CHAPTER 6
NEHRU’S NARRATIVES OF SELF AS/AND NATION

It is a dangerous thing to isolate oneself; dangerous both for an individual and a nation (Glimpses of World History I 430).

Two-faced like Janus, she [India] looked both backwards into the past and forward into the future, and tried to combine the two (An Autobiography 267).

“Not only the wisdom of centuries – also their madness breaketh out in us. Dangerous is it to be an heir” (Nietzsche, quoted in Discovery 36).

Independent India’s first Prime Minister, named by M. K. Gandhi as his political heir for leadership of the Congress and of the emergent nation, Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the key figures in the political struggle that led up to the formation of the independent Indian nation as well as being a creator of India as an idea and as a national entity. His multifaceted persona has led to the ascription of various labels, many striving to combine often contradictory impulses and pulls: a scholar-statesman, an aristocratic democrat with socialist convictions, a modernizer drawn towards an almost romantic discourse of nature, a man deeply committed to the future who also felt equally compelled to study the past, a reflective man of action who wrote copiously. This heterogeneity, self-reflectively invoked in his own writings, has rich implications for reading him as a spokesperson for the idea of India: a project that his considerable oeuvre addresses. His negotiations with the claims of West and East, and of nation and the world, take on piquancy and power as his dual vocation, as maker of a nation’s destiny and as a self-reflexive writer, see him making complex negotiations with the past and the present.

As with other politically active individuals suffering incarceration, the epistolary form suited Nehru’s circumstances and some of his most extensive writing is in that genre. He stretched the form to its limits and wrote copious letters to his daughter, Indira, which were also intended to be meant, metonymically, for the future generations of the nation’s children. He wrote also to other members of his large and politically active family, and later, as Prime Minister, to his Chief Ministers. His
speeches became signposts and guidelines for the new nation. He left a legacy of writing that engages with the grand destiny of India from a deep historical perspective, even as his fortnightly letters to Chief Ministers ranged from the dangers of narrow nationalism in the arguments around the ascent of Everest (quoted in Gopal and Iyengar 722) to the designing of brooms that uphold the dignity of labour (June 12 1960, JN Papers, NMML). It is in his three major books, *Glimpses of World History*, *An Autobiography*, and *The Discovery of India*, which together form a kind of triptych, that we can see him exploring his deepest concerns with India and the world, the present and the past, his private self and the public roles that he played. It becomes necessary to place the explicitly named Autobiography within these larger frames because of all the figures under consideration, his life story unfolds across the pages of two other books that claim to be something else altogether. And conversely, *An Autobiography* is a particularly reticent representative of the genre since the personal dimension is rigidly controlled and delimited in its narrative scope.

The broad context in which he wrote included the trend for earnest intellectuals who strove “self-consciously to be ‘popular’, to reach a wider audience” (Khilnani “Gandhi and Nehru” 148) and works in politics, philosophy, science and history came to be produced for a general reading public by writers such as Bertrand Russell and H.G.Wells. In India too there were works such as M.N.Roy’s *India in Transition* (1922), Edward J. Thompson’s *The Reconstruction of India* (1930) and Krishna Menon’s *Condition of India* (1933). The period also had the legacy of generic narratives of ethnography and travel writing as well as of autobiography which, as Javed Majeed has argued in the case of Nehru, Gandhi and Iqbal, were used by public intellectuals to articulate not only “their notions of individual selfhood” but also to “articulate points of resistance to the oppressive potential of collective nationalist identities” (Majeed 1, 4). In the case of Nehru, since he lived on to be the first Prime Minister of independent India, his narrative self’s preoccupation with the nature of the nation-in-the-making had more lasting reverberations intertwined with state power, further strengthened by the fact of dynastic succession. Indira Gandhi’s assessment of her father’s three major works in her 1980 ‘Foreword’ is telling in the public construction of the significance of these books. It also indicates the nearly epic/mythic
aura that the books and the man came to assume, even as it participates in the perpetuation of that aura. *Glimpses of World History* “remains the best introduction to the story of man for young and growing people in India and all over the world… The Autobiography is celebrated and acclaimed as not merely the quest of one individual for freedom, but as an insight into the making of the mind of new India… The *Discovery of India* ...delved deep into the sources of India’s national personality” (‘Foreword’, *An Autobiography* xii). These testify both to Nehru’s larger vision for India and its place in the world, and to the representative status he himself came to acquire. The individual—whether Indira as representative of the nation’s and the world’s children, or Nehru as representative of “the mind of new India” – becomes a metonymic representative for a larger collectivity, the nation-in-the-making envisaged as a player in a grand internationalist arena. In this he shares a strand with Rahula Sankrityayan’s oeuvre who also wrote *Manavki Katha* for his children. In each case, biological offspring become symbolic of the gesture of passing on, through writing, to the future, a sense of its past. Filial relation expands outwards to encompass the emergent nations’ current and future offspring.

Nehru’s, like Sankrityayan’s, and differently, like Gandhi’s, is a complex and heterogeneous sense of nationhood, eschewing narrower exclusivist versions of nationalism that could be dangerously insular in terms of linguistic, caste, or religious identities. His very literary style can be seen to suggest this. It has been argued that “the mixed formal elements and styles of Nehru’s autobiographical texts evoke his own self-conception and his conception of India as amalgams, and the two together as a form of flexible coalescence, rather than ongoing integration” (Majeed 153). This is inflected somewhat differently from Shashi Tharoor’s statement that “for the first seventeen years of India’s independence, the paradox-ridden Jawaharlal Nehru….was India,” which assumes or even imposes a broad national consensus. Nehru’s position on India’s identity and future was by no means the only one during this period. His ‘inheritance’ of the mantle of national leadership was also contested by the likes of Subhas Bose and Sardar Patel and the notion of the nation he came to project could be, and was, contested from ideologically diverse positions such as those of B.R. Ambedkar, Jayaprakash Narayan and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. Assumption of state
power meant that, despite these challenges, the complex figure of Nehru came to dominate and define the nation’s imaginary after independence, but autobiography, written when he was far from the central position he would come to occupy, is an important text in tracing the dynamics of this self-fashioning. Acutely self-reflexive in both his public and private utterances, Nehru describes himself, at the time of composing his autobiography, as a “strange medley” of “Buddha-Marx-Gandhi” (Prison Diary entry for June 3, 1935, SW 6, 366-7, 367), a combination that at once locates him in a position of contestation and complimentarity vis-a-vis figures such as Gandhi and Sankrityayan.

The received persona of Nehru is elusive. He is often seen as a Westernized secular modernizer, or equally often seen as a foil to Gandhi, who represented the youthful future to the latter. This is partly a result of his subsequent political persona and his actions as shaper of India’s policy. The autobiography, when read in conjunction with his other writings, which I have also read, like Majeed, as autobiographical texts, teases out the deeper paradoxes of his positions. I diverge from Majeed in that, rather than reading the varied texts in a seamless continuity, I am attentive to the implications of their titles and the temporal gaps and apparent difference in their respective foci. I believe this leads to highlighting some significant aspects of Nehru’s negotiations with the private domain and addresses the issue of vocation and national location with reference to slightly older modes of thinking than the postmodern ones that Majeed often suggests. When read in the context of the other figures in this study, especially Gandhi, Elwin, and Sankrityayan, his texts illuminate issues of nation, vocation and the dynamics of location as it was being contested and negotiated from different subject positions by public intellectuals at this juncture of India’s history. In *Discovery of India*, he reflects on the vision that guided his quest:

…It was this attempt to discover the past in its relation to the present that led me twelve years ago to write *Glimpses of World History* in the form of letters to my daughter. I wrote rather superficially and as simply as I could, for I was writing for a girl in her early teens, but behind that writing lay that quest and voyage of discovery. A sense of adventure filled me and I lived successively different ages and periods
and had for companions men and women who had lived long ago. I had leisure in jail, there was no sense of hurry or of completing a task within an allotted period of time, so I let my mind wander or take root for a while, keeping in tune with my mood, allowing impression to sink in and fill the dry bones of the past with flesh and blood.

It was a similar quest, though limited to recent and more intimate times and persons, that led me later to write my autobiography (23-24).

This may be seen as “personalized …. historiography” (Majeed 183) but it is also curiously de-personalised, as Nehru, whom even an Englishman like Edward Thompson described as “a man who carried reticence to almost an inhuman degree” (Letter July 20 1938, *A Bunch of Old Letters* 290) negotiates the intimate domain with characteristic indirection, qualities that arguably conflict with the autobiographical project itself. This reticence can be seen to have its roots in a combination of factors that locate him as an Indian upper caste male with an English education. When seen in the light of Gandhi’s project of writing the self, his autobiography acquires a specific dimension that has implications for his mode of negotiating history, gender, and the very possibility of self-articulation. In this process, India, as an ancient civilisation and a future entity to be shaped, figures significantly. Writing the self is intertwined with the project of writing India into being. At crucial junctures, I argue, the silences vis-à-vis the private domain reflect some of his deeper silences and conflicts vis-à-vis the idea of India. Discovering/inventing India is a project that involves self-discovery/invention.

An intricate interleaving of the public and the private, the West and the East, India and England, the national and the international and the past, the present and the future – these are the frames that define his life and its telling.

**The Reflective Self**

Nehru’s writing, like that of Gandhi’s and some of Sankrityayan’s, was done in prison, a space that afforded time and leisure, and a freedom from the cares of active politics. However, unlike Gandhi, Nehru finds an experiential dimension to prison experience that he finds disturbing. Besides the lack of privacy and the absence of
inspiring views that some prisons imposed, he points to how, in prison, “time is experienced differently,” a fact he finds non-conducive to writing. He speaks of beginning and abandoning a manuscript which was intended to be a continuation of his autobiography at Dehra Dun Jail (Oct. 1940-Dec. 1941). In retrospect he registers satisfaction at the fact that he was not “induced to send it to a publisher”:

Looking at it now, I realise its little worth; how stale and uninteresting much of it seems. The incidents it deals with have lost all importance and have become the debris of a half-forgotten past, covered by the lava of subsequent volcanic eruptions. I have lost interest in them. What stand out in my mind are personal experiences which have left their impress upon me; contacts with certain individuals and certain events; contact with the crowd – the mass of the Indian people, in their infinite diversity and yet their amazing unity; some adventures of the mind; waves of unhappiness and the relief and joy that came from overcoming them; the exhilaration of the moment of action. About much of this one may not write. There is an intimacy about one’s inner life, one’s feelings and thoughts, which may not and cannot be conveyed to others. Yet those contacts, personal and impersonal, mean much; they affect the individual and mould him and change his reactions to life, to his own country, to other nations (Discovery 34-35, emphasis added).

The embarrassment about the personal is obvious but there is also a feeling of the inadequacy regarding the act of writing autobiography as and in history, a history that is also geologically imagined in the striking metaphor of volcanic eruptions and the burial of a present rendered irrelevant by the progress of time. Majeed’s reading of Nehru’s autobiographical project as one of personalizing the historical does not pay adequate attention to Nehru’s insistence here on the limitations of language’s ability to convey the “inner life”. This problem is worded in language that suggests an existential condition, against which Nehru still attempts to write, since this incommunicable inner self is also a worldly self that exists in relation to “life, to his own country, to other nations”. Even though writing during imprisonment terms had become a habit, “yet I did not write”, he says, assailed now by a sense of the staleness of writing something which would be redundant as the “world went on changing. I
would not be writing for today or tomorrow but for an unknown and possibly distant future. For whom would I write? And for when?” World War- II in particular gave him “premonitions of vast and cataclysmic changes” as he spent October 1940 to December 1941 in his old cell in Dehra Dun Jail, where six years earlier he had begun writing his autobiography. For ten months he “could not develop the mood for writing” and “spent my time in reading or in digging and playing about with soil and flowers….” Ultimately I did write: it was meant to be a continuation of my autobiography. For a few weeks I wrote rapidly and continuously but was suddenly discharged” (34-35). It is this narrative that he left unfinished and, as he noted with relief, which remained unpublished.

This is a significant passage as it given insights into Nehru’s approach both to writing and to autobiography as genre. The stress on “mood,” on the articulation of a first-person subjectivity, coexists with a sense of the historicity of writing such as his. Not only does history impinge on it in terms of conditions beyond his control such as imprisonment and discharge, it also weighs upon his consciousness as a force against which his writing’s validity will be tested. The limitations of memory, “a half-forgotten past”, are germane to this enterprise, as the “lava of subsequent volcanic eruptions” threatens to obliterate that past. In the evocation of this geological metaphor, we could read a sense of “deep time”, of the self as a palimpsest, layered over much like the nation’s deep past that must nevertheless be excavated for the imaginative enterprise of reconstructing the nation’s history and its future identity, an enterprise that Glimpses and Discovery engage in.

Nehru punctuates his narrative with reflections on the self in terms that suggest a highly dynamic, changeable, impermanent and often elusive entity. For instance, writing the ‘Preface’ a little over a year after he completed writing Discovery, he reflects: “it is mine and not wholly mine, as I am constituted today; it represents rather some past self of mine which has already joined that long succession of other selves that existed for a while and faded away, leaving only a memory behind” (10). A similar reflection can be found in the postscript to his autobiography, titled “Five years later”:
As I glance through my book again, I feel almost as if some other person had written a story long ago. The five years that have gone by have changed the world and left their impress upon me. Physically I am older of course, but it is the mind that had received shock and sensation again and again and has hardened, perhaps matured. My wife’s death in Switzerland ended a chapter of my existence and took away much from my life that has been part of my being….I could not adjust myself easily. I threw myself in my work, seeking more satisfaction in it….even more than in my earlier days, my life became an alteration of huge crowds and intense activity and loneliness (620).

A middle space missing from this dualism of “huge crowds and intense activity” on the one hand and “loneliness” on the other, the space of companionship and reflection, is supplied partly by the practice of writing, in jail, where reflective solitude could alternate with the companionship of fellow-activists and books.

The original tentative title for the autobiography was “In and Out of Prison”, suggesting both the centrality of prison in this phase of his life and also that it was intended to be a predominantly historical account eschewing the personal. Of the 650-odd pages of the text, only the initial 41 concern themselves with telling the story of the family and the individual called Jawaharlal Nehru. The rest of the book weaves together sporadic references to family members and events related to them with a larger chronology of the politics of the time with commentaries on issues that have an overtly public/political dimension. After a brief introduction to his family history and childhood and schooling, he dismisses his marriage in a few lines. Apart from occasional references to the disruption in family life caused by political work, and even rarer references to holidays and some filial concern with his mother’s treatment at the hands of the English, Nehru assiduously avoids the personal in this narrative written in his forty-seventh year. Some aspects of his private life, such as his marriage, are remarkably ignored. This strikes one with renewed force when one reads his subsequent attempt to redress this via an entire chapter on his wife Kamala in his subsequent book, *The Discovery of India*, a book that otherwise has no space for the personal. His autobiography maintains a distance from the personal. Poles apart from Gandhi’s relentless focus on the self as an object of experiments in
intimate aspects of life such as sexuality, dietetics and spirituality, to be shared with full candor, Nehru, though he has no unease with the cultural moorings of the genre itself, bends it to his own public ends. Critical consensus on the autobiography tends to agree with the judgment that “even at his most self-confessional and self-doubting, Nehru displays an unfailing English reserve and tact, an obliquity of the personal” (Khilnani “Gandhi and Nehru” 151, emphasis added).

However, in his ‘Preface’ to the first edition, written at Badenweiler, 1936, Nehru reflects:

My attempt was to trace, as far as I could, my own mental development, and not to write a survey of recent history. The fact this account resembles superficially such a survey is apt to mislead the reader and lead him to attach a wider importance to it than it deserves. I must warn him, therefore, that this account is wholly one-sided and inevitably egotistical… (An A xiv).

This apologia conveys a shrinking from his role as historian, while also demanding to be juxtaposed against the somewhat contrary claim that this narrative can serve “to provide a background for the study of hard fact” for those “who want to make a proper study of our recent events” (xv). However, in the uninterrupted flow of the narrative itself, other, more private, uses for writing emerge: it is an exercise that affords him a therapeutic ‘space’ from where he can continue to keep alive an alternate self in prison. This becomes clear in a self-reflexive moment regarding the act of writing itself in the midst of the narrative flow: “Why am I writing all this sitting in prison? The quest is still the same, in prison or outside, and I write down my past feelings and experiences in the hope that this may bring me some peace and psychic satisfaction” (219). Writing appears now as a personally cathartic act, reflecting a troubled self in search of therapeutic release. One can sense the influence of Freud and psychoanalysis in such fleeting moments in the text, though they are few and far between. Earlier, Nehru had registered some embarrassment at some of the emotional excesses of the autobiography written as it was “during a particularly distressful period of [his] existence,” stating that it would have been “more restrained” had it been done “under more normal conditions”. However, at the time of
publication, he had decided to “leave it as it is”, for “it may have some interest for others in so far as it represents what I felt at the time of writing” (iv). In thus sharing with the public a picture of a vulnerable and changeable self, Nehru offers his thoughts and life as a process, rather than a finished product to be held up as exemplar. In this he differs from Gandhi, whose autobiography shows his past weaknesses but in a language and with a poise that suggests a point of arrival.

However, I would like to argue that the reading of such moments in Nehru as creating a sense of “selfhood in playful disarray” (Majeed 178) is a questionable (postmodern?) imposition on Nehru that sits ill at ease with the very modernist nature of his angst and self-questioning, coupled with a 19th century sense of location that defines his largely teleologically driven narrative. Nehru hints; he does not elaborate on the full range of the “distress” that he experienced. In the “Epilogue,” Nehru, the public figure conscious of a public image, shares one of his most self-reflective moments:

In writing this narrative I have tried to give my moods and thoughts at the time of each event, to represent as far as I could my feelings on the occasion. It is difficult to recapture a past mood, and it is not easy to forget subsequent happenings. Later ideas thus must inevitably have coloured my account of earlier days, but my object was, primarily for my own benefit, to trace my own personal growth. Perhaps what I have written is not so much an account of what I have been but of what I have sometimes wanted to be imagined myself to be (An A 616, emphasis added).

First published in England, the book projected an international readership and was an international bestseller, its royalties helping support the extended family in its increasingly straitened circumstances after Motilal Nehru’s passing in 1931. Its success in England can be attributed to elements of style as well as content: its language was comprehensible to the English in more ways than one. Not only was the persona perceived to be bearing no malice or personal grudge against the English, the book had something that Gandhi’s Autobiography (which also preached friendliness towards individual Englishmen and women) did not offer. As distinct from the eccentricities of Gandhi’s narrative, Nehru’s embodied a persona that was English in
sensibility. His bafflement with India mirrored the Englishman’s and his ‘neutrality’ of voice made it accessible to the English. Punctuated with references to a largely European world of scholarship and literature, especially English poets, more often than not left unnamed, it suggested an implied reader who would locate the original and/or unproblematically accept the universality of this cultural register. Despite all his critique of the Liberal position within political discourse, and his Marxian leanings, Nehru ultimately emerges as a liberal humanist, an alignment he acknowledges only towards the end in the book: “My roots are still perhaps partly in the nineteenth century, and I have been too much influenced by the humanist liberal tradition to get out of it completely” (610). Not surprisingly, the Calcutta Statesman recommended to all government officials that they read at least Nehru’s autobiography, while in the English New Statesman, H.N. Brailsford wrote: “Here is a man who is one of us, by his culture, his humanity and his scientific vision” (Nanda 259, 286). As Nehru acknowledged in a long chapter on his position on British colonialism, he owed much to England:

“Personally, I owe too much to England in my mental makeup ever to feel wholly alien to her. And, do what I will, I cannot get rid of the habits of mind, and the standards and ways of judging other countries as well as life generally, which I acquired at school and college in England. All my predilections (apart from the political plane) are in favor of England and the English people, and if I have become what is called an uncompromising opponent of British rule in India, it is almost in spite of myself” (An A 436).

This sense of self is rooted in his English public school upbringing but has its roots in the anglicized home environment he was raised in even before the physical relocation to England. England was at AnandBhavan, even before Harrow could claim him. However, that familial legacy was more complex and Janus-faced and had deep repercussions both for his individual acts of self-fashioning as well as for the nation-in-the-making that he came to represent.
The Familial Legacy

What is my inheritance? To what am I an heir? (Discovery of India 36)

“An only son of prosperous parents is apt to be spoilt,” Nehru states at the beginning of his autobiography, striking a note reminiscent of Austen’s social observation, self-reflexively deployed. However, the narrative soon suggests a sense of isolation and loneliness, with references to “fancies and solitary games” as the only outlet for a sensitive mind, feeling very early in life, a variety of existential angst (An A 1). He inherited a formidable legacy as the only son of Motilal Nehru, the flamboyant and powerful barrister who represented Indian success within the Raj, before Gandhi’s advent radically altered his politics and changed his lifestyle. A patriarch who was an overwhelming, even “emasculating” (Khilnani “Re-engaging” 6) presence in Nehru’s early life, to be supplemented by the much more feminized figure of ‘Bapu’ later on, Motilal’s influence on Jawaharlal’s character and life choices was deep. Born into a family of educated and professionally skilled Kashmiri Brahmin migrants to Mughal Delhi, the Nehrus inherited a legacy that involved dynamic adaptation as an adjunct to professional success. Motilal Nehru made his name at the bar, acquiring English tastes and lifestyle, along with stupendous professional success. Embracing Western modernity with zest and iconoclasm, he earned himself the ire of the orthodox when he refused to perform a purification ceremony for committing the sin of “crossing the black waters”. He was openly dismissive of religion and flaunted his iconoclasm in direct contrast to the traditional piety of his wife, Swarup Rani. Between the husband and wife, Anand Bhawan was divided into two sections – ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ – by the simultaneous existence of the two ways of living, a fact that is delineated in its full domestic detail only in the biography of Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Nehru’s sister, who does not see any deep dissonance in the twin life of tradition and modernity that the family lived. Nehru, for his part, is largely reticent on the private details, mentioning that he thought of religion as a “woman’s affair”, and that though he “enjoyed” the ceremonies at home, they “left little impression” on his mind (An A 9). As I will argue later, this marginalization of the traditional-religious-feminine domain from his early life acquires a central significance in retrospect with respect to the evolution of his
consciousness regarding India, mediated via his relationship with his wife Kamala, and with his political mentor Gandhi, for whom the traditional vaishnava piety of his natal home provided a recurrent point of reference for his own self-fashioning.

Nehru’s autobiography, though very different in its overtly historical focus from Gandhi’s, does share with it an early instance of a formative encounter with the father. Receiving a “tremendous thrashing” for taking one of his father’s pens, hiding the fact, and failing to own up to the fact, he recalls being “almost blind with pain and mortification at [his] disgrace”, he rushed to his mother, who “felt more of an equal” to comfort his “aching and quivering little body” (8). While one may read into this a lesson in responsibility and truth-telling, it is also a telling instance of the patriarchal influence that Motilal wielded, against which Nehru’s sense of self would come to be defined.

Living as a Victorian gentleman of means, Motilal hired English governesses for his daughters and a resident tutor called Ferdinand Brooks to educate young Jawaharlal, his only son. Recommended by Annie Besant, Brooks was a keen Theosophist, and Nehru admits being “influenced” by him “greatly” for the three years that he taught, much more than the “dear old Pandit” who “was supposed to teach” him Hindi and Sanskrit. Nehru learnt so little from the latter that he compares his knowledge of Sanskrit with the Latin he later acquired at Harrow (15).

Under Brooks’ influence, Nehru developed a taste for reading English fiction which included Kipling, Carroll, Scott, Dickens, Hardy, Mark Twain and H.G.Wells. Poetry became a life-long fascination and his writing is liberally sprinkled with quotations from the canonical English literary tradition, as well as from his later readings in Western philosophy, history and science. Besides kindling his interest in science, which he would later study at Cambridge, Brooks also initiated him into the mystical beliefs of the Theosophists. Having relegated his mothers’ religiosity to the domain of superstition and ritual, his first real appreciation of Indian thought came to him via the West: “For the first time I began to think, consciously and deliberately, of religion and other worlds. The Hindu religion especially went up in my estimation; not the ritual or ceremonial part, but its great books, the Upanishads, and Bhagavad
“Gita.” Like his father before him, who had previously joined the group under the influence of Mme Blavatsky only to leave it later, Nehru at thirteen became a member of the Theosophical Society, with Annie Besant herself performing the initiation (“I was thrilled. I attended the Theosophical Convention at Benares and saw Old Colonel Olcott with his fine beard.”) only to leave it “soon enough”. Looking back, Nehru describes himself at this time as “flat and insipid” and “smug”, inaugurating a self-mocking tone that persists in the narrative. It also reflects a deeper influence of the father’s iconoclasm towards all things spiritual. However, there is some ambivalence, when he notes “the lack of feeling” with which his father had treated his request to join the group: “Great as he was in many ways in my eyes, I felt that he was lacking in spirituality” (16). The dialectics between science and spirituality that this early phase of his life suggests stays with Nehru to the end of his days, resulting in an attempted reconciliation in this, as in other, more overtly, political aspects of his life.

**The Vocational Dilemma: the Paradoxes of Location**

*I have been a dabbler in many things; I began with science at college, and then took to the law, and after developing various other interests in life, finally adopted the popular and widely practiced profession of gaol-going in India* (Glimpses 1498-99).

*...that firm taming of the soul, which distinguishes the passionate politician and differentiates him from the ‘sterilely excited’ and mere political dilettante, is possible only through habituation to detachment in every sense of the term....daily and hourly, the politician inwardly has to overcome a quite trivial and all-too-human enemy: a quite trivial vanity, the deadly enemy of all matter-of-fact devotion to the cause, and of all distance, in this case, of distance towards one’s self* (Max Weber 116).

While Weber sounds a remarkably apposite note for Nehru’s narratorial vacillation between detachment and vanity, Nehru’s lines above affect a playful and facetious stance to the question of vocation, though there is in them an insight into the luxury of choice that he could afford. At Harrow, Nehru showed the first inkling of political interest, since 1905 saw the portioning of Bengal and he found himself on the side of the Extremists in the agitation against the partition. Japan’s naval victory over
Russia was the other world event that coincided with his arrival in England and he revealed the first signs of pride in this display of Asian strength, a theme that governs his engagement with the past in *Discovery*. A visit to Ireland in the summer left him impressed with the Sinn Fen movement and he displayed some signs of differing from his father on political issues, accusing him of being “immoderately moderate” (Letter 20 December 1907, *SW 1*, 39).

His extremist opinions were, however, part of “the general posture of dilettantism which Jawaharlal deliberately cultivated” and being “quite at ease in the vapid society of Indian middle class convention” (Gopal 7, 8), he saw nothing wrong with applying for the Indian Civil Service, an ambition that was dropped not out of ideological objection by either father or son but due to the family’s desire to have their only son live a comfortable life. Nehru had the freedom to follow his heart at Cambridge: “Jawaharlal was not by temperament an academic, and appears to have done very little work,” and even when he followed his father into Law, “joining the Inner Temple was merely part of his general policy of drift” (Gopal 9). His first experience of work was thus untouched by a sense of vocation, a career in law being chosen for him by a doting father who paved the way for his introduction into the field back in India.

Philosophically, Nehru’s intellectual formation was largely Western. He records the formative influence of his circumstances, which included taking science as a subject at Cambridge, after schooling at Harrow: “My early approach to life’s problems had been more or less scientific, with something of the easy optimism of the science of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. A secure and comfortable existence and the energy and self-confidence I possessed increased that feeling of optimism. A kind of vague humanism appealed to me” (*Discovery* 25). His first foray into politics was not anti-imperialist since as one of the joint secretaries of the UP South Africa Committee for the collection of funds for Gandhi’s passive resisters in South Africa, he was in line with the Government of India which had voiced support for the Indian Community in South Africa. However, the government’s reaction to Annie Besant and Tilak’s Home Rule League first stirred the political resentment of Nehru and he joined the League as a joint secretary, in 1917, with his father as president. Lacking “any startling ideas of his own” (Gopal 13) Nehru fell into a
Moderate groove but was dissatisfied enough with running *The Independent*, a newspaper started by Motilal to voice the Congress’ position, and to take up with enthusiasm the cause that Gandhi came to espouse on his return from South Africa. However, “it was the Soviet Union that now dominated Jawaharlal’s mind” and “he who had sailed from India a dedicated disciple to Gandhi returned a self-conscious revolutionary radical” (Gopal 57-8). This led him to challenge the political authority of both his father and Gandhi, though his continued work as Congress leader ensured that his career in “gaol-going” continued. Writing as a vocation emerged as a therapeutic means of coping with prison terms, giving expression to his scholarly and contemplative self, as well as helping shape the contours of a new national identity.

As he grows in political stature, a deep self-reflexivity marks Nehru’s recollection of his political self. In the autobiography, he consistently mocks at the idea of the hero, and of his public image. Debunking the sanctimoniousness implicit in the epithets that accompany political action, he approvingly records the family tradition of gentle irony in which he was teased by all except his mother as “Bharat Bhushan” and “Tyagmurti”, something that helped keep his “mental equilibrium” (*An A* 218, 217). The confessional mode surfaces in his deep ambivalence about the public persona, while he acknowledges his love for recognition, and admits to missing “the hero-worship of the crowd” and uses the Nietzschean phrase “will to power” to describe his political persona (217). To underscore this capacity for self-directed irony, a self-reflexive recognition of the “vanity” that Weber warns against, within a year of his election to a second term as president of the Congress in 1937, Nehru also pseudonymously, as “Chanakya”, authored an attack upon himself in the *Modern Review*, painting himself a Caesar:

He has all the makings of the dictator in him – vast popularity, a strong will directed to a well-defined purpose, energy, pride, organizational capacity, hardness, and with all his love of the crowd, an intolerance of others and a certain contempt for the weak and inefficient….Is it his will to power that is driving him from crowd to crowd? His conceit is already formidable. He must be checked. We want no Caesars (quoted in Tharoor, 100).

Gandhi had earlier interceded on behalf of Congressmen, chiding Nehru for his “rebukes and magisterial manner” and the “arrogation” of “infallibility and
superior knowledge”. Treating the affair as a “tragic-comedy,” (Letter July 15 1936, *Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence* 151-2) Gandhi uses a theatrical metaphor that also informs Nehru’s retrospective understanding of this period in his political life: “We posed often enough and struck up attitudes, but there was something very real and intensely truthful in much that we did, and this lifted us out of our petty selves” (*An A* 615).

Edward Thompson’s comments on Nehru’s “inconsistency” on precisely these lines, the co-existence of the democratic spirit with a love for powerful figures: “Everyone of us has our own special inconsistencies. Just as you surprise the reader of your *Glimpses*…by Napoleon-worship (very astonishing in a Jawaharlal Nehru!), so you may see in this Pondicherry *asram* (sic) business a genuine working of the inner truth and power of this bewildering universe” (Letter November 24 1936, *A Bunch of Old Letters* 212). The epistolary exchange between the two men assumes a shared scepticism regarding the spiritual domain as it found manifestation in the Aurobindo Ashram, but it is telling in capturing a tendency in Nehru towards the idea of the hero and of the power of charisma in politics, his vocation by now. Gandhi’s charisma impressed him, and *An Autobiography* pays fulsome tribute to this quality, despite Nehru’s wrestling with him on their differing notions of the nation and of the space of the spiritual within the political domain. Nehru himself came to see in a life of public action his true calling, with writing and contemplation as necessary though adjunct activities. In either case, there is an awareness of history as a “living process” of which he was an integral and active part:

…When actual action has been denied me I have sought some such approach to the past and to history. Because my own personal experiences have often touched historical events and sometimes I have even had something to do with the influencing of such events in my own sphere, it has not been difficult for me to envisage history as a living process with which I could identify myself to some extent…

Some mixture of thought and emotion and urges, of which I was only dimly conscious, led me to action, and action, in its turn sent me back to thought and a desire to understand the present. The roots of that
present lay in the past and so I made voyages of discovery into the past, ever seeking a clue in it, if any such existed, to the understanding of the present (Discovery 23).

Writing prolifically the history of the word and of India, he recorded an ambiguous relation to writing as a vocation: “I am not a literary man, and I am not a historian; what, indeed, am I? (Glimpses 1498-99). “Action” attracted him though he also saw it as an “escape” from the deep ideological conflicts: “I became a battleground, where various forces struggled for mastery. I sought an escape from this; I tried to find harmony and equilibrium, and in this attempt I rushed into action. That gave me some peace” (An A 29). Many years later, he would record how attraction for a life of action was a temperamental necessity: “Perhaps I should have been an aviator, so that when the slowness and dullness of life overcame me I could have rushed into the tumult of the clouds” (Discovery 22). Time, and even writing, became a burden when ‘action’ was denied him: “I cannot write about the present as long as I am not free to experience it through action … In prison [time] is something vague, shadowy, something I cannot come to grips with, or experience as the sensation of the moment. It ceases to be the present for me in any real sense of the word, and yet it is not the past either, with the past’s immobility and statuesque calm” (36). This preference for the “active virtues” is posited in his autobiography as being opposite to the passive Indian ones of “renunciation” as he registers his impatience with “the idea of the ascetic” with more than a hint at Gandhi as man of the East (An A 217). Incarceration, however, aids the process of introversion: “Gaol encourages introspection, and my long years in prison have forced me to look more and more within myself. I was not by nature an introvert, but prison life, like strong coffee or strychnine, leads to introversion…” (591). However, this introversion turns him towards the collective past of India and to the writing of history.

Understanding history, and telling it to his young daughter, is linked to his hopes for the future, for the forging of a new collectivity of India via giving it a narrative of its past. Nehru would be in consonance with Nietzsche’s approval to the following statement of Goethe’s: “…I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity”, a quote with which the philosopher begins his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”. Nietzsche’s essay, in fact, addresses the nature of Nehru’s making a vocation out of
his engagement with the past: “…we need history. But we need it … for life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action, let alone for the purpose of extenuating the self-seeking life and base and cowardly action” (Nietzsche 59). Ironically, in Nietzsche’s European sensibility, the essay is occasioned by a contrarian desire to challenge the dominant tendencies of his time: “I believe, indeed, that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognize that we are suffering from it”, claiming that “a hypertrophied virtue – such as the historical sense of our nation appears to be – can ruin a nation just as effectively as a hypertrophied vice” (60).

In Nehru, the anti-colonial nationalist, writing a history of the nation is an imperative occasioned by a need to write back to colonial stereotypes. He does it in terms that are distinct from other versions of narrow cultural nationalism that harked back to a Hindu Golden Age. Nehru appears to be selectively appropriating a Western discourse, assuming ‘History’ to be so, in the interest of a redefined vision of India that confidently looks to the future by looking at its past with pride. In this he must negotiate a sense of unease with the stasis of a long past, one which holds back the dynamism he wishes to unleash.

A sense of restlessness, and a desire for ‘adventure,’ an oft-repeated word in Nehru’s writings, marks his autobiography. Further, there is a sense of marked destiny that suggests the Nietzschean idea of the hero. Holidaying with his wife and daughter in Ceylon after the Karachi Congress, he observes and dilates on the Buddhist monks he sees, characterized by “peace and calm, a strange detachment from the cares of the world…. I looked at them with some envy, with just a faint yearning for a haven, but I knew well enough that my lot was a different one, cast in storms and tempests. There was to be no haven for me, for the tempests within me were as stormy as those outside. And if perchance I found myself in a safe harbor, protected from the fury of the winds, would I be contented and happy there?” (An A 285). A mood of reverie, Romantic yearning, and a sense of an isolated self dominates the passage. The conflicted, somewhat Byronic, temper that these lines delineate, one which revels in the “fury of the winds” of history, seeks contentment and happiness in precisely that which jeopardizes it. As he puts it in a tellingly titled chapter “Two Lives” in Discovery, “there is too much of a volcano within me for real detachment…” (68). A
“haven” of peace is not merely posited as a historical impossibility for a public figure caught in the turbulence of a nation’s history in the making; it is also an option that the force of his personality rejects. This, despite the fact that he expresses, only a few lines earlier, a deep attraction for the “strong, calm features of the Buddha’s statue” that was sent to him by a Ceylonese friend and which gave him “strength and helped [him] to overcome many a period of depression” in Dehra Dun Gaol (An A 284). Though rejecting “the dogmas that have grown up around Buddhism, he acknowledges being “drawn” to “the personality”, just as the personality of Christ had “attracted [him] greatly” (285).

Part of India’s glorious past, Buddhism was attractive to him for this ‘personal’ element, but also significant as an aspect of India’s future place in the international arena. It was the link between the past and the future. He saw India’s best influence in Asia in terms of its export of Buddhism and the major plank of his vision for an Asian civilisational unity was a recovery of this Buddhist past: “Buddhism more than anything else laid the foundation of Greater India and established cultural unity of an abiding value between India and many parts of Asia. A free India can worthily strengthen and revitalize those contacts.” He makes the point in a speech at Calcutta in January 1949 (Gopal and Iyengar 709). That this re-discovery of the Buddhist past was also, for him, like the Upanishads, a result of the work of Orientalist scholarship, as suggested by Charles Allen in The Buddha and the Sahibs, is a tribute to the complex interface between imperialism and nationalism to which Nehru was an heir.

Science, Spirituality, and Soil: Rooted Cosmopolitanism?

I have become a queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere (An Autobiography 616).

Nehru points out in the ‘Preface’ to Discovery, written between April to Sept 1944 in Ahmadnagar Fort prison, how the eleven companions such as AcharyaNarendraDev and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad who represented not only a pan-Indian political leadership but also Indian scholarship, old and new, translated into the fact of nearly all the principal Indian living languages, as well as the classical languages being represented. He names Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic and Persian, Hindi,
Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Sindhi, and Oriya in this deliberately eclectic list, indicating the linguistic inclusivity of his vision of the nation. In this sense the book is a collaborative effort, a synthesis via Nehru of a cross-section of polymathic intellectuals then in prison with him. It is possible to see it as an exercise in collective authorship, much like the making of the nation.

Written against the backdrop of the Second World War, the book relates Nehru’s adventures in philosophy and indicates his attraction towards Advaita. He admits his partiality to science, paganism, and atheism with a metaphysical touch, as well as a penchant for “vague speculation”. The book speaks of the “spirit of man” which is universalist-humanist and trans-historical and celebrates the Promethean spirit: “Plaything of nature’s mighty forces, less than a speck of dust in this vast universe, he has hurled defiance at the elemental powers, and with his mind, cradle of revolution, sought to master them. Whatever gods there be, there is something godlike in man, as there is also something of the devil in him” (Discovery 33). The dual nature of the human quest for mastery over nature can also be cast as a battle between the past and the present, and between tradition and modernity. For, from the Promethean perspective, Nehru moves to matters more political and local by quoting Emerson’s warning to his countrymen regarding the dangers of imitating Europe:

[Emerson writes]… “the rage for travelling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action….We imitate…Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean on and follow the past and the distant….Insist on yourself; never imitate…” …We in India do not have to go abroad in search of the past and the distant... If we go to foreign countries it is in search of the present. The search is necessary, for isolation from it means backwardness and decay. The world of Emerson’s time has changed and old barriers are breaking down; life becomes more international…. But a real internationalism is not something in the air without roots or anchorage. It has to grow out of national cultures and can flourish today on a basis of freedom and equality and true internationalism (565).
As he defines his position in a nuanced opposition to Emerson, Tagore is invoked consistently and Nehru returns to his theme of looking for integration of binaries, including those of Science and Religion. “The active principle of science is discovery” (Char 124) he says, indicating his own predilection for science. The concern is reiterated in *Discovery*:

There is a growing synthesis between humanism and the scientific spirit, resulting in a kind of scientific humanism …. And then the old question arises which troubled the thinkers of The Upanishads: how can the knower be known? How can the eyes that can see external objects see themselves? And if the external is part and parcel of the internal, what we perceive or conceive is but a projection of our minds, and the universe and nature and the soul and mind and body, the transcendent and the immanent are all essentially one. How then are we, within the limited framework of our minds to understand the mighty scheme of things objectively?...“In this materialistic age of ours”, says Professor Albert Einstein, “the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people” (*Discovery* 558).

The blurring of science and its ‘other’ is here effected via a blurring of another divide, that of East and West, a point reiterated in a striking metaphor he uses elsewhere: “The true scientist is the sage unattached to life and the fruits of action, ever seeking truth wheresoever this quest might lead him to” (quoted in Char 125). The language of the Gita used here is reminiscent of Gandhi’s sage-like ‘experiments,’ and the fact that the discovery of India led him not necessarily to modernity but to a tempering of the spirit of the modern with something older, a somewhat inchoately articulated sense of ‘poise’ and calm in the midst of the relentless march of modernity. Referring as early as 1946 to “ersatz foods produced with the help of ersatz fertilizers,” he asks, “what is wrong with modern civilization which produces at the roots these signs of sterility and racial decadence?” Typically, he goes on to state that “Modern industrialism and the capitalist structure of society cannot be the sole causes, for decadence has often occurred without this” and speculates that “the basic cause is something spiritual, something affecting the mind and spirit of man” and is linked to “a divorce from the soil” (*Discovery* 554-5). His language here is revelatory of a sensibility uneasy with some of the homogenizing and
Eurocentric excesses of modernity. It waxes eloquent, poetically, and rich in metaphors and flights of fancy, disturbs a facile attempt to read him as a committed ‘moderniser’. In terms of policy too, it is in this belief that “life cut off from the soil will completely wither away” and that “a touch of paganism is good for the mind and body” (556) that informs his approval for Verrier Elwin’s cautious approach to modernization of the tribals, one sees inklings of this sensibility alert to the dangers of mass modernization. This may reflect the influence of Romanticism – he quotes Emerson extensively in the last pages of Discovery – the dissident tradition of Western thought that questioned modernity from within. Though he disagrees with Emerson on the grounds that the reality is changed now, his citing of Einstein in the same breath indicates that the sources of his scepticism regarding the West/Modernity are grounded not so much in nativist discourses (though he attempts a link with The Upanishads at this point) but in cutting-edge voices from the international arena. Just as he takes recourse to a discourse of modernity to criticize the “apathy and conservatism of the British ruling classes in India”, Nehru’s interrogation of science too is effected from within that discourse: “Science used to look at nature as something apart from man. But now, Sir James Jeans tells us that the essence of science is that ‘man no longer sees nature as something distinct from himself’” (558).

This shift from a scientific worldview that could see nature instrumentally–since nature was outside, it was to be ‘used’–had profound implications for understanding modernity’s excesses, especially with relation to ecology. Gandhi had arrived at a similar understanding, and carried it forward into his private life, and from there into his politics, from the vantage point of a native spirituality that was mediated via his encounters with Emerson, Tolstoy and the underworld of those who lived ‘alternative’ lives in late Victorian London (Leela Gandhi, Stephen Hay, Akeel Bilgrami).

Nehru the Nationalist Internationalist

Looking back, in the year 1945, Nehru writes of his ambitions for the nation at an earlier phase of the freedom struggle:

I was not interested in making some political arrangement which would enable our people to carry on more or less as before, only a little better. I felt they had vast stores of suppressed energy and ability, and I
wanted to release these and make them feel young and vital again. India, constituted as she is, cannot play a secondary part in the world. She will either count for a great deal or not count at all. No middle position attracted me. Nor did I think any intermediate position feasible…. [the leaders’ attempt was, through their sacrifice] “to recharge the battery of India’s spirit (Discovery 56).

And speaking of the world as it was in 1945, he reiterates that “the nationalist idea is deep and strong; it is not a thing of the past with no future significance” even as he warns of “so-called internationalism” which is only “an extension of narrow British nationalism, which could not have appealed to us even if the logical consequences of Anglo-Indian history had not utterly rooted out its possibility from our minds” (53). Majeed argues that Nehru achieves this via a vision of India’s heterogeneity which reflects the heterogeneity of his own autobiographical self which while undermining arguments for the creation of Pakistan…also counter[s] colonialist constructions of India’s heterogeneity… [according to which India] was many nations, and as a result… unable to sustain European style democratic institutions, let alone a single nationality…. For Nehru, it is precisely the fact that India is many nations, which makes it eminently suitable to take its place in the global processes of modernity…. For Nehru there can be no flight from the self into a homogenizing nationalism. On the contrary, Indian nationalism can only be secured by being rooted in a necessarily fragile, mixed self, and it is only thus that it can take its place in the modern world (Majeed 160-1).

Thus his investment in anti-imperial nationalism was accompanied by internationalism which appealed to him from multiple vantage points: personal, philosophical, historical and ideological. His location as a Kashmiri in the Indian imaginary is worth considering for its legacy of a composite culture, especially as it embraced Sanskrit and Persian, and Hindu and Muslim, thereby rendering him culturally incapable of fathoming an exclusivist nationalism of the kind that supported the logic of Pakistan, or the one that Savarkar proposed in his rejection of Islam and Christianity as alien and Buddhism as fundamentally anti-national (Savarkar 15).
Contrary to Savarkar’s trajectory, Nehru’s travels to the West and exposure to Marxism/socialism had made him appreciative of the international movements against fascism and capitalism. He shared with Sankrityayan the broadly socialist vision that transcended the nation but also posited an anti-imperialist nationalism, as also a sense of India’s civilisational continuity with the rest of the world, especially Asia. They also shared a deep historical perspective that sought to restore India to her rightful place in the world. *Glimpses of World History* bears testimony to Nehru’s debt to Marxian modes of analysis in the way it traces a teleological vision of human growth, defined in terms of class conflict and control of means of production. If Sankrityayan was inspired enough by the communist vision to write biographies of Stalin, Lenin and Mao in his mature phase, Nehru was seen a future Lenin by many who were watching the political scene unfold in the 1930s. His main differences from the Congress were on their varying understanding of class as a category of analysis. In 1928 he reached a breaking-point with that mainstream, when Gandhi would write to him as “chafing under a burden of unnatural self-suppression” (Letter Jan. 17 1928, *Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence* 25), a position that was contained and confined more to his writings and his opinions as expressed in his speeches than in the substance of his actual political conduct. Unlike Sankrityayan, for instance, who left the Congress to join the Bihar Socialist Party, Nehru, to whom “discipline was more important than revolution” continued with the leadership of the Congress, building within it an awareness of economic issues, setting aside “the nagging problem of the gap between thought and practice (Gopal 75, 76). His perceived compromises earned him the criticism of the ultra-nationalists, the orthodox Marxists and even the Congress Socialists, but this balancing act of combining a nationalist movement with an internationalist perspective would define his political life.

Beside his exposure to Marxist thought as one strain of internationalism, Nehru’s amateur forays into Indology, history and ethnography had consolidated a sense of a historically given Asian identity that pre-dated the colonial era. He could thus look East and West for ideological affinities and points of contact based on a humanism that avoided Eurocentric biases. He could write in the 1930s:
I do not know what India will be like or what she will do when she is politically free. But I do know that those of her people who stand for national independence today stand also for the widest internationalism… Let us by all means have the closest contacts with the English and other foreign peoples. We want fresh air in India, fresh and vital ideas, healthy cooperation; we have grown too musty with age. But if the English come in the role of a tiger they can expect no co-operation….It may be possible to tame away the wild tiger in the forest and charm away his native ferocity, but there is no such possibility of taming capitalism and imperialism when the combine and swoop down on an unhappy land (*An A* 437).

Later in the book, he would muse on the need for keeping a sharp eye on contemporary world affairs:

A world is coming to an end, and a new world is taking shape …. Unhappily there is an astonishing ignorance or indifference to world happenings among our politicians….How many Indian politicians consider that Japanese imperialism, or the growing strength of the Soviet Union, or the Anglo-Russian-Japanese intrigues in Sinkiang, or the events in Central Asia or Afghanistan or Persia, have an intimate bearing on Indian politics?...even more important are the economic changes that are rapidly taking place the world over…The lawyer’s view, so prevalent in India, of proceeding from precedent to precedent is of little use when there are no precedents. We cannot put a bullock cart on rails and call it a railway train. It has to give way and be scrapped as obsolescent material (605).

In thus rejecting the “lawyer’s view” for that of an emerging statesman, Nehru indicates the distance he has travelled, in 1936, from his origins as a lawyer’s son. However, while the bullock-cart is obsolete in the face of the railways, the seeds of his discomfort with industrial modernity is also articulated in terms of the metaphor of the railways: “I am all in favour of industrialization and the latest methods of transport, but sometimes, as I rushed across the Indian plains, the railway, that life-giver, has almost seemed to me like iron bands confining and imprisoning India” (452). His response to the railways is tellingly different from Gandhi’s who saw the
railways as spreading contagion – Nehru only sees the economic and political exploitation attendant upon colonial industrialization. But the analogy of the bullock-cart as “obsolescent material” would define his relationship with the past as a source of stagnation and it is his political mentor Gandhi against whom his tussle over traditional and modernity would be played out.

**Discovering India: Private Negotiations with the Feminised Nation**

Perhaps my thoughts an approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me, as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways; and behind me lie, somewhere in the subconscious, racial memories of a hundred, or whatever the number may be, generations of Brahmans. I cannot get rid of either that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions (An A 616-7).

*An Autobiography* preceded *The Discovery of India*. In a manner of speaking, in the intervening decade between the two books, Nehru rediscovered India and Gandhi, as I argue in the next section, but also Kamala, who becomes a representative of a gendered nation on the cusp of modernity.

Significantly, it is *Discovery*, and not *An Autobiography*, that has the most intimate and moving descriptions in Nehru’s published writings of the last days he spent with his ailing wife Kamala, which draw out from him a reminiscence of their married life and its vicissitudes. While the incidents he describes here also find mention in the autobiography, they are treated differently. For example, in *Discovery*, the same vacation in Ceylon is described as a great moment of re-discovery, for the couple, of each other, while in *An Autobiography* it becomes an occasion for reflections on Buddhist monks and his own inability to find that peace and serenity that he sees reflected on their faces. In *An Autobiography*, written in prison, with a projected public persona, Nehru’s focus is different. He re-asserts his public self, carefully guarding his marital privacy in the process. It is the shock of Kamala’s death in the interim and the need to restore her story in his story, and to history, of the nation’s emergent narrative-in-the-making, that brings forth this personal narrative. His declared intention is to share and indicate the mood that followed the period he had written about at the end of *An Autobiography*: “But this is not going to be another
autobiography, though I am afraid the personal element will often be present”, he warns (Discovery 37).

However, there is a deeper movement and motive that emerges if one reads carefully the metaphors and symbolism with which he endows India on the one hand and his wife on the other. India is constantly feminized in Nehru’s prose, often reaching lyric dimensions. In the 1930s, Nehru, at a 1938 speech in London, explicitly distanced himself from Raja Ravi Varma’s iconic and popular depictions of “Bharat Mata as an elegant and well-fed lady holding in her numerous arms the symbols of wealth, power, etc…..” (quoted in Gopal and Iyengar 670). However, his objection was to the opulence of the image, not its gendering, for he goes on to clarify that the picture is not his version of India because the “real India” is the “India of the peasant.” The feminized representation of India, on the other hand, predominates in his narratives. And it is in this incarnation that his (fleeting) unease with modernity also gets articulated. I would like to suggest that though his statement made to the Indian Community at London posits an advocacy of the peasant, Nehru’s most powerful writing during the 1930s, his autobiography, betrays a cognitive difficulty with this very India of the peasant. And the treatment of the figures of Gandhi as well as of Kamala in that text bears this out. Understanding this dynamic helps us see the complex contours of Nehru’s growing discovery of India, a project that was left incomplete in the autobiography.

In the section of Discovery dealing with Kamala, the narrative segues into a narrative of traditional India’s tryst with the world at large and with modernity. The ‘world at large’ for him looks in two distinct directions: Eastwards and Westwards. Looking East, he sees ‘great ancient civilizations’ like China, while Westwards, his attention goes to liberalism, socialism, democracy, industrial modernity and its technological advances. For him, in the final analysis, India must not ignore either.

It is instructive to invoke at this point Nietzsche’s delineation of “three types of history”, as it illuminates the synthetic imagination of Nehru as an auto-didact historian and future nation-builder at work:
If a man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; he on the other hand who likes to persist in the familiar and the revered of old tends the past like an antiquarian historian; and only he who is oppressed by a present need and who wants to throw off his burden at any cost has need of critical history, that is, a history that judges and condemns (Nietzsche 72).

Nehru challenges Nietzsche’s schematic exclusiveness as his historiography crosses over these three categories; he is attempting all three modes of writing history since the idea of India-in-the-making, and of his own monumental and modernizing role in it, compels all three approaches to the past. Nietzsche had warned that “each of these existing types of history is right only for a single soil and a single climate; on every other one it grows into a destructive weed” (Nietzsche 72). However, unlike Europe, the unique multiplicity of India, as well as the historical flux it is caught in, see Nehru locating himself at once in these diverse discursive spaces.

In the personal chapter on Kamala, Nehru’s concern shifts from an earlier largely ‘monumental’ and ‘critical’ mode to the ‘antiquarian’ mode as he laments the regrettable disappearance of the traditional in the march of modernity. And it is Kamala as representative of traditional Indian womanhood that inaugurates this turn in his narrative. He speaks of her “as not the type of modern girl, with the modern girl’s habits and lack of poise” (Discovery 40) and further makes an explicit link between her and ‘India’:

She became a symbol of Indian women, or of woman herself. Sometimes she grew curiously mixed up with my ideas of India, that land of ours so dear to us, with all her faults and weaknesses, so elusive and so full of mystery. What was Kamala? Did I know her? Understand her real self? Did she know or understand me? For I too was an abnormal person with mystery and unplumbed depths within me, which I could not myself fathom (43).

Thus, while Discovery marks his rediscovery of some aspects of his own (lost) personal self, it also simultaneously marks a phase in his invention of a history and myth of India, as civilizational ‘types’ are invoked and a complex notion of ‘location’
takes shape. He locates India (via Kamala) in a temporality as well as in a physical geography which is distinct from the ‘West’ and ‘modernity’. Here, Kamala is transmuted subtly into a representative of the spirit of India. In a revealing passage, Nehru reflects on her character and his own early failure to understand her, acknowledging his erstwhile obtuseness to her subtler, more poised mode of being, very different from “the modern girls of today.” The section implicitly acknowledges his own inability to address the private dimensions of his own life in his need to be engaged with the abstract and ‘public’ sphere of politics and economics. It also simultaneously suggests that his own investment in modernity prevented him from accessing this space of the traditional feminine. In a move that links the most personal aspect of his life with the public/political, he casts it as a problem to be understood in civilizational terms, with a sense of loss as well as concern for the future:

The problem of human relationships, how fundamental it is, and how often ignored in our fierce arguments about politics and economics. It was not so ignored in the old and wise civilizations of India and China, where they developed patterns of social behaviour which, with all their faults, certainly gave poise to the individual. That poise in not in evidence in India today. But where is it in countries of the West which have progressed so much in other directions? Or is poise essentially static and opposed to progressive change? Must we sacrifice one for the other? Surely it would be possible to have union of poise and inner and outer progress, of the wisdom of the old with the science and vigour of the new. Indeed we appear to have arrived at a stage of the world’s history when the only alternative to such a union is likely to be the destruction and undoing of both (40).

Ancient civilizations like India and China are seen to carry a historical burden, but in *Discovery*, when recalling his last days with Kamala, he gets elegiac about this past. It marks one of those rare moments where modernity does not seem the best alternative to him. Interestingly, it is his acknowledgement, via suffering and loss, of the personal domain of his own ignored or repressed emotions, here represented by Kamala, that helps him arrive at this realization. She also represents the religious self. Nehru had encountered religion via Theosophy and the Upanishads as a boy while
being tutored at home; both traditions came to him from a line of transmission that could be called male/internationalist. Theosophy was developed from Indian materials in the West and the Upanishads, especially, come to signify for him the most meaningful aspects of ‘Hinduism’ when introduced by his male tutor.

Like the women’s domain, Kamala’s faith-bound Hinduism, had earlier left him alienated. During her illness, she had taken recourse to the Ramakrishna Mission and Nehru recorded his disappointment with her announcement that “she wanted to realize God and…apparently I was not to come in the way of God” and lamented “how little she fits in or tries to fit in with my ideas…and so she drifts apart” (Prison Diary entries, Feb 1 1935, SW (I) Vol. 6, 312-13; March 19 1935, 331). In An Autobiography, written at an earlier stage of his life than The Discovery of India, it was his male/public/Western devotion to ‘action’ that prevented him from understanding Kamala. In Discovery, he expresses regret that she did not speak her desire for political action and he was too busy and too self-absorbed to read her silences.

As he revisits those years, he inverts the relationship between politics and the personal in which politics had seemed to indicate clarity and action, while the private was inchoate and mysterious. Now, in hindsight, that world of political action is seen as having been “unreal”, distancing him from the “real people” around him: “I was then like a person possessed, giving myself utterly to the cause I had espoused, living in a dream world of my own, and looking at the real people who surrounded me as unsubstantial shadows….I almost forgot [Kamala] and denied her, in so many ways, that comradeship which was her due” (Discovery40). An older, more reflective Nehru belatedly expresses, in a deeply confessional digression in an otherwise entirely public book, emotions and insights he was too young and, by his own admission, too distracted by the life of political action, to understand or express in An Autobiography. Discovery thus marks a discovery – in the sense of uncovering – of an older moment of cognitive ignorance, marking a sense of self that is vulnerable and open to change and evolution, even as that narrative of ‘progress’ resists incorporation into a binary of past-as-stasis versus future-as-progress since personal evolution
involves a return to the past. The teleological thrust of the self-fashioning is devoid of the reductionism of rejecting tradition.

Nehru’s subsequent dedication of his autobiography to Kamala works as a belated tribute, an attempt to compensate for the early lack of understanding he then displayed towards this “unsophisticated girl”, chosen for him by his parents keeping the traditional caste and community considerations in mind, though her lack of English education and Western airs were ‘corrected’ by Motilal by having her “finished” by the two English governesses that he had employed for his daughters. Though prepared in this way for the dual life of the Nehru household–as a traditional Kashmiri Brahmin bride who could also participate in Allahabad’s high society – Kamala had still eluded Nehru’s comprehension. She had been “something fey-like, real but unsubstantial, difficult to grasp” (40). No wonder he was “blind to what she looked for and so ardently desired”, “to play her own part in the national struggle”. It was only in 1930 that he was able to “sense her desire” and they worked together with “a new delight” (41) Just as Kamala, linked in his imagination with all women and with India herself, grew in his estimation due to her ability to maintain her traditional poise while assuming a new role as Congress worker during his jail term, so he wishes India to maintain her “poise” while adapting to the new. India’s (future) mediations with tradition and modernity, and his own growing understanding of India is refracted via the personal: his belated recognition of Kamala and her symbolic significance.

Nehru deploys the tropes of mystery, tradition, inaccessibility, and silence when describing Kamala, a set of associations that is replicated in the autobiography’s references to India. Elsewhere, he develops these indicating a cultural dislocation: “India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic… to some extent I came to her via the West and looked at her as a friendly Westerner might have looked. I was eager and anxious to change her outlook and appearance and give her the garb of modernity. And yet doubts arose within me. Did I know India?” (50).

His self-proclaimed vocation of shaping India’s future by giving her “the garb of modernity” is challenged by a sense of his inability to fully grasp her. One person
who did represent a contrastive state of being located in India as it existed appeared to him to be Gandhi. The figure of Gandhi became a challenging figure in being both a father-figure inhabiting the traditionally male space of the political/public, and also the traditional space of the feminine/‘Hindu’/peasant India that Nehru admittedly found difficult to fathom. However, Gandhi’s syncretic vision of a vigorous anti-colonial nationalism and his undeniably holistic vision for India, and indeed of the world, compelled Nehru’s allegiance.

Discovering India via Gandhi

An Autobiography repeatedly figures India as a woman. But India is also equated with the ‘peasant’ which in turn is a category that gets equated with the figure of Gandhi. This typology works on a Nature/Culture or reason/intuition or modern/tradition divide. The motherland of India is posited as being different from the Father’s domain since Motilal was famously Westernized in his habits and lifestyle and aspirations before the advent of Gandhi. Gandhi elicits from the early Nehru the same bafflement that he experiences with his mother, and later, with Kamala, whose religious fervour during her sickness distances him from her. Religion/India/peasant/traditional women/Gandhi collectively come to represent a domain that has to be negotiated with difficulty since he harbours deeply powerful, though ambivalent, emotions vis-a-vis it.

His differences from Gandhi often took the form of a debate between Nehru’s Western education and scientific views and Gandhi’s appeal to another discourse: “Gandhiji’s conception of democracy is definitely a metaphysical one. It has nothing to do with numbers or majority or representation in the ordinary sense. It is based on service and sacrifice, and it uses moral pressure…. He claims to be ‘a born democrat’….” (An A 362). The tone here is not that of a follower, but of a slightly distant observer whose patience is often times tested by the peculiarities of Gandhi’s worldview. “Whether Gandhi is a democrat or not,” Nehru concedes, “he does represent the peasant masses of India; he is the quintessence of the conscious and unconscious will of those millions. It is perhaps more than representation; for he is the idealized personification of those vast millions.” In this myth-making, Nehru reveals a tendency
in his own writing towards poetic hyperbole and romantic generalization. However, despite this paean, Gandhi’s great critique of the West and defense of rural India, *Hind Swaraj*, never fully met with Nehru’s approval. Even as late as 1945, he wrote to Gandhi bluntly: “It is many years ago since I read *Hind Swaraj* and I have only a vague picture in my mind. But even when I read it 20 or more years ago it seemed to me completely unreal” (Letter October 9 1945, *Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence* 204). However, addressed to “Bapu”, Nehru’s letters reveal the depth of their personal relationship; Gandhi came to be a father to him in ways that surpassed even Motilal’s influence. At one of their breaking points in 1928, Nehru had written: “No one has moved me and inspired me more than you….But even in the wider sphere am I not your child in politics, though perhaps a truant and errant child?” (Letter January 23 1928, *Gandhi-Nehru Correspondence* 27). This “relationship of conflict and compromise” (Namboodiripad 60), which the communists watched with interest and dismay from the sidelines, rested often upon the specific tussle within Nehru between his leftist leanings and his loyalty to the Congress as a disciplined member of the party.

Nehru attempted to reconcile the conflicting claims by opening up a ‘rational’ space for Gandhian ‘peasant’ politics:

Many of us had cut adrift from this peasant outlook, and the old ways of thought and custom and religion had become alien to us. We called ourselves moderns, and thought in terms of ‘progress’, and industrialization and a higher standard of living and collectivization. We considered the peasants’ viewpoint reactionary….How came we to associate ourselves with Gandhiji politically, and to become, in many instances, his devoted followers? The question is hard to answer….Personality is an indefinable thing, a strange force that has power over the souls of men and possesses this in ample measure ….He attracted people but it was ultimately intellectual conviction that brought them to him and kept them there. Often they did not understand him. But the action that he proposed was something tangible which could be understood and appreciated intellectually (*An A* 267-8).

Gandhi thus has to occupy the space of reason and “tangible action” in order to be comprehensible.
However, Gandhi was seen to be accessing India more readily, almost instinctively, since he was a “peasant” (267). Nehru felt alienated from the masses despite his fierce sense of belonging. During his election tour he gradually began to understand the peasant masses: “If my mind was full of pictures from recorded history and more-or-less ascertained fact, I realised that even the illiterate peasant had a picture gallery in his mind, though this was largely drawn from myth and tradition and epic heroes and heroines, and only very little from history. Nevertheless, it was vivid enough” (Discovery 67). The faintly patronizing praise accorded to peasant knowledge, indigenous and with roots deep into the past, bears witness to his alienation from the lived cultural continuities that he celebrates elsewhere in the book. The peasant surfaces as a space of ignorance as he indulges in self-projection as an illuminator of the dark peasant mind on the issue of nationalism. When greeted by shouts of “Bharat Mata ki Jai”, Nehru’s narration deserves discussion as an example of different notions of nationalism at work:

I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them….At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil for immemorial generations, would say that it was the dharti, the good earth of India, that they meant. ….I would endeavor to … explain that India was all this…. and much more. The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forest and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, spread out all over this vast land. …You are parts of Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery (60-1, emphasis added).

Nehru’s own discovery of peasant India is posited here as a discovery by the peasant of a new concept of nationhood that goes beyond the immediacy of ‘soil’ to a larger and more abstract entity. The nation as an ‘imagined community’ is in the process of being made. However, Benedict Anderson’s modular framework for
understanding the rise of nationalism has limited applicability to the Indian context, as the work of Bhikhu Parekh (1989) and Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1994) has shown.

In one of the longest discussions on Gandhi in the middle of the autobiography, Nehru reflects on Gandhi’s appeal as a traveler between East and West, the metaphysical and the tangible, the spiritual and the intellectual. While it is a telling account of Gandhi as a political being at the high point of the struggle (The Delhi Pact of 1931), it reflects equally on Nehru’s own concerns and perceptual framework. Gandhi speaks of traditional culture, of what would be called Bharat while Nehru has in mind a modern nation, India, in the making. In a long passage that reveals Nehru’s own location outside this conceptual space of ‘India’, he writes:

Of course, he is not the average peasant. A man of the keenest intellect, of fine feeling and good taste, wide vision; very human, and yet essentially the ascetic who has suppressed his passions and emotions, sublimated them and directed them in spiritual channels; a tremendous personality, drawing people to himself like a magnet, and calling out fierce loyalties and attachments—all this is so utterly unlike and beyond a peasant. And yet within he is the great peasant, with a peasant’s outlook on affairs, and with a peasant’s blindness to some aspects of life. But India is peasant India, and he knows his India well and reacts to her lightest tremors. …

What a problem and puzzle he has been not only to the British Government but to his own people and his closest associates! Perhaps in every other country he would be out of place today, but India still seems to understand, or at least appreciate, the prophetic-religious type of man, talking of sin and salvation and non-violence….He was obviously not of the world’s ordinary coinage; he was minted of a different and rare variety, and often the unknown stared at us through his eyes.

India, even urban India, even the new industrial India had the impress of the peasant upon her, and it was natural enough for her to make this son of hers, so like her and yet so unlike, an idol and a beloved leader. He revived ancient and half-forgotten memories, and gave her glimpses of her own soul. Crushed in the dark misery of the
present, she had tried to find relief in helpless mutterings and in vague dreams of the past and the future, but he came and gave hope to her mind and strength to her much-battered body, and the future became an alluring vision. Two-faced like Janus, she looked both backwards into the past and forward into the future, and tried to combine the two (An A 267-8).

Strikingly, the language echoes the “elusiveness and mystery” that he had located in Kamala whose eyes “sometimes” revealed to him a “stranger peeping out” (Discovery 40). They are linked also by the repetition of the trope of “ancient, half-forgotten memories” that industrial modernity seems to deny. He locates meaning and significance, for the future of India, in its ancient past. Glimpses and Discovery are both concerned with correcting the Eurocentric bias of Western scholarship and they concern themselves with setting the record straight on the sophisticated and layered past of Asia. In this he may be replicating the Eurocentricity of historiography itself in the interest of forging a new nation. “...every man and every nation requires, in accordance with its goals, energies and needs, a certain kind of knowledge of the past,” says Nietzsche, even as he recognizes that “our valuation of history may only be an occidental prejudice” (Nietzsche 66). In his need for telling history, and that too, seeing it as a palimpsest, Nehru seems to be echoing the historian in Nietzsche who, “sometimes …greets the soul of his nation across the long dark centuries of confusion as his own soul; an ability to sense his way back and feel how things were, to detect traces almost extinguished, to read the past quickly and correctly no matter how intricate its palimpsest may be--these are his talents and virtues” (63). Perhaps the very idea of history as palimpsest, a recurrent and defining frame of Nehru’s writing, owes its origin to Nietzsche’s formulation.

Though he criticized Hindus and Muslims who look to the past with unqualified respect, he repeatedly identified with the ‘Asiatic’ as against the European, as with the triumph of the Arabs in Spain (An A 489, 488), a strategy that helps him appropriate history strategically in the interest of articulating an emergent Asian pride, even if it does so in terms of a collective “will to power.” This sets him apart from Gandhi who would not use such triumphalist/militarist examples from history to buttress national pride.
Nehru’s autobiography reiterates in no uncertain terms, his deep indebtedness to his English education and to his commitment to an internationalism, which is yet nostalgic about roots and soil. However, as his tussle with the figure of Gandhi reveals, Nehru had to struggle to become an Indian, even as he was engaged in the task of discovering an India that has, paradoxically, always had the seeds of ‘the modern’, if modernity means openness to the world at large. If he takes a critical stance towards traditional India, it is because it is in the grip of outdated customs. This and the notion of village self-sufficiency were issues where disagreements with Gandhi were openly articulated, especially as *Hind Swaraj* had voiced the latter’s views. However, when he declared that “India is not known by logic… and Gandhi knows her” (268), and a few pages later critiqued the Orientalisation of the East as “mysterious” (302), he was testifying to his own lack of clarity and deep ambivalence regarding India. Gandhi became a site for this ambivalence. Ultimately it was Gandhi’s success as a political mobilizer that won Nehru’s respect, a respect that he cast in Oriental terms of ‘Western’ activity versus an ‘Eastern’ passivity. In *The Discovery of India*, he asserts that “the Indian habit of mind is essentially one of quietism” and though he conjectures that “perhaps old races develop that attitude to life” (incidentally positing a questionable construction view of ‘Indians’ as a ‘race’), it is to Gandhi he turns as an example of its contrary, praising him as “an activist full of dynamic energy. There was no submission in him to fate or anything that he considered evil; he was full of resistance, though this was peaceful and courteous” (359-360).

Given his autobiography’s occasional betrayal of a discomfort with ‘India’, reflecting a stage in Nehru’s life when he was yet to come to terms with the nation, it is a rare moment in the text when he makes reference to a traditional Indian source for political inspiration. Evoking the *Rajatarangini*, the thousand-year-old Kashmiri historic epic, translated into English by his brother-in-law, he speaks approvingly of the ideal of governance it posits and leaves the twin terms it uses for law and order – *dharma* and *abhaya* – untranslated. In holding this up over the British concept of the mockery of “law and order” as something to be imposed on “a frightened populace”, Nehru shows his own participation in the search for a discursive location of
cosmopolitanism which was also confidently rooted in an alternative language to that of the imperial masters (500).

However, Nehru’s vision of composite India is best described via the metaphor of transplantation and grafting, rather than organic rootedness. This comes through in passages in his autobiography where he invokes the discourse of the soil. In an atypical and interesting formulation which transposes the conceptual category of caste onto class, Nehru refers in a derogatory way to “the bania civilization of the capitalist West,” arguing that the “spirit of India has always looked down upon trade,” where “honour and wealth did not go together.” Significantly, at this early stage of his thinking, the answer to this plague of capitalism is also to be found in European socialism, articulated by him via a striking phrase: the “brahmanisation of all classes”:

But the West also brings the antidote to the evils of this cut-throat civilization – the principles of socialism, of co-operation, and service to the community for the common good. This is not so unlike the old Brahman ideal of service, but it means the brahmanization (not in the religious sense, of course) of all classes and groups and the abolition of class distinctions. It may be that when India puts on her new garment, as she must, for the old is torn and tattered, she will have it cut in this fashion, so as to make it conform both to present conditions and her old thought. The ideas she adopts must become rooted in her soil (449).

In this formulation, Nehru attempted to align the West with the East, albeit via a questionable reading of the caste system. Not only was “the old Brahman idea of service” a problematic assumption about the caste system, it revealed the residual Brahman in Nehru, constructing a mythological idea of India’s past, showing the contradictions of the progressive elite. It is also reminiscent of RahulaSankrityayan’s choice of retaining a trace of his gotra name (sanskrit) even in his Buddhist avatar. So when Nehru declared in the “Epilogue” to An Autobiography that “behind me lie, somewhere in the subconscious, racial memories of a hundred, or whatever the number may be, generations of Brahmans” (617), the use of the caste metaphor suggests that perhaps Nehru was not aware of the full, sometimes retrogressive, range of these “race memories” which continued to co-exist with a commitment to
socialism. A contrast with Gandhi is instructive here. For Gandhi, often understood to be a defender of the varnashram per se, most powerfully in Ambedkar’s critique, the answers lie not in socialism but in an indigenously articulated critique of both capitalism and socialism, even as he avoids using the caste metaphor to understand a Western system of oppression.

The “Epilogue” to the truncated autobiography is a quote from *The Talmud*: “We are enjoined to labour; but it is not granted to us to complete our labours” (615). There is an acceptance of open possibilities for the self and the nation, both unfinished projects: “The distant mountains seem easy of access and climbing the top beckons, but as one approaches, difficulties appear, and the higher one goes the more laborious becomes the journey and the summit recedes into the clouds. Yet the climbing is worth the effort…. ” Though the journey ahead is figured in the language of adventure in nature, suggesting a need to retreat from the business of politics, the Tennysonian ring of these lines indicate both the challenges of making history as well as its rewards. In the final analysis, Nehru’s is a sense of wonder that transcends the moments of “age and weariness” to assert an optimism and open-ended-ness: “More and more I have looked upon life as an adventure of absorbing interest, where there is so much to learn, so much to do. I have continually had a feeling of growing up…” (616).

For one close reader of his texts, Nehru’s “sources of identity are kept open.” Majeed here counters SarvapalliGopal’s formulation that Nehru’s autobiography is “written in an astonishingly narrow nationalist tradition” to assert the cosmopolitanism of Nehru’s variety of India, indeed a “cosmopolitan self in disarray” (162-163). Majeed overstates the point here, risking the creation of yet another fixed formulation of India’s “disarray”. He also risks interpreting accidents of history – at least some of Nehru’s ‘disarray’ is traceable to difficult periods and contexts of his life in which his autobiography and the life came into being – as deliberate choices. Nehru’s self-acknowledged debt to the nineteenth century also needs to be remembered along with his oft-repeated nostalgia for a wholeness, which the postmodern celebration of “playful disarray” does not adequately capture (Majeed 178). While his formulation regarding the impossibility of closure in Nehru’s autobiography – since it is the expression of a perpetual becoming of someone who
has “continually had the feeling of growing up” (An A 596) – is true to Nehru’s own self-projection, it is also true that as Prime Minister of independent India his actions often had a historical force and closure that must surely qualify Majeed’s reading.

“In the midst of activity, I could separate myself from it and look at it as a thing apart. Sometimes I would steal an hour or two, and forgetting my usual preoccupations, retire into that cloistered chamber of my mind and live, for a while, another life. And so, in this way, these two lives marched together, inseparably tied up with one another, and yet apart” (Discovery 68). For Nehru, writing the self was a project that had to be carried out in a dynamic and fragile dialectic between a space of mental freedom and the compulsions of history-making. His twin vocations – of being an epoch-making actor on the national stage and of one leading a life of the mind – locate him in a space of often contesting polarities. These polarities were negotiated in a dynamic exchange with other actors who offered instructive contrasts to his location within the nation, and on the international stage. Of these, Gandhi was the most powerful one.