The second is that the explanation of any phenomenon must come from within the nature of the phenomenon. He writes, “This tendency you will find throughout modern thought; in one word, what is meant by science is that the explanation of things are in their own nature, and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going in the universe.”¹² Since Nehru wrote his book in prison, we must infer that either he was quoting this from memory or perhaps a copy of Vivekananda’s lecture was very familiar that he didnt see the need for any attribution. For we know that throughout his writings, he is meticulous about his sources. In fact, the sources he cites imply the wide spectrum of his reading. But Vivekananda’s thought had become almost second nature to Nehru.

In addition to Vivekananda, there were two more giants of the Indian intellectual landscape that influenced Nehru’s thought. These were Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. In all three, he found his ideas of internationalism echoed in their writings. Indeed, in his *Discovery of India*, he quotes all three in the chapter titled “Reform and other movements among Hindus and Muslims.” He cites Vivekananda as follows. “I am thoroughly convinced that no individual or nation can live by holding itself apart from the community of others, and wherever such an attempt has been made under false ideas of greatness, policy or holiness the result has always been disastrous to the secluding one. The fact of our isolation from all the other nations of the world is the cause of our degeneration and its only remedy is getting back into the current of the world. Motion is the sign of life.”¹³ As Vivekananda himself points out elsewhere, India has had a strong international engagement in older times.

From Vivekananda, he moves to Tagore. “More than any other Indian,” writes Nehru, “he has helped to bring into harmony the ideals of the East and the West. He has been India’s internationalist par excellence, believing and working for international co-operation, taking India’s message to other countries and bringing their messages to his own people. And yet with all his internationalism, his feet have always been planted firmly on India’s soil and his mind has been saturated with the wisdom of the Upanishads.”¹⁴ He

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

¹² Swami Vivekananda, *Yogas and other works*, pp. 736-737.

¹³ See p. 255 of *Discovery of India*.

¹⁴ See p. 257 of *Discovery of India*.

continues, "It was Tagore's immense service to India, as it has been Gandhi's in a different plane that he forced the people in some measure out of their narrow grooves of thought and made them think of broader issues affecting humanity. Tagore was the great humanist of India."¹⁵

It is really due to the scholarly demeanor that Nehru can take this detached view and appraise the contributions of these great personalities. He writes, "Tagore and Gandhi have undoubtedly been the two outstanding and dominating figures of India in this first half of the twentieth century. It is instructive to compare and contrast them. No two persons could be so different from one another in their make-up or temperaments. Tagore, the aristocratic artist represented essentially the cultural tradition of India, the tradition of accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance. Gandhi, more a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant, represented the ancient tradition of India, that of renunciation and asceticism. And yet Tagore was primarily the man of thought, Gandhi of concentrated and ceaseless activity. Both, in their different ways, had a world outlook, and both were at the same time wholly Indian. They seemed to represent different but harmonious aspects of India and to complement one another."¹⁶ One could not ask for a better critical appraisal of these two personalities than this one by Nehru.

Though Gandhi was an intense nationalist, Nehru underlines that this nationalism was free from hatred of other countries and had the right spirit of a synthesis between nationalism and internationalism. Nehru quotes Gandhi as follows: "My idea of nationalism is that my country may become free, that if need be the whole of the country may die, so that the human race may live. There is no room for race hatred here. Let that be our nationalism."¹⁷

Nehru had studied Marx and Lenin and pondered deeply how their ideas could be used to build the future India. But it was Vivekananda's message of service to the poor that really stirred him. This along with the magic awakened by Gandhi's approach gave him a strong sense of optimism. Commenting on this point, Michael Edwards writes in his biography of Nehru that Nehru's Marxism was never much more than a sentiment. It gave a sense of universality to the ideas he had absorbed from Vivekananda whose message influenced him more than that of Marx. It was not just Vivekananda's vision of Indian unity but his ideal of selfless service as a means of redeeming the poverty-stricken Indian masses that had fascinated Nehru. Under the influence of Gandhi he had discovered the terrible world of the peasant and because of it he now rejected the Marxist thesis that revolution lay with the urban proletariat.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See p. 336 of *Discovery of India*.

¹⁸ See Michael Edwards, *Nehru*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 63.

But the philosophy of national unity and internationalism that Nehru espoused had its foundations in a more fundamental landscape. He always searched for a personal philosophy. This is evident throughout his writings. In fact, in his *Discovery of India*, he has a chapter entitled "Lifes Philosophy" in which he wrote, "What was my philosophy of life? I did not know."¹⁹

These words, written in 1944, reflect uncertainty, which Nehru thinks was due to world events and especially the Second World War and the menacing forces it unleashed. "Was human nature so essentially bad that it would take ages of training, through suffering and misfortune, before it could behave reasonably and raise man above the creature of lust and violence and deceit that he now was?" he asks.²⁰ After some more pondering and reflection, he finally hinges on one theme. "Ends and means: were they tied up inseparably, acting and reacting on each other, the wrong means distorting and sometimes even destroying the end in view? But the right means might be beyond the capacity of infirm and selfish human nature. What then was one to do?"²¹ He realized that the ends do not justify the means. In this, he agreed with Mahatma Gandhi who taught that "worthy ends deserve worthy means". Thus the "Robin Hood" philosophy of "stealing from the rich to give to the poor" was rejected by both Gandhi and Nehru. On this point, he wrote in his autobiography, "What I admired was the moral and ethical side of our movement and of satyagraha. I did not give an absolute allegiance to the doctrine of non-violence or accept it for ever, but it attracted me more and more. A worthy end should have a worthy means leading up to it. That seemed not only a good ethical doctrine but sound, practical politics, for the means that are not good often defeat the end in view and raise new problems and difficulties."²²

Nehru is not alone in his vision for the world. Since time immemorial, scholars and sages have taught us about the ideal. Even in the Bible we find, "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."²³ In the Rig Veda written centuries before the Old Testament, we have the famous unity prayer. "Common be your prayers. Common be the end of your assembly. Common be your purpose. Common be your deliberations."²⁴

Thus the message of mutual co-operation and peaceful co-existence has been taught since the dawn of civilization. Since humanity seems to forget this teaching, we need scholars and sages to remind us, to renew the message, to re-interpret in the modern context and give a new direction for the

¹⁹ See *Discovery of India*, page 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² *Autobiography*, p. 80

²³ The Holy Bible, Isaiah, 2.4 and 11.9

²⁴ See for example, p. 16 of M. Ram Murty, *Indian Philosophy, An Introduction*, Broadview Press, Peterborough, 2013.

modern age. In this task, the writings of Jawaharlal Nehru convey a universal vision, a global perspective. Nehru's leadership, being rooted in sincerity of his commitment to the well-being of the human race, attracted many thoughtful men and women into his orbit. For instance, Zakir Husain, in his foreword to the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Volume entitled "The Emerging World", wrote that Nehru "had an unparalleled gift of seeing things as a whole. His scientific attitude comprehended a reverence for the spiritual; his insistence on a realistic approach could, all of a sudden, reveal its deep idealistic, if not romantic, origin. He astonished the intellectual and the scientist by saying things that were supremely relevant, but which the special interest of the scientist and the intellectual predisposed them to overlook. He continuously pulled up intellectuals who left technological developments and their effects out of account in their thinking, and warned scientists that they would lead the world towards annihilation if they were not guided by moral values."²⁵ Recognizing Nehru's vast erudition, Husain wrote, "He had studied world history and its meaning had sunk deep into him. He could see the present as indissolubly linked with the past and the future, and identify himself with the ageless striving of mankind for truth and justice."²⁶

In the modern era, we can recognize many thinkers of all nations converging towards the ideal of Nehru for a world civilization. Perhaps the rising tensions of the current day are a reflection of this conflict of ideals, a regression into tribal nationalities on the one hand and an expansion towards a world civilization, on the other. In his essay entitled "Towards one world by peaceful change", the British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote "The restraint of violence by mutual tolerance and forbearance is one of the necessary conditions for social life in all circumstances. In the Atomic Age this is also one of the necessary conditions for mere survival; and here, I believe, the present generation of the human race has a lesson to learn from the Indian tradition a tradition that, among Indians of our time, is represented pre-eminently by Shri Jawaharlal Nehru."²⁷

Leaving aside the negative aspects of European colonialism, we can discern a positive side in that it has brought the nations of the world closer together. Technology has only hastened this pace. But if the new era is to be one of peace and prosperity for all, we must learn to work together and live together and truly create a world civilization. Great thinkers of every nation are becoming aware of this imperative and feel that the survival of the human race depends upon it.

In this context, Toynbee, after reflecting further on the movement of events since the Second World War, writes, "The new modern-educated leaders of the liberated Asian and African peoples share with the Western

²⁵ See Foreword to *The Emerging World*, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Volume, Asia Publishing House, London, 1964.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Arnold Toynbee, *Towards one world by peaceful change*, in *The Emerging World*, Asia Publishing House, London, 1964, page 238.

peoples a common culture that, as far as we know, is the first literally world-wide culture to arise up to date. Here we see the forerunners of a new world-civilization. At present, this world civilization is in its infancy. It is confined to a handful of pioneers; but representatives of it are now to be found, in greater or lesser numbers, in every country of the world; and it looks as if, as time goes on, this world civilization is going to spread to wider and wider circles."²⁸

After the Second World War, when the world moved into the polarized tension of the Cold War, Nehru along with a few other world leaders sought to promote the non-aligned movement. This was not a position of inaction or docile inertia. Rather it was the opportunity to offer a voice of reason, a higher perspective and an expression of the aspirations and dreams of those who could not be heard since they were not powerful. The world has been brought together and no nation could be silent in issues that concern all of humanity. Each must offer its deliberated view on the matter. The world is now of interdependence and the days of narrow nationalisms are over.

Just as Vivekananda had diagnosed the cause of India's maladies in its isolationism of the past, Nehru also warned the Indian people of this danger when he wrote, "If we ignore the world we do so at our peril. Civilization today, such as it is, is not the creation or the monopoly of one people or nation. It is a composite fabric to which all countries have contributed."²⁹

In his celebrated *Discovery of India*, he reflected further when he wrote, "We march to the one world of tomorrow where national cultures will be intermingled with the international culture of the human race. We shall therefore seek wisdom and knowledge and friendship and comradeship wherever we can find them, and co-operate with others in common tasks, but we are no supplicants for others' favours and patronage. Thus we shall remain true Indians and Asiatics, and become at the same time good internationalists and world citizens."³⁰

The world is still struggling to attain this ideal that Nehru envisioned. In this endeavour, dialogue is the most important. After the Second World War, the great powers had the wisdom to form the United Nations so that there will be no more wars. Today, we see this ideal dwindling and we stand on the precipice of total catastrophe. Thus, if reason is to prevail and if the human race is to survive, there is only one path, and that path is the way of internationalism.

Toynbee writes that "we may look forward to a world-civilization in the future that will have incorporated in itself all that is best in each of our local traditions. As the spiritual unification of the world makes headway, nationalism will, of course kick against the pricks. In all continents nationalism is age-old and archaic minded. Yet the only way in which the nations of

²⁸ Ibid, page 245.

²⁹ See page 195 of M.N. Das, *The Political Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru*, George Allen and Unwin Limited, London, 1961.

³⁰ See page 540 of *The Discovery of India*.

the world have any chance of preserving something of their traditional national identities is to subordinate themselves voluntarily to a supranational world-government. The alternative is not the preservation of their former sovereign independence; the alternative is annihilation; for in the Atomic Age, war, if waged again, will grind belligerents to powder, without making the traditional distinction between victors and vanquished that has given wars their historic significance in the past."³¹

The ideal of a world civilization, therefore, will not simply happen. We have to make it happen. That is why thoughtful people conceived of the ideal of a United Nations. In this regard, Nehru said, "The United Nations or rather the idea behind the United Nations was a very big step towards that, and that idea is worth preserving and working for."³² Highlighting the fact that the human spirit will have to prevail over the atom bomb, he said in a famous speech in 1956 that the danger of war is not past, and the future may hold fresh trials and tribulations for humanity. Yet the forces of peace are strong and the mind of humanity is awake. I believe that peace will triumph."³³

³¹ Ibid, page 245.

³² See page 240 of M.N. Das.

³³ Ibid., p. 241

Chapter 11

Krishnamurti and Truth

The core message of Vedanta with its many yogas is that there are innumerable paths to Truth and that each individual may choose the path to suit their temperament. By contrast, Krishnamurti wrote that “Truth is a pathless land and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect ... Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized, nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along a particular path.” (Luytens, 293)

There is much to unpack in this deep utterance. It resonates loudly with the essential message of the Buddha who advocated each person to think for themselves, develop reason, and not to accept authority or tradition. Rather, think it all out and if it is beneficial to one and all, accept it and then carry it out in practice. Buddha would say, “Be a light unto yourself.”

Krishnamurti’s strange life’s journey led him to this profound conviction and it is instructive to trace the trajectory of his mental evolution. His childhood and upbringing contributed greatly to his core message. We will highlight these events in the narration below with a view to understanding his essential philosophy.

Jiddu Krishnamurti was born in 1895 in Madanepalli, Andhra Pradesh. He was the eighth of eleven children, and being the eighth was named Krishna because according to Indian mythology, Sri Krishna was also the eighth child of Devaki and Vasudeva. When he was ten, Krishnamurti’s mother passed away and his father moved to Madras (now Chennai) for employment where he found work in the Theosophical Society in Adyar, a suburb of Madras.

Theosophy is a mystical religion that tries to combine theology and philosophy. Its central teaching is that there is a spiritual hierarchy and that humanity is evolving according to this hierarchy. It was founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, a Russian woman who dabbled in the occult. The 19th century being marked by the ascendancy of science and the decline of traditional religions, the movement found a fertile home in Europe, America and of course, India. With its occult and mystical overtones, the interna-

tional religious cult established the Theosophical Society in Madras, with Annie Besant as their leader. Central to her message was that a new messiah “world teacher” would soon appear on the planet and so the congregation was fixated on finding one.

Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) was a product of Victorian England. After a failed marriage with an Anglican minister, she became an atheist and began editing a journal advocating woman’s rights, especially with respect to birth control. She was embroiled in legal battles with her ex-husband for the custody of her two children. In such a confused mental milieu, she was asked to review the theosophical work titled ‘The Secret Doctrine’ of Helena Blavatsky. She was immediately converted to this line of thought and corresponded with Blavatsky, ultimately taking over leadership of the Theosophical Society. With this renewed missionary zeal, she moved to India and led the society from Madras. While in India, she supported India’s independence movement and was on good terms with many of the leaders of the movement, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. But much of her work in India was centered on expanding theosophy.

In 1909, an assistant to Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, seeing young Krishna and his brother Nitya playing on the seashore reported back that they had “extraordinary spiritual auras.” Krishnamurti later recalled, “When I first went over to his room I was much afraid for most Indian boys are afraid of Europeans. I do not know why it is that such fear is created, but apart from the difference in color which is no doubt one of the causes, there was, when I was a boy, much political agitation and our imaginations were much that the Europeans in India are by no means generally kind to us and I used to see many acts of cruelty which made me still more bitter. It was a surprise to us, therefore, to find how different was the Englishman who was also a Theosophist.” (Luytens, 23)

Leadbeater and Annie Besant convinced Krishna’s father to hand over the custody of his two sons. “They will be well taken care and educated and then sent to England for higher studies,” they told him. After the death of his wife and his brood of children under his solitary care, the father was only too happy to comply especially with a promise of a foreign education for his two children, a dream of many Indians under colonial rule. Krishnamurti was fourteen and Nitya eleven when Annie Besant took over as their guardian. The two boys were quickly showered with gifts, from books to bicycles, and it was not long before they called Annie Besant their mother and she reciprocated. “Will you let me call you mother when I write to you?” Krishnamurti wrote in a letter to her later that year. “I have no other mother now to love, and I feel as if you were our mother because you have been so kind to us. We both thank you so much for taking us away from home.” (Luytens, 32)

At first, Annie Besant was their private tutor. Regarding her instruction, Krishnamurti recorded later, “Our mother gave us an hour’s reading lesson every morning. We read together Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, and I en-

joyed very much, *Captain Courageous, The Scarlet Pimpernel ...* and some Shakespeare plays," (Luytens, 44)

What this reveals is another side of colonial rule. Undoubtedly, there were the imperialist rulers such as the Viceroy and General Dyer who had a militant attitude to the native population. Then there were others like Annie Besant who had a more "missionary" attitude to "civilise" the natives. These were the two extremes of colonial rule. There is no doubt however that Annie Besant did regard both Nitya and Krishna as her children, but her guardianship was under the Theosophical optic of grooming the "new messiah."

In 1911, she took them both to England for higher studies. The frail Nitya had trouble adjusting to the new environment and was plagued with recurring health problems. Though Mrs. Besant had some difficulty in enrolling both of them in Oxford because Oxford would not admit Indians or any colored people, she used her influence in getting them in.

While in England, Annie Besant continued her work promoting theosophy. She gave a lecture titled 'The Coming of the World Teacher' at Queen's Hall in London. She seemed to have oratorical magnetism. The hall was full and it was standing room only. Perhaps not knowing that he is the 'world teacher' referred to in her talk, Krishnamurti later wrote, "She is indeed the finest speaker in the world." (Luytens, 56)

It is helpful to understand these developments against the background of global events. The First World War was ravaging Europe and people everywhere may have been unconsciously expecting the "messiah" to save them. Thus the climate was ideal for her message. So when she created 'The Order of the Star' and was grooming Krishnamurti to be the leader, it was natural that this would attract that segment of educated society who were disillusioned with the atheism of science and the puritanical authoritarianism of the Church in the Victorian era. The attraction to theosophy was psychological and romantic with its overtones of the mystical east.

Meanwhile, back in India, Krishna's father filed a lawsuit against Annie Besant charging that she abducted his two children so she returned to India to deal with the legal case. Krishnamurti and Nitya continued their studies in England and sat for the matriculation examination in January 1918. Nitya passed with honours but Krishnamurti failed. It seems that his weakest subject was mathematics. (Luytens, 110) So later that year, in September, Krishnamurti sat for the matriculation examination for the second time and failed again. However, he continued to attend lectures in London University. During this time, he wrote frequently to Annie Besant, always addressing her as "dearest mother" and calling her "amma" the Telugu word for 'mother.'

For her part, Mrs. Besant reciprocated and there was genuine empathy towards Krishna and Nitya. Apart from her legal troubles, she also supported the Gandhian movement for independence and during one of her acts of civil disobedience, was arrested and imprisoned for three months in 1917. She earned the respect and admiration of Gandhi and others that she was

elected as the president of the Congress Party. During this time, she also founded a college, promoting education for both men and women and this college later became what is now called Benares Hindu University.

Apart from her humanitarian works and supporting the cause of Indian independence, she was hoping that Krishnamurti would soon take up his role as the "new messiah." However, events were not unfolding as she had envisioned them.

Nitya's health was fragile and Krishnamurti too was getting repeatedly sick while in England. So Annie Besant moved them to a warmer climate where the society had a cottage in Ojai, California, eighty miles north of Los Angeles. There, the two boys could recover and resume their studies in salubrious serenity.

It was in Ojai that Krishnamurti had his life changing experience on the 17th of August, 1922. It lasted three days and began with an intense pain at the back of his neck. The pain swelled. He then lapsed into unconsciousness. What this was no one can say, but Krishnamurti called it 'the process.' Of this event, Krishnamurti later wrote, "I was supremely happy, for I had seen. Nothing would ever be the same. I have drunk at the clear and pure waters and my thirst was appeased. ... I have seen the Light. I have touched compassion which heals all sorrow and suffering; it is not for myself but the world. ... Love in all its glory has intoxicated my heart; and my heart can never be closed. I have drunk at the fountain of Joy and eternal beauty. I am God-intoxicated." (Luytens, 171-172)

It is unclear exactly what this 'pain in the neck' was and its relation to his ecstatic experience. Perhaps this was a psychosomatic response to the fact that he knew by then that he was being groomed to be the 'new messiah'. It is difficult to say. What is clear is that it changed his perspective and sadly 'the process' would recur sporadically throughout his life, though perhaps in his later life, it was somewhat diminished.

Many in the Theosophical Society viewed this experience as a turning point and an indication that the 'messiah' had arrived. Krishnamurti took up his role in the Order of the Star and began lecturing on theosophy in America, Europe and India. Annie Besant travelled from India and met both Nitya and Krishnamurti in England in June 1924. Perhaps she felt a sense of fulfilment by these events. Unfortunately, Nitya's health was too fragile by these travels that he had to return to Ojai to recuperate. In November 1925, Nitya died at the age of 27. Krishnamurti received this news while he was en route by ship to India.

Two other Indian members of the Theosophical Society were with Krishnamurti on this voyage and they recorded his emotional reaction. The news "broke him completely; it did more - his entire philosophy of life - the implicit faith in the future as outlined by Mrs. Besant and Mr. Leadbeater, Nitya's vital part in it, all appeared shattered at that moment." His sadness lasted ten days. "At night he would sob and moan and cry out for Nitya, sometimes in his native Telugu which in his waking consciousness he could

not speak. Day after day we watched him heart-broken disillusioned. Day after day he seemed to change, gripping himself together in an effort to face life - but without Nitya. He was going through an inner revolution, finding new strength." (Luytens, 238)

Krishnamurti's message in his theosophical lectures was slowly changing. He advocated everyone to think for themselves and was steering away from theosophical doctrine. This created a schism in the order. There were some who agreed with him and others who were opposed. These developments reached a climax on August 3, 1929. That day, in front of Annie Besant and a crowd of thousands along with a world-wide radio audience, he said, "You may remember the story of how the devil and a friend of his were walking down the street, when they saw ahead of them a man stoop down and pick up something from the ground, look at it, and put it away in his pocket. The friend said to the devil, "What did that man pick up?" "He picked up a piece of the truth," said the devil. "That is a very bad business for you, then," said his friend. "Oh, not at all," the devil replied. "I am going to help him organize it." I maintain that truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized, nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along a particular path." (Luytens, 293)

This was a defiant act of courage and Krishnamurti must have pondered over it deeply. His thoughts were veering in this direction ever since Nitya's death and perhaps all the prophecies were shattered. It was difficult for him to do given his love for Mrs. Annie Besant who was more than a foster mother for him. Yet he continued. "This is no magnificent deed, because I do not want followers, and I mean this. The moment you follow someone you cease to follow Truth. I am not concerned whether you pay attention to what I say or not. I want to do a certain thing in the world and I am going to do it with unwavering concentration. I am concerning myself with only one essential thing: to set man free. I desire to free him from all cages, from all fears, and not to found religions, new sects, not to establish new theories and new philosophies." (Luytens, 294)

The World Teacher had arrived. Yet the congregation was disgruntled. A leading member of the society, Lady Emily Luytens wrote, "How strange it seems that for seventeen years we have been expecting the World Teacher, and now when He speaks of what is beyond all forms, we are hurt or angry. He is making us do our own work, mentally and emotionally, and that is the last thing we expected." (Luytens, 283)

However, it is paradoxical that Krishnamurti had followers and helpers in his message. Moreover, part of the infrastructure of the Theosophical Society still supported his world travels. Everywhere he went, he was the aristocratic sage for who were his listeners? They were often the educated elite whether in Europe, America or India.

For the next fifty odd years, Krishnamurti lectured incessantly and established schools. Much like Tagore who hated his childhood indoctrinal education, Krishnamurti too shuddered at the very thought of such schooling. So he established various new schools where children would be encouraged to think for themselves and explore the world for themselves.

For Krishnamurti, there is no "state of enlightenment." Rather, "there is only the journey. There is no total knowing of oneself but rather an unending process of knowing oneself." (Jayakar, 82) "Truth is Life," he would say. Truth is where you are. The human being is in microcosm the whole of humanity, not as an abstract idea, but an actual fact. But each one must discover this for himself or herself. "When the mind is utterly still, that which is sacred takes place."

In a conversation with Jawaharlal Nehru, Krishnamurti said, "Understanding of the self only arises in relationship, in watching yourself in relationship to people, ideas, and things; to trees, the earth, and the world around you and within you. Relationship is the mirror in which the self is revealed. Without self-knowledge there is no basis for right thought and action." When Nehru asked, "How does one start?", Krishnamurti replied, "Begin where you are. Read every word, every phrase, every paragraph of the mind, as it operates through thought." (Jayakar, 142)

This is the process of reflective thinking. Through this process, we transcend thought, and we transcend the mind. The problem with the human being is that we want others to do the thinking for us and thus we become prisoners of dogma. This creates division and thus is the source of all conflicts, says Krishnamurti.

The essential message of Krishnamurti is to reject authority and to think for oneself. This message of cultivating your own abilities of critical thinking is as old as the Buddha who taught several millenia ago, "Believe not because some old manuscripts are produced, believe not because it is your national belief, because you have been made to believe it from your childhood, but reason it all out, and after you have analysed it, then, if you find that it will do good to one and all, believe it, live up to it and help others to live up to it." (Murty, 103)

Immanuel Kant in his 1784 essay on 'What is Enlightenment?' wrote that "laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a portion of mankind ... remains under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. ... If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, etc., I need not trouble myself. I need not think, if I can only pay ... others will undertake the work for me." (Kant, 83) Krishnamurti's message is the same. However, it is easy to infer from this a rejection of everything and surely that is not what is implied. What is meant here is that we should use our judgement and not let demagogues run our life which is sadly the case with the rise of populisms everywhere.

To try to bring order by political means, or by economic means, or by social change, is futile according to Krishnamurti. The individual consciousness is not different from the consciousness of humanity. The interconnect- edness of life then implies that if I can bring about the change within my- self and put an end to sorrow, that change will touch the rest of humanity. This resonates with Gandhi's message that one must be the change that one wants to see. The change must come from within.

In one of his last talks, he said, "The brain is extraordinarily capable, has infinite capacity, but we have made it so small and petty. ... So when there is that space and emptiness and therefore immense energy - energy is passion, love and compassion and intelligence - then there is that truth which is most holy, most sacred, that which man has sought from time immemorial. That truth doesn't lie in any temple, in any mosque, in any church. And it has no path to it except through one's own understanding of oneself, inquiring, studying, learning. Then there is that which is eternal. (Krishnamurti, Talks, Washington D.C., 1985, p. 50)

Krishnamurti's message does not clash with the essential message of Vedanta. All systems, all philosophies, all disciplines are approximations of Truth and not Truth itself. *Veda aveda bhavati*, which means the Veda be- comes Aveda, that is useless, for the enlightened being. That can come about only if we find infinity within ourselves.

So for more than fifty years, Krishnamurti lectured moving from conti- nent to continent spreading the message of independent thinking and stress- ing the need not to imprison oneself in doctrine and dogma. He conversed with many learned academics and these are all recorded and documented and make for a fascinating study. At the age of 90, he died of pancreatic cancer in Ojai, California.

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