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BOOK REVIEW

Nation, Science and Religion in Nehru's *Discovery of India*

Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India* was first published in 1946 and is Nehru's personal reflection on the past with a view to explain the present as it existed in the time of its writing. For Nehru the history of India is intertwined with the history of religion and social institutions as they have developed down the ages and the history of science, scientific values and materialism from the ancient to the modern ages.

It is significant that Nehru writes in the very beginning about the relationship between religion, morality, ethics and science when he is describing the major influences on his thought processes. For Nehru science is more about materialism, rational and logical thinking that does not necessarily emanate from the modern world alone. Hence there are several references in the text to the scientific knowledge and its development from the Indus civilisation onwards, thereby implying that science is a method and not an emotion, feeling or a belief. This understanding pervades the entire text of the *Discovery of India* whether Nehru discusses the science of the Indus civilisation and its inventions, the origins of mathematics or the science of state craft in ancient and medieval India.

This simple narrative poses questions about the relationship between science, religion and tradition or the materialist and the spiritual. In the very preface of the book Nehru sets up this relationship in the following manner:

> *In the wider sense of the word, religion dealt with the uncharted regions of human experience, uncharted, that is, by the scientific positive knowledge of the day. In a sense it might be considered an extension of the known*

> *and charted region, though the methods of science and religion were utterly unlike each other, and to a large extent they had to deal with different kinds of media. It was obvious that there was a vast unknown region all around us, and science, with its magnificent achievements, knew little enough about it, though it was making tentative approaches in that direction. Probably also, the normal methods of science, its dealings with the visible world and the processes of life, were not wholly adapted to the physical, the artistic, the spiritual, and other elements of the invisible world. Life does not consist entirely of what we see and hear and feel, the visible world which is undergoing change in time and space; it is continually touching an invisible world of other, and possibly more stable or equally changeable elements, and no thinking person can ignore this invisible world.* (**Discovery of India, p. 26**)

As seen in the quote above, Nehru sets up a debate on the relationship between science and religion in terms of the duality of materialism and morality. For him tradition is embodied within religious codes and practices. Such an explanation also imbues in him some sympathy for the ancient value systems of the nation. For example, he does not consider caste as inflexible and discriminatory in the first instance (in what he describes as the age of the Aryans). Nor was the term Aryan associated with any superior race, but by a superior class of elites who were distinguished from the commoners (**Discovery of India, pp. 85-87**). This system of social organization was however transformed into a rigid system of exclusiveness within Hindu philosophy and social system down the ages, thus necessitating the Gandhian social reform programme. Hence the modern values of equality need a Gandhian programme of social reform, even as they recognized the value of religion to the great heritage of Indian traditions.

This romanticism, or rather nationalism to give heritage its due place gives Nehru the impetus to explore the role of science

in exploring the 'invisible non-material world' through an exploration of the relationship between science, religion and philosophy. While devoting a significant section to this problem, Nehru grapples with this problem through the concept of 'scientific temper'. Thus he writes,

> *Science deals with the domain of positive knowledge but the temper which it should produce goes beyond that domain. The ultimate purposes of man may be said to be to gain knowledge, to realize truth, to appreciate goodness and beauty. The scientific method of objective inquiry is not applicable to all these, and much that is vital in life seems to lie beyond its scope — the sensitiveness to art and poetry, the emotion that beauty produces, the inner recognition of goodness. The botanist and zoologist may never experience the charm and beauty of nature; the sociologist may be wholly lacking in love for humanity. But even when we go to the regions beyond the reach of the scientific method and visit the mountain tops where philosophy dwells and high emotions fill us, or gaze at the immensity beyond, that approach and temper are still necessary.* (**Discovery of India, pp. 512-513**)

Hence the idea of scientific temper was essential to having a rational view of the world and for the Indian society to break with its own past. The ethical system promoted by scientific temper would thus be part of a philosophical world view that could narrow the scope of both superstition and religion. Thus the idea of scientific temper goes some way in resolving this dilemma that Nehru poses in the beginning of his book *i.e.,* the need to resolve the human urge to know the unknowable.

But more importantly the development of scientific temper, or a rational method of knowing the presently unknowable world, is central to the idea of nationhood and nation building. The Indian nation is described in terms of its past traditions, 'a continuous adaptation of old ideas to the present situation'. As

Nehru puts it, this has resulted in a continuity that has defied sharp 'cultural breaks' in history, thereby creating a spirit of tolerance and a flexible mind (**Discovery of India, p. 517**). This created a space for new ideas and structured the symbiosis between science and religion. In contrast, Western Europe had comparatively lesser freedom of mind and spirit of tolerance. Hence the conflict between science and religion was inevitable, and often violent.

For Nehru, the relationship between science and religion will change, but only through a process of social reform. While science and scientific temper provide a value system for a modern democratic nation, tradition signifies resilience and a respect for the past. The past has two elements: the forms that have become hierarchical and discriminatory and cultural exclusivity of the caste system on the one hand, and the traditional freedom of thought and tolerance on the other hand. The cultivation of the scientific temper is to be used to transform the first and to defend the second. In this sense, the idea and notion of scientific temper can mediate and transform religion (often equated with tradition in Nehru's text) into a modern value system.

In conclusion, Nehru rakes up the question of the relationship between science and religion once again. He writes,

> *In all this there appears to be a firm belief in science and yet an apprehension that purely factual and purposeless science is not enough. Was science, in providing so much of life's furniture, ignoring life's significance? There is an attempt to find a harmony between the world of fact and the world of spirit, for it was becoming increasingly obvious that the over-emphasis on the former was crushing the spirit of man. The question that troubled the philosophers of old has come up again in a different form and context: How to reconcile the phenomenal life of the world with the inner spiritual life of the individual.* (**Discovery of India, p. 559**)

One wonders, that while returning to the dilemma in the last page of the book Nehru is not raising doubts about the efficacy of science to alone provide the tools for the development of the idea of a nation. By pointing out the potential destructive aspects of science, Nehru once again invokes the power of the spirit. Perhaps the idea of the scientific temper is a crucial aspect of transforming the spirit of the nation from a culturally exclusivist to a more egalitarian spirit of inquiry and progress.

In conclusion, the text itself is an important reminder that science, scientific enterprise and the efforts to cultivate scientific temper are embedded in social relations of production and control. In the contemporary context Nehru's text raises questions that open up the space for debates about what type of science should be promoted to build an egalitarian society. Hence a science and technology system that reproduces capitalist morality and relations of production will only increase inequities and reinvent traditions which legitimize these inequities. Such a science may be termed as not free from the influence of the values of the ruling classes that can strengthen the forces of religious conservatism.

On the other hand, the promotion of scientific knowledge and techniques that empower the oppressed and reduce inequities lays the basis of a different type of morality, one that may require the dismantling of traditional value systems and fighting religious fundamentalism. This type of scientific knowledge and techniques can only develop through democratic movements with a vision for an egalitarian nation. The production of such scientific knowledge and its adaptation to real life situations created through the engagement of people can be termed as People's Science. In this situation the processes and enterprise for cultivation of scientific temper will have to be accompanied by secular value systems and social relations that democratize the control over scientific institutions and science.

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