Ms. Nayantara Pandit Sahgal, a prominent Indian-English political novelist, was born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927 into one of India’s most prominent political families. She is the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, their other two daughters being Chandralekha and Rita Rai. It was in Anand Bhavan at Allahabad that all her childhood was spent with her parents, her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin; Indira Gandhi. Anand Bhavan was at that time a hubub of political activities related with the freedom-struggle being waged in the country. In *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, her autobiography, she writes, “Our growing up was India’s growing up into political maturity – a different kind of political maturity from any the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace.”

Nayantara Sahgal’s father, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit was a great Sankrit Scholar. He had translated into English Kalhana’s well known Sanskrit work *Rajatarangini*. He was also a reputed lawyer. But the service of the nation was put by him above all the literary and professional re-occupations. This is how Ms. Nayantara Sahgal remembers her indulgent and proud father in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake* : “Our father combined the most extra-ordinary qualities. He was a Sanskrit scholar who had translated a number of the classics into English,
and a gifted linguist, speaking several European and Indian languages.”

His poetic nature is reflected in the naming of his daughter by him. He named his eldest daughter Chandralekha (called just Lekha) a name he picked from *Rajatarangini* which he had translated into English. This name in English can be translated as the crescent Moon; the name of his first-client, Nayan whose case he argued and won, so impressed him by its sweetness that he gave it to his second daughter and the name of his third daughter, Rita was picked up by him from the *Prithvi Sukta* of *Atharvaveda*. The name Rita is a distorted form of the word ‘Rita’ which means ‘the Laws of Nature’. Nayantara Sahgal was very fond of her father who always treated his daughters as his equals and saw to it that no inhibiting forces came in the way of their growth. She inherited from him her love of scholarship and a sense of history and a concern for the freedom of human being. If India had been free, he might not have turned to politics and the country would have received far more fruits of his scholarship.

Ms. Sahgal’s Mother Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was a famous lady in the political field. She had many firsts to her credit. She was India’s first woman cabinet minister, the world’s first woman ambassador and the first woman president of the United Nations General Assembly, and later governor of Maharashtra. But above all, she was a woman endowed with a sense of beauty, courage to face the problems that life presides and a desire to live life fully.
In her first autobiography, Nayantara Sahgal speaks thus of her mother’s aesthetic sense which she inherited from her.

“We had always associated our mother with the ordered beauty of home. We were used to seeing her early in the morning on the veranda, where she would be down on her knees among freshly cut roses, arranging them with care in the vases arranged before her.”

This is how she pours out her praise for her mother in unmistakable terms:

Mummie were a person of beauty, warmth and understanding. Her presence was like sunlight, and we blossomed in it. When she walked into a room, it became home. When she put her hand to the most ordinary meal, it became a banquet. When we were guided by her, the most unpleasant ordeal became a challenge. We were her ardent admirers.

While staying with her parents in Khali, an estate situated high in the Kumaon hills, she was fortunate enough to strengthen her knowledge of Indian culture through the Ramayana which her mother read to her and her sisters every evening. She recalls: “In
Khali, Mummie read to us every evening from the *Ramayana*, and we learned by heart some of its flowing musical verse. It seemed singularly appropriate that against the background of India’s ancient Himalayas we should become familiar with her ancient heritage, learning to appreciate it both as literature and as the centuries old way of looking at life which belonged to us as Indians.”

She owed his interest in the stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to his great-aunt Bibima. She had spent many an afternoon listening to these stories in addition to fairy tales with an avid interest from her. As far as the influence of her parents on her forming her attitude towards life, she says: “Neither of my parents had any sympathy for this attitude (a deliberate burial of personality by a widow), maintaining that there was no need to bury one self before one was dead, and that life was most emphatically meant for living.

Nayantara Sahgal regards Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India and the famous author of *Discovery of India*, *Glimpses of World History* and *Autobiography* as her third parent, whom she called ‘Mamu’. This is how she speaks of him in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* : “Mummy and Papa were wonderful parents, but Mamu was a class apart, and our feeling for him came as class apart, close to adoration as it did for anybody”. His was a very powerful influence on her. He served as a model for the character of Shivraj in *A Situation in New Delhi*. His influence can be seen on her interest in politics, her faith in democratic values and her firm commitment to the socialist ideal
for India. Again, it was Jawaharlal Nehru who inspired her to devote herself to writing. She says, “And when my uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, a writer himself (of several books written during his jail terms) told me that I loved writing, why not concentrate on it, I did.”

Pandit Nehru’s personality exercised an immense influence in her developing her way of looking at life and the world. In her childhood days he was a boisterous and uncontested hero to her. She remembers that while he was at Anand Bhavan in Allahabad, “he found, in spite of his busy schedule, snatches of time to play with us and answer the many questions with which we plied him during our conversation.” The following conversation between Rita, Sahgal’s younger sister and Pt. Nehru and Nayantara’s comment that follows it speak a lot about what their Mamu and his words meant to them:

“I wish we could do something really important to help you, Mamu’, said Rita earnestly. ‘All we do is go to school and have lessons and horrid things like that’. Mamu laughed whole-heartedly. ‘Those are just the things that will fit you for the future,’ he said, ‘they will give you a body that is strong, a mind that is as keen as the edge of a sword, and a character that is firm and steady fast and dedicated to high ideals. These are all things I want you to have. There’s so much work to be done, and
before you know it, it will be your turn to shoulder the burden.’

What Mamu said was always something to listen to attentively, stow away carefully in memory, and remember forever afterwards.”

Pt. Nehru called his nieces philosophers for their tendency to discuss with him problems of vital importance concerning life. Once he exhorted them on the need for using one’s mind to deserve the name of a human being. He said, “… it is always better to think out things for oneself and arrive at one’s conclusions than to keep a closed mind and accept blindly what after people saya.” Nayantara Sahgal commented on her Mamu’s words in the following words: “It’s very hard to decide on one’s own what is right and wrong and what to believe. One could just go on thinking about it, and never settle down to doing anything’. Pt. Nehru’s reply to Nayantara Sahgal has an all-time importance and must have made her think of her Mamu as a friend, philosopher and guide: “Yes, it is hard, and decision is a serious responsibility, but in thinking about all these problems one should not get lost in speculation. That would serve no purpose at all. There is a big enough job to do in this world to understand our fellow creatures and work for their betterment. One should never lose sight of this.”

10
As far as religious beliefs are concerned she believes that religion is for each individual to choose when old enough. The household in which she was born and brought up allowed religious freedom to its every member. Agnosticism and deep religious belief were not strange but familiar bed-fellows there. Though her parents and her uncle prided on their agnosticism, her maternal grandmother and great-aunt were religious-minded members of the household. She has pointed out that though Pt. Nehru did not call himself religious; he was one of the most religious people. It was the religious spirit of her uncle that she may be said to have imbibed although she is content to call herself a natural born believer. In a reply to Nadine Kreisberger’s question on her spiritual inspirations in the Proust Questionaire Nayantara Sahgal said,

I would first and foremost mention my uncle Nehru. He has the greatest influence on my life and writing. And although he did not call himself religious people I have known his absolute integrity, the devotion to his ideals, his service to humanity - what else is religion? Besides, the atmosphere at home was very open. While Nehru and my parents were agnostic, my grandmother and her sister were deeply religious. Every morning I would gather the flowers for my great-aunt’ pooja and sit with her while she
was praying and I loved it. At the same time I would go to a convent school where I prayed to Virgin Mary. And I would spend long hours with our Muslim tailor who would pray five times a day. So it was a harmonious household where the chief bonds were love and respect and where one learnt that religion is for each individual to chose when old enough. And I chose to be a believer. I believe in fairy tales, Santa Clause, love, marriage, you name it. I have believed in all of it. Some of it has let me down at times but I am a natural born believer.\textsuperscript{11} 

Nehru’s influence on Nayantara Sahgal is, indeed, very deep. She got from him not only noble ideas but also an inspiration to think for herself. His ideals became hers. She says,

\begin{quote}
My country was for me inextricably bound up with my uncle’s ideal of it. I had sensed this as a child. Now I was convinced of it. This was the India with which I wanted to associate myself, and in which I wanted to live.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Besides her father Ranjit Pandit and uncle Pt. Nehru, it was Mahatma Gandhi who influenced Nayantara Sahgal greatly in
forming her political beliefs. So deep is the influence of Gandhian thought on her and such is its manifestation in her novels that we cannot think of them without referring to it. Though Gandhiji struck her as an ugly person, when she first saw him but later she came under the influence of the charismatic personality of Mahatma as her father had come. In this respect she says of her father, “It was as though he longed to draw his entire family into the Gandhian circle, which had charmed and held him captive in its spell”.13 And this is how she describes her first meeting with Gandhiji and her later attitude towards him:

I did not like Gandhiji when I first met him.
I was four years old.... In one perspiring first I clutched a bouquet of red roses.

‘Now remember to give the flowers to Bapu,’ my mother coached me, using the name by which Gandhiji was known to his followers.

I thought she meant papu, my father, and ran up to him with the bouquet. Mummie pulled me toward the little man sitting on the floor and leaning against a white bolster.

‘But he’s ugly’, I objected loudly. ‘I don’t want to give them to him’.
I stubbornly clutched my roses and scowled at him. Bapu gave his gleeful laugh and lightly slapped my cheek, which was his way of showing affection, and remarked that he hoped that I would always be as honest. I backed away from him and went to sit near my father. I did not enjoy that prayer meeting. It was a trial to be still for so long. My foot went to sleep, I fidgeted endlessly, and I told my father I would never attend a prayer meeting again.

But I did attend other prayer meetings, and many years later I sang for Bapu at one of them.”

The last paragraph of the above quotation shows how her dislike for Gandhiji changed into her reverence for him. This is how she dwells on the sources of her fascination for Gandhiji.

Mamu’s example (of throwing in his lot with Gandhiji) had fired the imagination of the Nehru household, and so it was natural that our father, when he married mummie, should have been drawn into the same fever. It was all the more understandable because Papu’s family had settled in the
same part of western India from which Gandhiji himself hailed, and papu’s father, Sitaram Pandit, had been in many ways Gandhiji’s ‘guru’. So the stream that bore us toward Gandhi came from two sources as it were, and was greatly intensified by the remarkable bond of comradeship and affection between our father and our uncle.¹⁵

For Gandhiji, politics was inseparable from religion. He had asserted that politics devoid of religion would be like coils of a snake round the throat. It is this way of Gandhiji’s thinking that appeals to Nayantara Sahgal although the notion of Gandhiji’s application of religious principles to politics at first overawes her:

Could it be true that a man could talk of love and truth and goodness and apply these religious terms to politics and not laughed at? Could it be that such sentiments could actually guide a nation’s policy? ¹⁶

Nayantara Sahgal has firm faith in Gandhian ideals and holds that his philosophy is relevant to our times and it can help us in solving the problems facing us at present. She praises him for his belief in human dignity and imbibes it herself. According to her, Gandhiji’s noble work “was to express the poetry hidden in
the individual. Under tortured layers of deprivation, servility and fear it was his destiny to unearth the human being, and restore to him his human dignity. Freedom for India, all progress, all reform, he believed, began with the individual....

Nayantara Sahgal’s emphasis on the individual is a direct outcome of her allegiance to Gandhism. Dr. Manmohan Bhatnagar has rightly observed that, “the individual is the most important factor in Nayantara Sahgal’s thinking. The individual is the criterion with which she judges all issues in politics and religion, sociology and ethics. She is unsparing in her scathing expose of degeneration of ideals in politics where the individual becomes just a pawn in a game with bigger stakes.” Like Gandhiji she wants power and politics to be value-oriented.

The fact Gandhiji put life of action above that of contemplation greatly appeals to Nayantara Sahgal. The contemplative, non-active bias implicit in Hinduism did not find favour with Gandhiji. He once said, “If I had the good fortune to be face-to-face with one like him (the Buddha), I should not hesitate to ask why he did not preach the gospel of work in preference to one of contemplation, I should do the same thing if I were to meet... these saints (Tukaram Jnaneshwar and others).” Nayantara Sahgal imbibed the philosophy of action from Gandhiji and like her protagonists believes in and practises the gospel of work. Dr Manmohan Bhatnagar’s observation in this connection is quite apt: “Nayantara Sahgal makes her protagonists come to
grips with the ills the body politic is afflicted with, rather than leaving them sitting back in abject surrender. Sahgal exposes the view that the Gandhian heritage makes a virtue of passivity and that for action, means have not to be bothered about. We have thus in each novel of Sahgal’s characters cast in the Gandhian mould, endeavouring not merely to expose but also to stem the rot percolating to the very core of the polity.20

Gandhian ideals have always been dear to her heart. But she is not a parrot of all his ideas. She thinks for herself and accepts only those ideas of Gandhiji which she considers relevant to the present age. His ideas on cow slaughter, celibacy and his opposition to family planning do not appeal to her and she voices her dissent in unequivocal terms. But she upholds Gandhian doctrine of non-violence with all her heart. According to her, non-violence is “an active and powerful force. It may have been ineffectively used on occasions, e.g. by misuse of fast and the like, but it remains a potent force if used in an organized way.”21 She is convinced that, “to this day, regardless of all evidence to the contrary and the world’s continued militarization. I believe non-violence is the only ‘ultimate’ deterrent.”22 She believes that Gandhian values are quite relevant in the present context. After Gandhiji’s assassination, she reasserted her faith in Gandhian ideals and methods and made a resolve to pursue them in her life. In *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, she says,
“Was I, after all going to relegate my childhood and all that it represented to the realm of a dream I had dreamed? Were my values so fragile – had Bapu lived and died for nothing? – That I could so easily lose courage when he was no longer there? Millions of people would have been ordinary folk, living their humdrum unperturbed lives but for him. He had come to disturb them profoundly, to jolt them out of indifference, to awaken them to one another’s suffering, and in so doing to make them reach for the stars. Those stars still beckoned luminously. Bapu’s ashes had been scattered over the Ganges, but what if he had gone? We were still there, young, strong, and proud, to bear his banner before us.... Gandhi was dead, but his India would live on in his children.”

A writer learns in his family, in school and in the world that lies around him. Anand Bhavan in Allahabad where she grew up was the centre of the country’s political activities. It was humming with political and moral ideas. Thus she learnt a lot of useful lessons in politics and morality while she lived at Anand Bhavan and saw the history (of India) take shape. This is the informal education she received in her family. But the role of
formal education is also very significant in the life of an author. Mark Twain, a great humorous writer of America, described a cauliflower in these words: “A cauliflower is nothing but a cabbage with a college education.”24 This definition underlines the role of formal education in the full flowering of personality. Nayantara Sahgal owes a lot to her school and college education for the development of her natural abilities. Her formal schooling began at a convent in Allahabad. There, as Jasbir Jain says, “She found the experience an unsatisfactory one and was conscious of the difference between the values of her home and her school.”25. Later she had to unlearn what she had learnt there about her country’s past from a study of Highroads of History, much of which according to her was fiction, not fact. About her experience in the convent she writes,

Our first school was a convent. Classes were a torture for me. My highest mark in arithmetic was four percent. I could spell and learn long poems by heart, but History and Geography were a mystery to me. The former, as we had to study it from a brown book called Highroads of History, was, I realize now, a blot on the name of history. The author had a rather lively imagination and should have written fiction instead of fact because much of what he wrote was only fiction. The book was filled with lurid
accounts of the Black Hole of Calcutta, the villainies of Tippu Sultan, and the valour and courage of Clive and Warren Hastings and other British heroes in a land of vindictive natives. If I know any history now, it is no thanks to Highroads.\textsuperscript{26}

Her securing four percent marks in arithmetic did not anger her learned father. To the contrary, he consoled her and encouraged her confidence in her intellectual powers. When she told him about her being terrible at arithmetic, he said with a sense of humour, “so am I. No daughter of mine can be expected to do well at arithmetic... you know you have a brain, and I know you have a brain, and we don’t need any third person’s assurance.”\textsuperscript{27}

After a few years at the convent, Nayantara was sent to Woodstock, a co-educational ‘school run by American missionaries at Mussoorie. There she found the atmosphere quite conducive to the development of her intellect and personality. Here her arithmetic improved since for her “dollars and cents were a salvation after the intricacies of pounds, shillings, pence, florins, half-pennies and half-crowns.” She writes, “Allahabad with its sultry heat had been left behind for the pure bracing air of the Himalayas, and \textit{Highroads of History} and all my other unhappy associations were forgotten. We entered with great zest into a crowded schedule of work and play. We took part in sports, theatricals and student government.... School became fun instead
of an ordeal, and we were always eager to go back after the holidays.”

One thing is especially notable about Nayantara’s conduct at the Woodstock. She did not compromise with her patriotism. In order to be confirmed as a Bluebird she had to take an oath of loyalty to “God, king and country”. With the help of her parents, she obtained the principal’s consent to swear allegiance to ‘God and Country’ only. In this way she avoided taking the oath of loyalty to ‘a king whom we did not recognize as our own.”

Nayantara, with her elder sister, Lekha, was sent to America for higher studies. Jasbir Jain’s surmise about their parents’ decision to send them to America for higher education sounds right: “The curbs on the political activities of students in India were, in a way, responsible for the decision of their parents to send Tara and Lekha to America for higher studies. While their mother worried about their safety and whether or not the decision was wise one, their father and uncle felt that this was the only possible course to ensure that their lives were not embittered by the political situation at home.”

While in the United States, Nayantara kept as guideline for her conduct the following words of her uncle: “Whenever in this wide world there goes an Indian, there goes a piece of India with him, and he may not forget this fact or ignore it. It lies within his power, to some extent, to bring credit or discredit to his country, honour or dishonour....” As nieces of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lekha and Nayantara were unofficial ambassadors of India. They availed themselves of every opportunity to meet American celebrities during their vacations.
These meetings were very fruitful as they enriched Nayantara’s knowledge of life and the world. What she learnt outside the college was no less significant than what she learnt in classrooms. About her experience as a student during her four years stay in America, Nayantara writes in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*.

I do not know what college means to most young women, but to me it was incredibly full and happy four years – a time cut out of the crowded fabric of living to think and grope and analyse. What we learned in our classes was important, but what we students learned from one another, often as we sat huddled in uncomfortable groups in each other’s rooms, drinking bitter black coffee till late at night, was to my mind just as important. The leisure to talk as we did, the whole-heartedness and single-mindedness with which we attacked and dissected every conceivable subject, will perhaps never be ours again. And now, more than ever, that time spent in thinking, arguing and questioning stands out as time well spent. That in itself was an education.31
Nayantara passed her B.A. from Wellsley College in 1947. While she was studying in the United States, a very sad incident took place at her home in India in 1944. Death claimed her ‘gallant, laughter – loving father, to whom life was adventure, a day-to-day challenge accepted with zest and enthusiasm’. His death left a traumatic effect on her. She felt that on her return to India, ‘India would not be the same I had left behind, for papu would not be there’. She writes: “An Independent India could deservedly have flaunted his scholarly genius, hailed him as an ambassador of her culture to foreign lands. But a subject India had chosen him to serve among her martyrs, and a prison, the grey symbol of all that was opposed to his nature, had claimed him in the end. For me, India would be empty without him, every place echoing his gay voice, mirroring his smile.”

After doing her B.A in History from Wellesley College, Massachusetts, Nayantara returned to India in October 1947. India was free from the foreign yoke. Nayantara’s father having left for his heavenly abode, her mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit being ambassador to Moscow and Anand Bhavan being ‘a house full of ghosts and memories’, Nayantara had no option but to live with her uncle Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who was then Prime Minister of India. According to Jasbir Jain, “At this time Nayantara felt more comfortable in the world of the past than the present, and cherished romantic dreams of marrying a history professor and spending her life doing research in some remote period of Indian
History.” But destiny had chalked out some other course for her.

Before Nayantara could embark on the realization her dream of doing research in history, the gold-tipped arrow of Cupid struck her heart, for she fell in love with Gautam Sahgal, an ambitious young man who was working in a ‘British Firm’. As Jasbir Jain says, “Nayantara found his world strangely attractive for it offered her stability and ordinariness – an ordinariness which she had not so far experienced.” But they were in some respects unlike each other, for they came from different backgrounds. Politics was in her blood whereas Gautam Sahgal had nothing to do with it. Mahatma Gandhi was not just a name to Nayantara as it was to Gautam Sahgal. Gandhiji was a perennial source of inspiration to her. But they moved towards Hymeneal light after Gautam’s assurance to her that the difference in their backgrounds would not affect the cementing of their marital relationship. After Gautam had assured her that together they would build a new world and convinced their elders of the desirability of their marriage, they were united in wedlock in 1949. But the marriage was not tension-free. Differences developed, yet she was hopeful that their marriage would be a success. The dedication of her second autobiography *From Fear Set Free* to Gautam Sahgal has been seen by critics as an attempt to make a success of her marriage. But the attempt fell through and the divorce broke the bond of their marriage in 1967. This is how she analyses her marriage:
For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man’s ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man’s will and desire must prevail.... I was uneasy and restless, adjusting to the demands of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture were different from anything I had heard or been comfortable with.\(^{35}\)

This was certainly her unfortunate and unhappy marriage. This is how she regrets her matrimonial alliance with Gautam Sahgal: “I should not really have married when I did. I don’t think I was cut out to marry young. One should take time to decide. I should and would have left marriage for much later. But society in India pressurizes girls to marry young.”\(^{36}\) The terms of divorce were very harsh. It involved a heavy responsibility for taxes, eliminating all her capacity to earn for herself. As for as the divorce and its impact on Nayantara Sahgal is concerned, we have only to look, at Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* to understand them, for Simrit’s case runs parallel to Nayantara’s. In an article Nayantara Sahgal states: “In this book (*The Day in Shadow*) I tried to figure out something that has happened to me – the shattering experience of divorce. I wanted to show how even in a free country like ours, where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple”\(^{37}\) The
unjustness of the divorce settlement continues to rankle in Nayantara Sahgal’s mind. This can be seen in her description of it as “a hangman’s noose round her (Simrit’s) neck.” We hear the voice of the novelist herself when Simrit compares Som to Shylock and says: “This agreement I’ve signed is his pound of flesh.” But divorce does not dampen her enthusiasm for life and she decides to go ahead. In the same way Nayantara Sahgal’s desire to live life fully led her to live without the conventional prop of marriage with E.N. Mangat Rai, a Punjabi Christian who was a distinguished Indian civil service officer. After living together for many years, she married Mangat Rai in 1979. About her second marriage she says: “Neither of us were at all interested in getting married. But in 1979, the Janata Government appointed me ambassador to Italy and that forced me to marry. Fundamentally, there is not much difference between living together and being married. If you are loyal to each other, it doesn’t matter. If there is loyalty and trust, one does not need marriage.” Rai died at the age of 87 in 2003 in Dehradun, where Nayantara and he lived in the house once owned by her mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.

Two daughters and a son were born of her first marriage. She feels quite satisfied with them. Not only this. She feels grateful to them for being the only people who have really ever understood her. She says, “I’m very close to them. I consider that my greatest achievement.” This is how she told Jasbir Jain about them:
Well they are all over. One of them is in Delhi. She used to be an airhostess with Air India for a time.... She is the only one who is physically close. My son was with a Swiss firm abroad. He was in America for some time, now he is in Italy. He has married an Italian girl, they have two children. My younger daughter is in London.... A very dedicated feminist. She is content to remain there.... She married an Englishman and they divorced because she couldn’t fit into the diplomatic service, she couldn’t fit into it and felt she couldn’t spend her life pouring cups of tea. I’m sad about it because he is a very nice person and they are very close.42

It goes to the credit of Nayantara Sahgal that after the divorce she strove hard to earn money and succeeded. The lesson in independence and courage which she learnt from her parents and which she revised during her formal education stood her in good stead. She has every reason to be proud of having made money through her own efforts. She says, “My husband defrauded me.... Not-only defrauded me but hung me with taxes I would not have had otherwise. I had a huge struggle after the divorce to make money and I made it. I feel pleased that I managed to do it, not by any inheritance or any such thing, but by my own efforts.
My father died still very young and left nothing. I have made a living. All that is there but one wonders if I really could have done more.”

Nayantara Sahgal comes from a writing family. It has been pointed out that her father, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit was a great Sanskrit Scholar who translated into English three Sanskrit classics - *Rajatarangini, Mudra rakshasha, and Ritu Samhara*, besides writing learned articles for the press. Her mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit is known for her book titled *Prison Days*, a poignant account of her last imprisonment. Her third parent’, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, was a historian who wrote The *Discovery of India* and *The Glimpses of World History*. He wrote the story of his own life titled *Autobiography*. It is but natural that a writing family should be voracious readers also. Nayantara in her student days read a lot of books and her reading was guided by her uncle. “Characteristically he would want to know what we were reading and why. He would point out his own favourite books and we would compare our tastes.”

When Nayantara showed him Andri Maurois’s *Byron* and expressed her unqualified praise for its subject, he did not agree with her. He advised her to read Maurois’s *Ariel*, a book on Shelley, ‘a far more admirable and lovable character’. He not only advised her to read this book but also found and brought it to her. It is not difficult to get an idea of her wide-reading from the following passage in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* : “We were a family of voracious readers, and much of the reading, we look back on now, was done in that
library, with the high shelves of long-stored books.... It was a lived-in room full of old friends cherished lovingly through the years. The fact that not so long ago mamu himself had read and enjoyed the books he was recommending to us added to the joy of reading them.”

Apart from listening to the stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from her great-aunt in childhood, she read these epics to understand various aspects of Hindu religion. She studied English, French, Russian and Indian English authors which resulted in the enrichment of her sensibility and widening of her mental horizon. To a question whether she finds inspiration from her peers, she replied, “I have found inspiration from the books I admire and these have changed through the years because I have changed my taste in literature, at one time, I read a lot of Iris Murdoch because her kind of writing fulfilled some need in me. Looking back, I think it was too cerebral, not emotional enough. The needs I have had since are better filled by Graham Greene, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and some of the writing now coming out of Asia.” The top ten among her favourite books are: Kenneth Grahame’s The Wind In The Willows, Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights, Josephine Tey’s Daughter of Time. Jeremmy Potter’s A trial of Blood, Ernest Hemingway’s For Whom The Bell Tolls, Graham Greene’s The End of The Affair and The Human Factor, J.M. Croctzee’s Waiting For The Barbarians Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Chronicle of a Death Foretold. A person is known by the books he
reads and the favourite books of Nayantara Sahgal listed above throw a lot of light on her mental make-up.

Her works have claimed world-wide attention and won acclaim of distinguished critics of Indian English literature. They have been favourably reviewed in various magazines here and abroad and her valuable contribution to the Indian English fiction has been recognized. She has many awards and prizes to her credit. She won Sinclair Fiction Prize in 1985 and Sahitya Academi Award in 1986 for her novel, *Rich Like Us*. She was awarded Commonwealth Prize (Eurasia) for her fictional work *Plans For Departure* in 1987. She was honoured with Diploma of Honour, International Order of Volunteers of Peace. A champion of Civil liberties, Nayantara Sahgal graced the post of Vice President in the organization named People’s Union for Civil Liberties. The University of Leeds conferred on her Honorary Doctorate (Doctor of Letters). She received the Alumnae Achievement Award from Wellesley College and from Woodstock School, Mussoorie in 2002. There were the institution where she received education before going to the U.S.A. for higher education.

Mrs Nayantara Sahgal’s life is highly inspiring. The struggle she put in to stand on her own feet has crowned her with inward glory. Many an institution has benefitted from her expertise. She has been closely associated with Sahitya Academi. In the 8th decade of the last century she was honoured with the membership of the Sahitya Academi’s Advisory Board for English. She continues to contribute to its seminars with her knowledge and experience. On September 20, 2007 she delivered the inaugural address at the international seminar
on *Borders, Border Theories & Crossing Borders* organized jointly by IRIS, Jawahar Kala Kendra, University of Rajasthan and Sahitya Academi at Jaipur. In her inaugural address she made a significant observation that “the world of letters teaches us to understand humanity and value our diversity.” This observation throws light on her broad-mindedness which we find reflected in her novels. The 1970’s saw her as writer-in-residence also at the Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, U.S.A. She was a member of the Delegation to the United Nations. She was appointed member of the committee on Autonomy for Radio and T.V. She was fellow of the Bunteing Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Though born into a family, whose every part was connected with the movement for independence from British rule led by Mahatma Gandhi, she has never been a member of a political party. She has herself given reason for not entering politics in these words: “I didn’t think seriously about it as I was very clear that I wanted no part in active politics. And when my uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, a writer himself (of several books written during his jail terms) told me that if I loved writing, why not concentrate on it”. She became a writer, Patriotism is in her blood and so she has never been indifferent to the heart-beats of the nation. When tyranny seemed to threaten the freedom of the country, she came forward to champion the cause of liberty, putting the nation above family ties. In 1974, before the Emergency of 1975-77, she took up the cause of Jayprakash Narayan’s Bihar Movement against authoritarian rule, wrote for his paper, *Everyman*, at his request and made several visits to Bihar to write about it for the
national newspapers’. 49 When Emergency was declared by Mrs Indira Gandhi, she raised a voice of protest against the distortion of Indian democracy which the imposition of emergency implied. Manmohan Bhatnagar has rightly observed: “Among the Indian intellectuals who fought for the restoration of democracy and human rights in India at this critical juncture in the country’s history, Nayantara Sahgal was perhaps one of the most outspoken and impassioned champions of the civil and political rights of people.” 50 She went to the U.S.A. and therefrom carried on her fight against the throttling of democracy in India through University Seminars, radio interviews, talks, T.V. symposia, articles, etc. Later she published Voice For Freedom in 1977, a selection of speeches, articles and interviews connected with Emergency in India. In 1979, the Janta Party government appointed her ambassador to Italy, an office she held until Mrs Indira Gandhi’s return to power.

During the 1980’s Nayantara Sahgal held the office of a Vice President of People’s Union of Civil Liberties, an organization formed by Jayaprakash Narayan. In this period she was a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington, D.C. and of National Humanities Centre, North Carolina U.S.A. She graced also as a guest international festivals of literature and literacy conferences. In the 1990’s she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She chaired also the Eurasia jury of Commonwealth Writer’s Prize.

Thus, Nayantara Sahgal has lived a very active and meaningful life. It is as a writer and champion of freedom that she has endeared
herself to her readers. We are fortunate to have her in our midst and benefit from her thinking. May God grant her many, many years of creatively active life.
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