The Oxford India Nehru

by Jawaharlal Nehru (edited by Uma Iyengar),
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'I am not a man of letters,' wrote Jawaharlal Nehru in one of his missives from jail to his daughter Indira, but of course he was. All through his life Nehru lost no opportunity to write. His words took the form of drafts and resolutions for the Congress party, essays on the great issues of the day for newspapers and journals, and letters to friends, family, and colleagues in the independence movement. When he became Prime Minister of India, Nehru wrote a long letter addressed jointly to his chief ministers every fortnight, containing his deliberations on domestic and world affairs. It is clear that, despite the burdens of his worldly commitments, words set down on paper were for Nehru a way of sorting through the commotion of life, politics and ideas.

But Nehru was also a man of letters in a more abiding sense, as readers of any of his major works (his autobiography, *Glimpses of World History*, and *The Discovery of India*) know, and as *The Oxford India Nehru*, a selection of his most representative speeches and writings, once again proves. That is to say that we can read Nehru not just for his ideas, or for insights into his personality, but also for the way in which expressed himself, for the grace and rhythm of his English. 'At its best,' wrote Frank Moraes, one of Nehru's best biographers, 'Nehru's style shows a vigour and clarity as pleasing and compelling to the ear as to the mind.' Indeed, Nehru was among a handful of Indian writers, among which Gandhi and Tagore were also prominent, who found a way to domesticate what for most other Indians born in the nineteenth century was a puzzling and intractable colonial tongue – a language the rules and moves of which could of course be learnt, as did many young people wanting to make a career under the British, but which somehow could never be used with the same vigour or pliability.

'English made the empire,' observes the historian Sunil Khilnani in an essay called 'Gandhi and Nehru: The Uses of English,' 'but [Gandhi and Nehru] showed how it could be used to unmake it – how the language could be a tool of insubordination and, ultimately, freedom.' The two men, neither of them professional writers,

> shaped the place and form of English in India in three decisive ways. Gandhi was born in 1869; Nehru died in 1964: their lives encompassed a linguistic century that stretched from the English of legal petitions and imperial proclamations, of diwans, pleaders, and officers of the early Raj, to the official bureaucratese of the Five-Year Plans and the ministries of the independent Indian state. The sheer bulk of their spoken and written words (combined, the published work of Gandhi and Nehru exceed 150 volumes), as well as its historical span, ensured for the English language a countrywide currency. Second, though often ambivalent about the function of English in India, they kept a political commitment to English as a language of public communication. English may have been 'the language of the enemy,' yet both wished to accommodate it alongside other Indian languages, recognising it as a vital link not just to the wider world but also between Indians themselves. Finally, the forms in which they wrote – autobiographies, public and private letters, journalistic essays and articles, and works of history – helped to define how these genres came to be understood and used in India, by their contemporaries and those who came after.

Although he sometimes wrote in a romantic and elevated tone that could grow monotonous, there is never in Nehru's work that tendency towards vagueness and bombast, the use of clichés and archaisms, that to this day disfigures so much Indian prose in English. Indeed, Nehru deserves to be seen, independently of the political man, as one of the best Indian prose writers of the twentieth century.

Uma Iyengar's selection of extracts for *The Oxford India Nehru* organises Nehru's work by theme rather than by chronology, grouping together Nehru's thoughts on Indian history and culture, on Gandhi, on India before and after independence, on the changing world situation, and so on. The great preoccupations and leanings of Nehru's work quickly emerge: his rationalism, his natural egalitarianism and his commitment to democratic institutions and practice, his impatience with, if not outright contempt for, religion, his espousal, after the fashion of his times, of socialism, his sometimes qualified admiration for and complicated relationship with Gandhi, his keen interest in world politics, and his sense of India as one indivisible composite culture and his desire to overlay upon it 'the garb of modernity.'

Many of these thoughts are still relevant: sometimes they seem never more relevant than today. Attacking the demands made by various communal organizations in 1934, Nehru writes that communalism is 'another name for social and political

reaction,' and that 'it has often sailed under false colours and taken in many an unwary person.' Writing in 1953, Nehru remarks that although nationalism can be a rousing and unifying force, one of the problems with it is 'the narrowness of mind that it develops within a country, when a majority thinks itself as the entire nation and in its attempt to absorb the minority actually separates them even more.' Objecting to the very name of the Indian Backward Classes Commission, he writes, 'It is as if we are first branding them and then, from our superior position, we shall try and uplift them.'

In more than four decades of writing to convince, persuade, engage, describe, attack, defend, reminisce, synthesise, and understand, Nehru wrote upon every possible subject on which opinions were divided, from cow slaughter to public health to the national flag and anthem to divorce ('Divorce,' he opines with characteristic clarity, 'must not be looked upon as something which makes the custom of marriage fragile'). Iyengar even includes a letter to his chief ministers on the subject of brooms, observing that the commonly found short-handled ones make for tiring and backbreaking work and encourage 'a certain subservience in mind,' and insisting that municipal sweepers be supplied with long-handled brooms.

Here, from *The Discovery of India*, is a classic example of Nehru's elevated style: a multi-clause sentence that is syntactically balanced and clear in sense, and which proceeds steadily from specifics to generalities, generalities that exemplify his professed humanism and universalism:

> The story of the Ganges, from her source to the sea, from old times to new, is the story of India's civilization and culture, of the rise and fall of empires, of great and proud cities, of the adventure of man and the quest of the mind which has so occupied India's thinkers, of the richness and fulfilment of life as well as its denial and renunciation, of ups and downs, of growth and decay, of life and death.

The only phrase that rebels in a sentence full of sonorous cadences is 'ups and downs,' which is a favourite Nehru phrase. In a letter written in 1930 from jail to Gandhi, also in jail following the success of the Dandi march, Nehru exulted that Gandhi had made a new India with his 'magic touch,' and remarked that 'our prosaic existence has developed something of epic greatness in it.' His writing about India, too, can often seem like a project to lift up an India of prosaic realities and

trying to infuse in it, by harking back to the past and to the universal story of man, an epic greatness.

Nehru becomes a more interesting writer when irked or riled; the expression of annoyance or dissent adds muscle to his writing. Here, for example, is a paragraph from one of a series of letters he exchanged with the Englishman Lord Lothian in 1936 over the future direction of India. In it he attacks Lothian's argument that Indian people should stick to constitutional methods of protest:

> You refer also to the 'constitutional road' in India. What exactly is this constitutional road? I can understand constitutional activities where there is a democratic constitution, but where there is no such thing, constitutional methods have no meaning. The word constitutional then simply means legal, and legal simply means in accordance with the wishes of an autocratic executive which can make laws and issue decrees and ordinances regardless of public opinion. What is the constitutional method in Germany or Italy today? What was this method in the India of the nineteenth century or of the early twentieth century or even now? ... The mere fact that it is impossible for the great majority of the people of India to make their will effective shows that they have no constitutional way open to them. They can either submit to something they dislike intensely or adopt other than so-called constitutional methods. Such methods may be wise or unwise, under the particular circumstances, but the question of their being constitutional or not does not arise.

Nehru's rhetorical tactic here is to ally 'constitutional' to 'democratic,' and to insist that one is nothing without the other. Cutting and hacking away sentence by sentence, he leaves his adversary with no ground to stand on.

And in an essay in *the Tribune* early in 1934, he launches a broadside against organizations motivated by narrowly religious considerations:

> What are communal organizations? They are not religious, although they confine themselves to religious groups and exploit the name of religion. They are not cultural and have done nothing for culture, although they talk bravely of a past culture. They are not ethical or moral groups, for their teachings are singularly devoid of ethics and morality. They are certainly not economic groupings, for there is no economic link binding their members and they

> have no shadow of an economic programme. Some of them claim not to be political even. What then are they? As a matter of fact they function politically and their demands are political, but calling themselves non-political, they avoid the real issues and only succeed in obstructing the path of others.

Nehru had a naturally metaphorical cast of mind. He is often found on these pages comparing history to a great river. Indeed, he thought a lot about history, and felt keenly the pressure of history. In a speech to the Constituent Assembly in 1947, he imagines himself 'standing on the sword's edge of the present between the mighty past and the mightier future' – a particularly good metaphor, because it suggests how fraught with uncertainty the present is, possessing the power to cut sharply even as attempts are made to work with it. Elsewhere, he likens the taking of risks to the exhilaration of climbing the mountains, while those who hold back, desiring safety and security, are seen as living in the valley 'with their unhealthy mists and fogs.' This metaphor shows among other things Nehru's love of mountains, for most Indians would hardly go along with his negative characterization of valleys.

Although he read widely and well, Nehru was curiously not much given to quoting from the works of other writers, perhaps because he spent so much time on the move or else in prison, with limited access to books in either case. For instance, despite frequent references to the excesses of capitalism and the merits of socialism, he can only be found quoting Marx once on these pages. Also, Nehru's relationship to his reading was intensely practical, a means of learning something about the world past or present. He liked to read travellers' accounts (Hsuen Tsang, Marco Polo, Ibn Battutah) and surveys of history and society (Marx, Oswald Spengler, Reinhold Niebuhr) but we know that he disliked reading novels, saying they left him 'mentally slack.' Gandhi appears to have been a more adventurous and open-minded reader, fond not only of the Gita and the works of Tolstoy, Ruskin and Plato but also of Walter Scott, Jules Verne and Goethe.

Perhaps it is to these tendencies we may attribute one fault of Nehru's writing, which is a fondness for generalities and groupings and a neglect of specificities, of details without which prose can become mere rhetoric. Consider that, although he travelled widely for decades on end, and was a captivating speaker who drew huge crowds, his references to the Indian peasantry almost always take the form of the generalized description – 'the sunken eyes and hopeless looks of the people,' 'the starving peasant' for whom 'hunger gnaws at his stomach.' There is no account in

his letters or essays of an actual conversation with a peasant whose name is provided or who is seen as more than a downtrodden man or a hungry stomach. Nehru can thus seem patronising towards the very people whom he cared for so deeply.

Yet the most memorable words of twentieth-century Indian writing in English were composed by Nehru. These are the opening sentences of his speech to the constituent assembly on the hour of India's independence, at midnight on August 14, 1947. It was a situation made for a man of his talents and predilections. 'Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom,' he began. 'A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.' Nehru never wrote a better or more deeply felt line – after all it was what he had been waiting to say almost all his life.

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