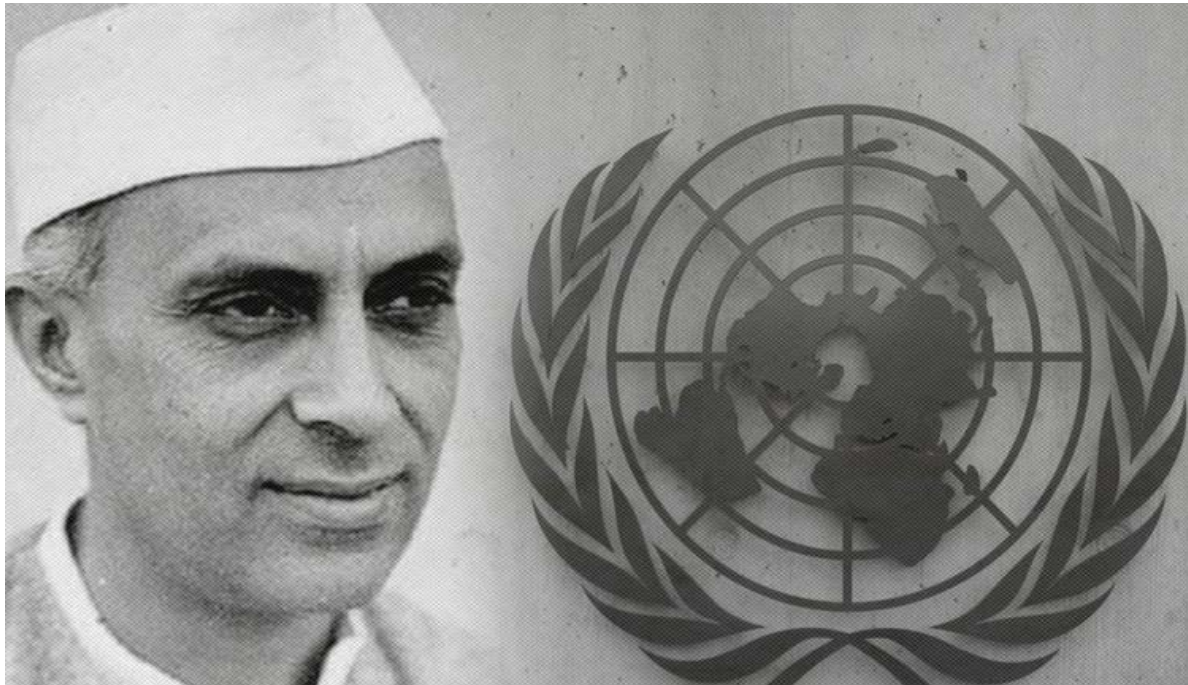


Nehru and Internationalism



Jawaharlal Nehru

The enigma of Nehru

- Nehru stands at the crossroads, between the old and the new. He was the first prime minister of independent India.
 - Born on 14 November 1889 in Allahabad into an aristocratic Brahmin family, he led a “sheltered and uneventful life.”
 - He was the eldest of three children. One of his two sisters, Vijaya Lakshmi, became the first female president of the United Nations General Assembly.
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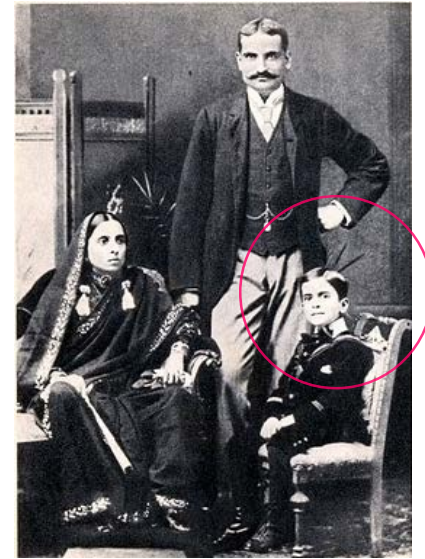
Motilal Nehru

- His father, Motilal Nehru (1861-1931), was originally a westernized aristocrat.
- But Gandhi changed his outlook and he joined the independence movement, becoming the President of the Congress party in 1919-1920 and 1928-1929.



Nehru at Trinity College

- Like Tagore, Nehru was educated at home with private tutors.
- He was sent to study at Trinity College in Cambridge in 1907 and graduated with an honours degree in natural science in 1910.
- After, he went to London to obtain a Law degree which he did in 1912.
- In 1916, he married Kamala Nehru. He was 27 and she was 16.



Nehru in 1919 with his wife Kamala and daughter Indira

Who is a philosopher?

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”.

Nehru and his philosophy

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.

Internationalism

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 meaning of the 20th century

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

Gandhi and Nehru

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

The shaper of India's destiny

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 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.

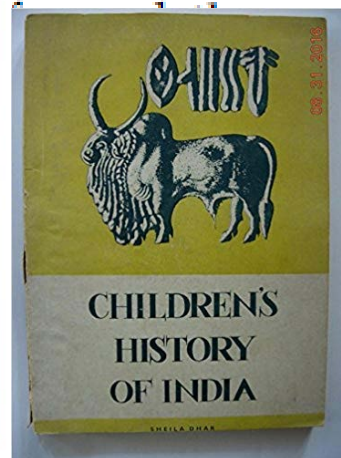
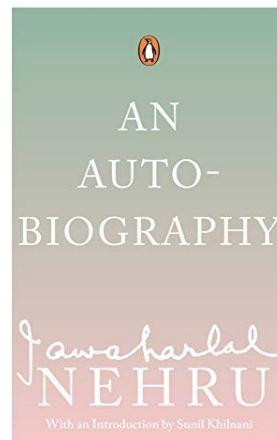
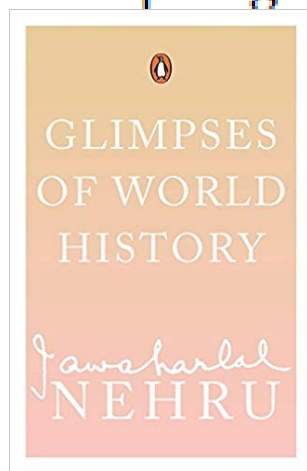
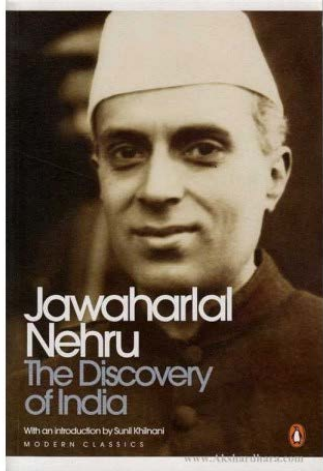


Thought and action

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.

The books of Nehru

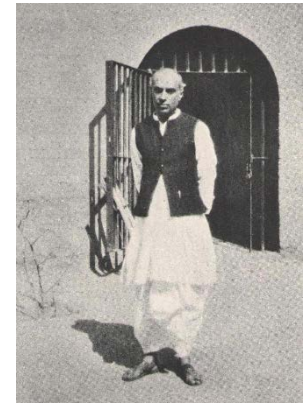
Four works stand out. The first is his “Discovery of India”. The second is his “Glimpses of World History” and third is his “Autobiography”. We might also make mention of his earliest book “A Children’s History of India.” All of these books were written in prison. During the course of the independence 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



His early books

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 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.

The autobiography



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.

Meditations in prison



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

Prison time

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

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

The cycles of imprisonment

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.



The Discovery of India

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.

The essential philosophy of Nehru

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 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.

Psychological journey into India's past

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

The problem of national unity

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.

Nehru and Vivekananda

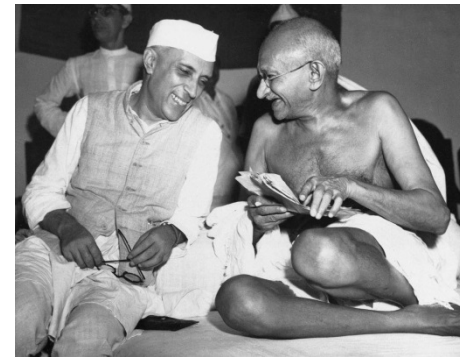
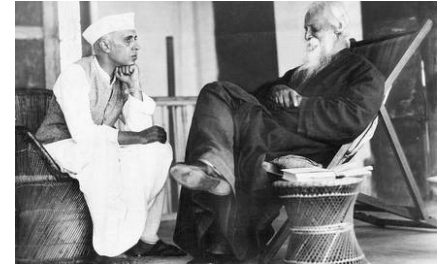
In this context, it is clear that Nehru was familiar with Vivekananda's thought. Several times in his *Discovery of India*, Vivekananda is quoted sometimes with attribution and sometimes not. On page 18 of his *Discovery*, he discusses the underlying unity of the cosmos. After having given the testimony 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 changing 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

Reason and religion

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.

The influence of Tagore and Gandhi

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.



Nehru on Vivekananda

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 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

Nehru on Tagore and Gandhi

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.

Gandhi's nationalism

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

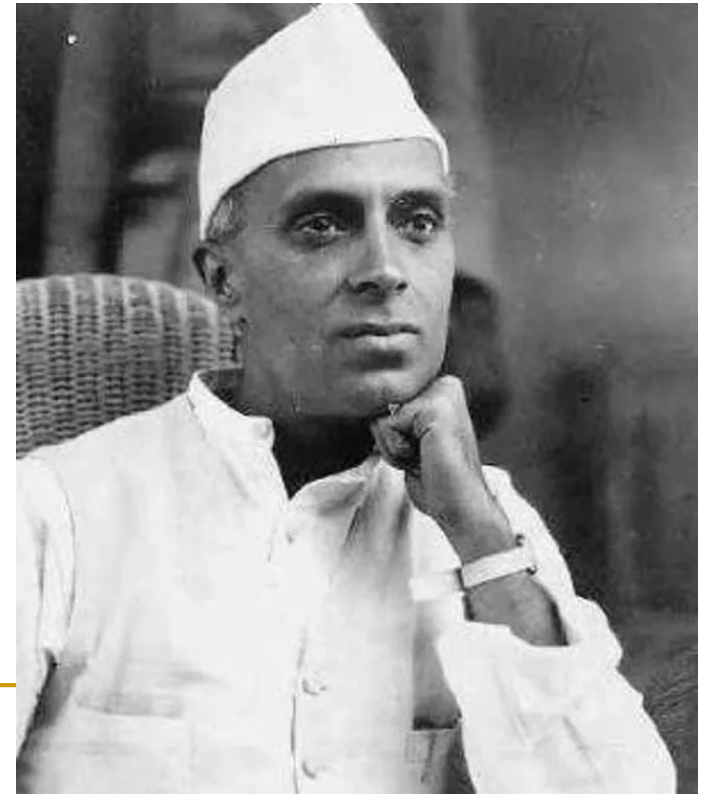


The influence of Vivekananda

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

Life's philosophy

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



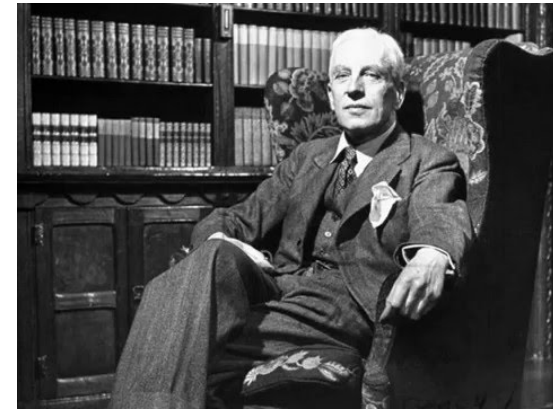
Ends and means

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

His vision for the world

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

Arnold Toynbee on Nehru



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

The ideal of a global civilization

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 suppliants 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 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

Nehru's legacy

- What was Nehru's legacy? What can we learn from his life and thought?
- His leadership was vital. He was prime minister from 1947 to 1964.
- He died on 27 May 1964 of a heart attack. He was 74.
- He was the consummate scholar and world visionary. He dreamed of a unified world and a global civilization of a community of nations.
- He introduced the idea of “scientific temper” in the humanities as well as the sciences and in all walks of life, especially politics.
- He said, “What is needed is the scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind—all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.”
- He believed in this so firmly that he had it written into the Indian constitution.