CHAPTER III
The Two Key Aspects of Nehru’s framework: The Relation between Culture & Democracy and the Question of National Identity

In this Chapter we would look at two aspects of Nehru’s nationalist framework: firstly, the relationship between culture and democracy in Nehru both in its normative and political aspects, and secondly, the normative historical narrative where Nehru tries to fuse in questions of ethics along the borderlines of a unique national identity.

Culture & Democracy: Normative and Political Aspects

We would find in this section how Nehru did not equate the questions of culture with nationalism but democracy. In specific terms, though Nehru does link up culture with the idea of the nation, he does so in the vague sense of the “past” and treats it as a normative for cultural differences being sorted out through mutual influences and co-existence. In terms of the modern nation state which Nehru seeks to build, the issues of culture would belong to the private, and can act politically only in narrow senses, the most acute being communalism. In the political sphere, culture can act as normative only through the ideal of mutual tolerance and respect for secular principles. In other words, culture can either value democratic norms or rendered a law and order problem and a backward ideology. The democratic idea of the nation puts culture into the private sphere as the nation’s definition includes a plurality which excludes any particular cultural claim. The nation is politically more of a territorial idea, where issues of culture are linked to other issues, which are all together, handled to foster democracy.
According to Nehru, India was rich in cultural heritage, something that was however more about the past, from where we could draw our sense of subjective attachment, but couldn't bring upon that heritage to formulate the values of the nation. Because, for Nehru, the word nation is a "narrow creed"\(^1\) unless it is synonymous with the ideals of democracy. In fact, for Nehru, democracy is the new cultural ideal – where issues of individual freedom and social equality thrive. In a statement Nehru forged a relationship between democracy and community in strict terms: "You may define democracy in a hundred ways but surely one of its definitions is self-discipline of the community"\(^2\) It appears that democracy to Nehru is like a regulatory mechanism. Democracy can be established over a community only after a community practices restraint about certain aspects. What aspects did Nehru have in mind? Certainly communal passions for one. One should understand that the word "self-discipline" does not have any discursive meaning in Nehru's idea, though there might be repercussions of the idea on other aspects of Nehru's ideas. In this particular context, Nehru has a thick idea of communal passion, which is disruptive to a democratic order of social relations. As elsewhere, even here Nehru tries to base the definition of democracy in terms of a "relation" between communities. The issue of culture is brought to the level of the intrinsic conflicts in Indian society between religious groups and democracy is posed vis-à-vis the need to curtail the communal tensions between communities so that issues of democracy can flourish. This posing of the community vis-à-vis democracy in terms of self-discipline\(^2\) is turned towards an anxious understanding of the problem where

\(^1\) Nehru, Jawaharlal, *An Autobiography*, OUP, 1980, p. 166
passions of the community, evidently regarding political matters, is sought to be tamed. The taming of community passions is required by Nehru to make a society democratic. What does Nehru seek to channelize this passion into? The answer seems to be: co-operative work.

As Nehru said, "Parliamentary democracy demands many virtues. It demands, of course, ability. It demands a certain devotion to work. But it demands also a large measure of co-operation, of self-discipline, of restraint". Elsewhere he says, "Work, hard work, not for years but for generations, should be the order of the day if any nation wants to survive. Hard work is essential if the nation is to advance in the economic sphere and if the people have to advance well. I am pained to see the lack of discipline and character in India".

Nehru had the optimism about co-operative work replacing the factional tendencies of communalism. It was very much a Protestant-capitalist idea as brilliantly explained by Weber, which was Nehru's answer to the cultural problem. In fact, Partha Chatterjee has also shown how Nehru tried to replace cultural problems by bringing in questions of economic solutions. There is a long quote of Nehru by Chatterjee to argue his case. Lets look into what Nehru is saying here:

"It is nevertheless extraordinary how the bourgeois classes, both among the Hindus and the Muslims, succeeded, in the sacred name of religion, in getting a measure of mass sympathy and support for programmes and demands which had absolutely nothing to with the masses, or even the lower middle

---

3 Nehru, Jawaharlal, The Essential Writings, Vol 2, ed. S. Gopal, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, p. 69
4 Ibid. p. 174
class. Every one of the communal demands put forward by any communal group is, in the final analysis, a demand for jobs, and these jobs could only go to a handful of the upper middle class. There is also, of course, the demand for special and additional seats in the legislature, as symbolizing political power, but this too is looked upon chiefly as the power to exercise patronage. These narrow political demands, benefiting at the most, a small number of the upper middle classes, and often creating barriers in the way of national unity and progress, were cleverly made to appear as the demands of the masses of that particular group. Religious passion was hitched on to them in order to hide their barrenness.

In this way political reactionaries came back to the political field in the guise of communal leaders, and the real explanation of the various steps they took was not so much their communal bias as their desire to obstruct political advance. 

Chatterjee finds this articulation of Nehru within the overall framework of Nehru’s ‘scientific’ construction of society and politics, where only the questions of objective, economic interests, as apart from the subjective interests of beliefs, could be understood. So in the case of the communal problems between Hindus and Muslims, Nehru reduces the problem, according to Chatterjee, into comprehending “the motivations and interests of political leaders and organizations which sought to manipulate the masses by playing upon their religious passions. And so, understanding the politics of

5 Chatterjee, Partha, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?, OUP, Delhi, 1986, 142
'communalism' becomes a problem of identifying which group of politicians used which particular issues to mislead which sections of the people"⁶.

Chatterjee's argument about Nehru's split understanding of the communal problem into the zones of the objective and subjective is placed from another observation by Nehru. As Chatterjee quotes Nehru:

"Having assured the protection of religion and culture, etc., the major problems that were bound to come up were economic ones which had nothing to do with a person's religion. Class conflicts there might be, but not religious conflicts, except so far as religion itself represented some vested interests"⁷.

In fact Nehru was absolutely sanguine about religious tolerance in Indian society, which was more a case of social ethics as practiced between communities, rather than a political problem, which was always the work of communal animosity. As he says in *The Discovery*:

"Latterly religion, in any real sense of the word, has played little part in Indian political conflicts, though the word is often enough used and exploited. Religious differences, as such, do not come in the way, for there is a great deal of mutual tolerance for them. In political matters, religion has been displaced by what is called communalism, a narrow group mentality basing itself on a religious community but in reality concerned with political power and patronage for the interested group"⁸.

---

⁶ Ibid. p. 143
⁷ Ibid. p. 141
⁸ Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery*, OUP, 1964, p. 382
So according to Nehru, as we see, the problem of culture in the field of politics is mainly about the granting of its protection. By itself culture cannot form an ideology of conflict that can be progressive about its demands, as whatever problem isn't strictly economic, cannot be termed progressive in Nehru's conception. Questions of "difference" cannot raise politically viable issues for Nehru, as for him, protection of cultural rights is enough for all purposes, taking into account the already existing (taken for granted) tolerance between religious groups. Politically speaking, Nehru was sure where the question of religion should not be. As he clarified:

"While religion is free, it is not allowed to interfere with the political and economic aspects of national life".9

The link between culture/religion and modernity is based upon economic questions according to Nehru. Issues of belief were put into the private sphere of things. It is the primordial sphere that had to be respected but not brought into the field of politics.

What this sphere needs, according to Nehru, is education. The real barriers against this socio-cultural sphere of group-identity were a matter of eradicating religio-cultural concerns and replacing them with economic self-sustenance and social progress of the community. As he says:

"(E)very effort should be made by the state as well by private agencies to remove all invidious social and social and customary barriers which came in the way of the full development of the individual as well as any group, and that educationally and economically backward classes should be helped to

---

9 Nehru, Jawaharlal, The Essential Writings, ed. S. Gopal, Vol. 1, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, p. 46
get rid of their disabilities as rapidly as possible. This applied especially to the depressed classes. It was further laid down that women should share in every way with men in the privileges of citizenship.\textsuperscript{10}

Nehru saw the real problem, whether of the group or the individual, as essentially one that has to do with economic and educational progress. In one of his speeches, Nehru provides his suspicion about the nature of religious conflicts in simple terms:

"In the modern world, people do not quarrel because they belong to different religions. Unfortunately, they quarrel about other matters and even go to war, but they do not do so on the basis of religion. To do so is a sign of backwardness and exhibits a lack of the tolerance of spirit for which India has prided itself.\textsuperscript{11}

Nehru unambiguously holds to the conception that religion is never the basic reason for religious conflicts in the modern world. The idea of the modern, in Nehru, is consistently the idea – to begin with – of a conflict between traditional ways of thinking and life, posed against the social and political consciousness which demanded values of social equality, economic progress and individual freedom, all marked by a rational and liberal way of thinking. The rational side in Nehru is partly placed, as has been noted, in the scientific-management mode of positivistic thinking, where the large-scale generation of resources, of proper planning and execution of methods of development, are writ large in the process of progress. Though in this, Nehru's concerns are social, the type of changes Nehru envisages of society

\textsuperscript{10} Chatterjee, Partha, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, OUP, Delhi, 1986, p. 141
\textsuperscript{11} Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Essential Writings*, ed. S. Gopal, Vol. 1, OUP, New Delhi, 2003
is hinged upon his thrust towards scientific development. Nehru did realize the nature of conflict inherent between a scientific mindset and a traditional society. But in rare moments he clarified his view in straight terms and chillingly betrayed where his heart lay:

"There are certainly many differences between the traditional Hindu and the Muslim philosophies of life. But these differences are hardly noticeable when both of them are compared to the modern scientific and industrial outlook on life, for between this latter and the former two there is a vast gulf. The real struggle in India today is not between Hindu culture and Muslim culture but between these two and the conquering scientific culture of modern civilization...I have no doubt, personally, that all efforts, Hindu or Muslim, to oppose modern scientific and industrial civilization were doomed to failure and I shall watch this failure without regret"\(^{12}\).

Having accepted the universality of scientific culture, Nehru pits the entire structure of traditional, religious cultures against the modern, scientific one. It is a kind of idea of a third culture that would both merge the first two in a common thread of progress and at the same time wipe out the resistive elements of those two cultures. Nehru treats the question of traditional Hindu and Muslim cultures here in almost fossilized terms and dreams of their defeat in the face of the modern, industrial and scientific world. Hindu and Muslim cultures were thus historical terms of cultures where the question of values were not regarded as sacrosanct in the face of questions about equality, social progress and a common tolerance based on liberal principles. In other words, the terms 'culture' and 'moral value' were themselves

---

untenable under present norms. “The most notable feature of this world today, including India,”, Nehru once said in a Conference, “is the divorce between moral and cultural standards and the business of life”13. Nehru was sure where the first priority of society lay in terms of “the business of life”:

“The first thing that one has to do is to provide the essentials of life to human beings before you can talk of anything else and then economics comes in, and human beings today are not in a mood to put up with this suffering and starvation and inequality when they see that the burden is not equally shared”14.

About questions of morality, Nehru’s idea was distinctly tilted in favour of the modern individual rather than in traditional groups.

“Perhaps, (this) past inheritance influences the national group even more than the individual, for large numbers of human beings are driven more by unconscious and impersonal urges than the individual, and it is more difficult to divert them from their course. Moral considerations may influence an individual but their effect on a group is far less, and the larger the group the less is their effect on it. And it is easier, especially in the modern world, to influence the group by insidious propaganda. And yet sometimes, though rarely, the group itself rises to a height of moral behaviour, forcing the individual to forget his narrow and selfish ways. More often the group falls below the individual standard”15.

13 Nehru, Jawaharlal, _The Essential Writings_, Vol 1, ed. S. Gopal, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, p. 107
14 Ibid. p. 113
15 Nehru, Jawaharlal, _The Discovery_, OUP, 1964, p. 524
Hence, according to Nehru, the individual is a much safer bet, a more stable recipient of moral considerations rather than a group. The idea of the individual is directly correlated with the idea of modernity. In fact, Nehru links up the importance of democracy to a mentalist conception where every factor leads to the basic flowering of the individual. As he says, speaking to Norman Cousins:

"I would say that democracy is not only political, not only economic, but something of the mind, as everything is ultimately something of the mind. It involves equality of opportunity to all people, as far as possible, in the political and economic domain. It involves freedom of the individual to grow and to make the best of his capacities and ability. It involves a certain tolerance of others and even of others' opinions when they differ from yours. It involves a certain contemplative tendency and a certain inquisitive search for truth – and for, let us say, the right thing\(^{16}\).

Nehru visibly incorporates the Kantian idea of modernity into his basic premises about democracy. As for Kant, the freedom of individual thought was the basis of growing into maturity, against the authority of traditions, so for Nehru; this very "mental" attitude would evolve into the desired freedom of the individual as well as imbibe an ethical attitude towards others in the social sphere. In fact, with regard to the fundamental status of the individual Nehru fuses in the idea not only of democracy but also his idea of the nation. At the end of The Discovery, when Nehru contemplates on what he's discovered throughout the book in his bid to understand India, he says:

---

\(^{16}\) Nehru, Jawaharlal, The Essential Writings, Vol. 2, ed. S. Gopal, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, p. 710

126
"Today she is four hundred million separate individual men and women, each differing from the other, each living in a private universe of thought and feeling."¹⁷

In a speech Nehru asserted this same idea of India being a nation made up essentially of individuals:

"Once I was asked, 'What is your principal problem? How many problems have you got?' I said, 'We have got 360 million problems in India'. Now that answer amused people, but it has an essential truth in it: that all our problems have to be viewed from the point of view of the 360 million individuals, not some statistical mass which you see drawn in curves and graphs on paper. Graphs are very useful to understand, but we must think in terms of individuals, individual happiness and individual misery."²⁸

Hence the idea of culture is fused into the idea of the individual as the fundamental category which concerns both the notion of democracy as well as the nation. In a reverse manner one can say that the cultural problematic is thrown into the individual domain to show that even if the modern subject is seen to have a specific cultural identity, he stands outside the sphere of the group and is regarded as a separate entity. He does say in The Discovery, speaking in the context of the socialist ideas of Marx and Lenin:

"I am too much of an individualist and believer in personal freedom to like overmuch regimentation. Yet it seemed to me obvious that in a complex social structure individual freedom had to be limited, and perhaps the only

---

¹⁷ Nehru, Jawaharlal, The Discovery, OUP, 1964, p. 562
way to read personal freedom was through some such limitation in the social sphere¹⁰.

What is Nehru’s conception of the social sphere? We have already seen that he distrusts groups more than he does individuals. One understands from Nehru’s various writings that the social sphere is inherently a modern conception where the ideals are not cultural superiority or group exclusiveness, but rather socio-economic participation and general welfare. The relationship which Nehru draws between the individual and the group is distinctly modern in its very notion of the individual as an autonomous subject however much within social relations.

To come back to the political questions regarding culture; for Nehru, traditional cultures were simply narcissistic in nature where issues of inequality and injustice were justified under rigid and unchanging norms. Under democracy, these norms just had to disappear. In fact, the norms of democracy and traditional cultures were quintessentially opposed in Nehru’s idea. Here one should note when Nehru talks about the spirit of the age or of modern life, etc, they form synonyms of his idea of democracy. Since Nehru isn’t a theorist, his language is both loose and imbued with a rich vocabulary in order to drive home the essence of his ideals. Here, in The Discovery, Nehru makes it plain his attitude towards traditions in contrast to modern norms:

“We have to get out of traditional ways of thought of living which, for all the good in them, have ceased to have any significance to-day. We have to make

¹⁰ Nehru, Jawaharlal, The Discovery, OUP, 1964, p. 29
our own all the achievements of the human race and join up with others in the exciting adventures of man, more exciting to-day perhaps than in earlier ages, realizing that this has ceased to be governed by national boundaries or old divisions and is common to the race of man everywhere.\textsuperscript{20}

It is quite clear what were those "exciting adventures" which Nehru meant. Namely, the spirit of science. But Nehru has linked up this spirit with the social ideal: that of equality, which in turn demands economic progress.

Since the idea of democracy includes the principles of the state in the political sense, Nehru's idea of a secular state would give us the idea of where exactly it's placed in his conception of the state. In this quote he makes the idea of a secular state wonderfully precise and noteworthy:

"We call our state a secular one. The word 'secular' perhaps is not a very happy one. And yet, for want of a better, we have used it. What exactly does it mean? It does obviously mean a state where religion as such is discouraged. It means freedom of religion and conscience, including freedom for those who may have no religion. It means free play for all religions, \textit{subject only to their not interfering with each other or with the basic conceptions of our state}. It means that minority communities, from the religious point of view, should accept this position. It means, even more, that the majority community, from this point of view, should fully realize it. For, by virtue of members as well as in other ways, it is the dominant community and it is its responsibility not to use its position in any way which might prejudice our secular ideal."\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. p. 510
\textsuperscript{21} Nehru, Jawaharlal, \textit{The Essential Writings}, Vol. 1, ed. S. Gopal, OUP, New Delhi, 2003, p. 192

129
It is quite clear at first glance that the idea of a secular state in Nehru’s conception has a two-fold indication: in the social sphere, religious communities are given normative directives of behaviour, which is more in the shape of private responsibilities and attitudes of a group as a whole, while in the political sphere they are told to stay out. The “basic conception of the state” is linked to the question of culture only with regard to the protective measures taken by the state. We go back to the issue of Nehru’s state-protection of minorities as a panacea for what he calls the communal problem. Let’s have another look at the issue to study his position more clearly. Here he says in *The Discovery*:

“The communal problem, as it was called, was one of adjusting the claims of the minorities and giving them sufficient protection from majority action”22.

In fact, for Nehru, any religious demand in the sphere of politics is essentially communal:

“In political matters, religion has been displaced by what is called communalism, a narrow group mentality basing itself on a religious community but in reality concerned with political power and patronage for the group concerned”23.

The problem with this way of formulating the case by Nehru lies in its more being a language of the state than of a national leader who is still faced with a political problem of resolving serious questions regarding the issue of Hindu-Muslim animosity. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru does not seem to regard the issue at

23 Ibid. p. 382

130
an organic level of engagement, but merely treated it as a law and order problem. He sidestepped the political demands at stake in the Muslim claim of representation of the community in concrete political terms. Any demand made solely on the basis of community was termed communal by Nehru. We now know, as he later did, how the sidestepping of the issue did not help prevent a bloody partition of India. But even then, Nehru stuck to his old conception and regarded partition as a sectarian achievement by the Muslim League. Whether partition was a sectarian event or not is not the issue. Nehru’s stubbornness in not allowing historically strained feelings and perceptions between religious communities to be taken seriously shows a typical and insensitive prejudice towards an issue which in real terms marked a disastrous blot in India’s independence. The formation of a theocratic state in Pakistan allowed Nehru to go on with his rhetorical tirade against “communalism”. In 1946, when the Muslim League demand for a separate state was at its peak, Nehru still clung on to his old assertion:

“Difficult problems in India…(are) not so much those about which people talk and (become) heated, such as about Pakistan, although (such problems exist), but the primary problem (for) India is the economic problem: (to solve) as far as we can the problem of poverty and (raise) the standard of living”24.

When partition and the riots actually happen, Nehru says on October 3, 1947:

---

"India had for thirty years been drilled into non-violence by Mahatma Gandhi. Why, then, suddenly did violence break out in the country?"  

This bemusement sounds unexplainable in the face of facts. Having ignored the signs of repeated communal violence which has been happening in parts of India during the 1920s and 1930s, and having treated the issue trivially in his overall scheme of things, Nehru was now faced with an event he had no answer for. India was always sitting over a communal earthquake but Nehru's modernist optimism was veered towards economic structures and social progress. It wasn't as if his fundamental concerns did not deserve utmost attention, it certainly did, but the language of change had to be more entrenched with respect to the cultural psyche of the population. To not address cultural issues in the political sphere amounted to a big disaster which proved itself during partition. The individualist thrust in Nehru's understanding of society, and his suspicious and restless attitude towards cultural groups did not help to quell the many political aspirations of religious and other groups. The statist language of protection and reservation was not merely what marginalized groups were seeking. Political power was a core issue among groups and to treat it as narrow was certainly an elitist bias on Nehru's part. It also smacked of dishonesty, because Nehru himself was interested in political power for the sake of bringing about his own method of changes in society. In fact, even though one finds Nehru's cultural idea of India to be pluralistic, his political idea of the nation was distinctly individualist and unitarian. The obsession for unity among India's diverse cultural population could not be settled merely through statist regulations like

---

25 Ibid. p. 344

132
federalism. Nehru, of course spoke about "emotional unity". But this can be seen as a variant of securing political unity without really going into the problems between and within regions and cultural/religious groups.

More importantly, historically speaking, the politics of the Congress dilly-dallied with the Muslim League’s demand for partition. Lets look at the changeover in Nehru’s words within eight days in April 1946. On the 5th of April, Nehru states:

"Congress is not going to agree to the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan under any circumstances whatsoever, even if the British Government agrees to it. Nothing on earth, not even (the United Nations Organization), is going to bring about the Pakistan which Jinnah wants"26.

On the 13th of April Nehru had this to say:

"(I am) prepared to view with respect a demand for Pakistan if it is made after the freedom of the country has been achieved"27.

The question for Nehru, in this rhetorical game of politics, was a desperate bid to push back the contentious issue of partition till freedom is bought by a sleight-of-hand shadow playing with the Muslim League’s demand. But apart from this crisis of political contingency which forced both sides to play with words, what is at issue here is on what principles Nehru on the one hand regards partition as impossible to accept out of ideological and ethical reasons, having rejected the communal idea of a nation based on religious identity, and on the other hand accepts "with respect" the possibility of the

26 Ibid. p. 25
27 Ibid. p. 25
same at a later date. It makes his desire for independence appear to be highly instrumentalist, being made an issue of political bargaining in the core.

The basic attitude with which the Congress faced the issue of Partition is best summed up by this statement of Nehru:

"The Congress was prepared to do anything within the bounds of reason to remove fear and suspicion from the mind of any Province or community, but it felt itself unable to endorse (any suggestion that) went against the 'basic method of democracy' on which (it) hoped to build up (a) constitution."\(^28\)

There are four aspects at work in this statement: the element of reason, the fears of a community, the 'method' of democracy and the making of a constitution. All these four aspects have been fused together. There immediately arise certain conceptual questions at the level of politics. Firstly: Can fears of a community merely be handled through reason? Does the democratic method solely rest on reason? How can a constitution be envisaged and worked out \textit{a priori} till the issues between communities aren't yet settled? Nehru leaves these questions unanswered, or rather, fails to answer them.

In \textit{The Discovery}, Nehru however saw reason playing second fiddle to the issue of Partition and the relation between the Hindu and Muslim communities:

"It is clear that any real settlement must be based on the goodwill of the constituent elements and on the desire of all parties to it to cooperate together\(^{29}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid. p. 24

\(^{29}\) Ibid. p. 24
for a common objective. In order to gain that *any sacrifice in reason is worthwhile*. Every group must not only be theoretically and actually free and have equal opportunities of growth, but should have the sensation of freedom and equality.\textsuperscript{29}

Nehru obviously didn't seem to believe in this as his later remarks show. Power politics, or whatever else the constriction, had finally replaced principles of belief with the principle of reason. Instead of reason, what was sacrificed finally was the unity of the country and the relation between communities.

Before we look into how political commentators have commented on the aspects of Nehru's ideas under discussion, it should be mentioned that the issue of partition was discussed in order to highlight Nehru's political engagement with the question of culture and community, as this was the single most event which brought Nehru's cultural understanding face to face with real politics. It is worthwhile to compare Nehru's ideas in a historical context which challenged his premises and how he negotiated with the problem. Through this, one would have a more critical understanding of his normative ideas regarding the relationship between culture and democracy which we will go back to shortly.

Keeping the whole discussion on partition and Nehru's response to it in mind, let us first look at T.N. Madan's conclusion on Nehru's secularist standpoint vis-à-vis religious communities:

\textsuperscript{29} Nehru, Jawaharlal, *The Discovery*, OUP, 1964, p. 530
"Nehru did not seem to take into consideration the fact that the ideology of secularism enhances the power of the state by making it a protector of all religious communities and an arbiter in their conflicts... The principal question is not whether Indian society will eventually become secularized as Nehru believed it would but rather in what sense it should become so and by what means."

Madan is wrong in saying that Nehru did not take into consideration the fact that his idea of secularism won't enhance the power of the state. In fact, going by his definition of a secular state, we have all reason to believe that he desired the state's power to be supreme in this regard and play the role of protector. But he also had normative directives for communities in his definition where the minority community was asked in its own interest to support the cause of secularism and the majority community was expected to play an even more responsible role in guiding the secular principle to its desired effect. However, Nehru's conception left out a political link between the responsible roles of the community and the detached ideology of the state, thus making both the spheres alien to and suspicious of each other.

In the first chapter we noted Akeel Bilgrami's significant critique about Nehru's secularist conception being an imposition as it assumes secularism to be outside the "substantive arena of political commitments". We also noted how Bilgrami finds a problem in Nehru's imposition of a "non-negotiated" secularism.

---

30 Madan, T.N., "Secularism in its place", ed. Sudipta Kaviraj, Politics in India, OUP, 1997
The clean divide between the idea of the community and the idea of secularism in Nehru's conception resulted in a contradictory assumption on Nehru's part regarding the same issue: on the one hand, communities were supposed to maintain tolerance and assume responsibility through its own commitment towards democracy, while on the other hand, the language of negotiating problems couldn't be justified in the political arena on any principle or sentiment from which that very commitment is sought. This shows a much too rationalistic breach between the idea of secularism and the idea of the community as the responsibilities seem to be clearly divided: the community has to be committed to the idea of secularism from within its own idea of the good, but secular policy would judge the community through principles outside its sphere of the good. For Nehru, simply speaking, the language of the community and that of the state couldn't meet except through the language of law and order if trouble erupts. This negativizing of the relationship between the state and the community was largely responsible in Nehru's failure to negotiate between the political aspirations of the community and the democratic ideology of the state. The community should have no part in politics and politics would not tolerate any intervention by the community. The rights and protection guaranteed to the community by the state is enough remedy. The responsibility of a secular state ends here, in Nehru's conception of things.

So we see that Nehru realizes how a democratic state would need the positive cooperation of cultures in maintaining harmony between each other and also in keeping their own language of rights within what a secular state
can allow, and how beyond this positive relationship, cultures would have to mind their own business with regard to the working of the state.

Nehru acknowledges the importance of cultures in fostering a national community dedicated towards the historical role played in the world as well as towards the progress of the nation, and this sentiment and passion of cultures is identified by Nehru as being linked to a common history of synthesis and achievements. He was enormously optimistic that Indian cultures would adapt favourably to the new, modern ways of society and add this layer easily to the 'palimpsest'. In Nehru's idea of Indian culture, the script of change can be overwritten any number of times as history has shown. The new 'garb' that Nehru was interested to put on India's culture was modernity. But this cultural excess of a nation, in Nehru's understanding, should act as a behind-the-screen source of inspiration to work for the historically new values of economic and social progress.

Lastly, one finds that Nehru's unit of society was always the individual, and he imagined India in the last analysis as a country of individuals belonging to various cultures. In fact Nehru's idea was quite in tune here with the Enlightenment thinkers who envisaged modern society as the coming into being of individuals who would resist the authority of traditions and break up the old sense of ties within cultures with a more individualized, secular and critical notion of how to make one's culture negotiate with its own past and ally with the modern structure of society.
The Question of National Identity:

As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, Nehru never accepted the clash between cultures as arising out of any genuine understanding, as for him, the real opposition was historical and not cultural. This was because in his reading of Indian history he found that cultures had throughout borrowed from each other and progressed, while they showed signs of decadence in periods when they became more narcissistic and stubborn. The more open nature of cultures made Nehru even make a distinction between culture and religion where he saw cultures as more porous entities, easily mixing ideas with those from cultures outside, while religion being more resistant entities which resisted changes. This distinction by Nehru held the cultural impulse in a more aesthetic esteem of creativity as well as viewed it as having a more ethical impulse to share and regard the presence of the other in history. In fact, unity between cultures was more rampant in Nehru's reading of history than the unity between religions.

Therefore, historically speaking, cultures were, in a way, more attuned to historical changes than religion was, in Nehru's conception. In fact the real opposition in the case of the west and the east during the colonial period was seen by Nehru as a historical opposition between an industrialized and secularized west and a non-industrialized and traditional east. But since cultures were not closed entities, this historical circumstance between them can be easily adapted to change. For Nehru, colonialism was simply an ideology of exploitation which however brought into focus the difference between two cultures faced with the promises of modernity. Colonialism was an exploitative ideology of power which had to do more with the expansionist

139
zeal of a narrow minded class of Englishmen who were themselves against the essence of this modernity whose values make it impossible for one culture to exploit others. So in a way, colonialism betrayed the very baggage of modernity it brought to India's doorstep. Let's go back to what we noted Nehru saying in *The Discovery* and see it from a different perspective:

“...The impact of western culture on India was the impact of a dynamic society, a ‘modern’ consciousness... And, yet, curiously enough the agents of this historic process, were not only wholly unconscious of their mission in India, but, as a class, actually represented no such process... They encouraged and consolidated the position of the socially reactionary groups in India, and opposed all those who worked for political and social change. If change came it was in spite of them or as an incidental and unexpected consequence of their activities.”³¹

We find Nehru making a distinction between modern culture and its “agents” in the form of the colonial rulers. The historical situation then, for Nehru was to be fought at two levels: one, the anti-colonial struggle to remove the agents of modernity who spread and lived through colonial exploitation of other cultures and two, the struggle within India to fight its own medieval habits of tradition and embrace the fruits of modernity.

We have already discussed Nehru’s idea of modernity and colonialism. Here we would see how Nehru’s idea of culture and history vis-à-vis the colonial situation paved the way to his understanding of the national subject, though whom the anti-colonial struggle is fought and through whom the idea of

---

modernity enters Indian society. This idea of the modern subject, who is also a national one, lies at the heart of Nehru's linking of the idea of the nation, with that of democracy: the crucial link between history and ethics, two supposedly irreconcilable terms.

As noted in the beginning of the first chapter, Nehru was a double anti-traditionalist. He had links both with the heterodoxical traditions of western and Indian society. He saw himself as part outsider and part insider of the Indian nation and its culture. He represented the other within Indian society. This was the crucial aspect of his modern understanding of the historical and national subject. A subject who both belonged to one's culture but also a critical subject of that culture. It wasn't a merely rational idea of identity but a part romantic and part rational understanding of the modern, national subject. As a romantic, Nehru refused to part away with the linkages of India's past and as a modern subject, he could easily embrace the critical rationality of the West and look deep into the self of his culture in his desire to change it.

As Sunil Khilnani has pointed out:

"Nehru... turned away from religion and discovered a basis for unity both in a shared cultural past of cultural mixing, and a future project of common development"32. He further states:

"Nehru's idea of Indianness emerged through impoverished responses to constrained circumstances: its strength was not its ideological intensity, but its

---

ability to steer towards an Indianness seem as layered, adjustable, imagined, not as a fixed property. What we get here is an argument of an authentic Indian identity which is almost indefinable and porous. We saw how at the end of The Discovery, Nehru fails to define India beyond partly categorizing the people as a mass of individuals and the country itself as symbolizing a primordial myth dipped in gendered metaphors. Nehru’s idea of historical identities stand at the opposite pole of those who understand them in stricter terms of ethnicity, religion, or even culture. For Nehru, historical experiences form the only ground through which identities can be understood and defined and these experiences involve so many categories of interaction all at once, that it is almost impossible to define beyond few normative suggestions, whether an identity really belongs to this or that category of identification. The normative suggestions in Nehru are never conceptually worked out. They remain suggestions within a historical narrative that is itself more suggestive than definitive, but Nehru brings in other categories to turn them normative. Namely, what he calls synthesis, which is the only pre-modern value Nehru is willing to accept, and in the context of the modern word: democracy, which is loosely but largely placed on individual freedom. But in this Nehru makes a difference: with regard to the modern context, Nehru is sensitive about the ideology of individualism which he wants to regulate through socialist principles, and differentiates, as we have seen, between the ‘predatory’ individual who wants to maximize his own narrow self-interest, and the individual who works within a progressive structure meant to promote larger,

33 Ibid. p. 167
social goals. But in the case of history from where he draws the value of cultural synthesis, Nehru hardly takes into account the question of power behind the various ways certain cultures dominated the scene not by virtue of superior values of tolerance but by the force of coercion, while others were assimilated or destroyed in the process. This makes the argument for synthesis at the cultural level, historically naïve on Nehru's part. It makes Nehru take the anti-colonial scenario too as a context where cultural assimilation became not only inevitable but desirable in the way he presents his historical narrative. Thus, national identity comes to mean, in Nehru's formulation, one of extreme choices where almost every conceivable parts of cultural identity is desired to be inculcated from past and present, as if harmoniously blended. However, Nehru's idea of culture is markedly anti-traditionalist, which for him makes it precisely possible for a mixed cultural identity to become possible. The only missing thing in his narrative is a more rigorous historical analysis of how such cultural identities have flourished through ancient and medieval times and what were the consequences on cultures because of them. He presents a very positive view of historical synthesis and borrowing of cultural attributes and enjoins it with the idea of the nation. For Nehru, as we saw, the idea of a shared past was the most important indicator, as nothing else could have been, of the legitimacy of imagining a nation state. Even here though, one needs to point out that Nehru mostly uses the word "past" unlike other ideas of the nationalist imagination which seeks to situate the meaning of nationhood and nationalism on the basis of a thick cultural notion based either on ethnicity or religion. In Nehru's interesting narrative, the "past" forms a vague, historically lost, but quite imaginable a category through which the nation, and a national identity could
be formed in the most pluralistic and emergent manner. Since, for Nehru, history is quintessentially diachronic, such possibilities of identity was possible at every stage of history and the modern period was no exception, except being this unique moment when the West has something new to offer to other civilizations inspite of its ugly baggage of colonialism. For Nehru, it was possible to both fight against the evils of colonialism as much as integrate the new aspects of human civilization coming from "elsewhere". This elsewhere-ness in Nehru's idea of contemporary history makes cultures seem as open-ended entities, open to both threats and good possibilities. Nehru, simply speaking, was willing to face the challenge of choosing both. It's a very optimistic notion of both history and ideology, as we saw in Nehru, as he relentlessly spoke about the virtues of rationality and science, along with the humanitarian ideologies which emerged within European philosophy and culture. In Nehru's conception, a cultural subject is like a gatherer of values from 'elsewhere', always at a juncture when he has to make choices outside his immediate cultural context and put the old to test with the new. It's markedly a product of post-Enlightenment optimism regarding human, cultural capacity, which we have mentioned in reference to Partha Chatterjee's critique of Nehru's position. But Nehru as has been repeated, also has a normative idea of culture which he fuses to the question of national identity. His discovery of the historical synthesis between cultures made him treat it as a valuable mode of human interaction. For Nehru, cultures interact inspite of their belonging to particular religious systems. It told him that the synthetic capacity of cultures which made them open to sharing cultural values from elsewhere was an extra-religious capacity. So the entity of cultures stretched beyond its being a component part strictly adhering to religion in the strict
sense. Nehru wanted cultures to become part of a national identity in this manner of reaching out to other cultures as its historical mode of interactiveness. The nation state becomes for Nehru, a ground where cultures would flourish under a relational normativity among themselves, both within the national boundary as a distinctive mode of national ethos, as well as become a part of the associative interaction between various nation-states. Hence, it was a cultural identity which Nehru sought as a common national identity at the level of groups. The cultural identity by transcending the divisive forms of religious identities would form an integrative ideal in the national context. This common cultural identity functions as a common good of a shared politico-cultural, and national identity. It becomes the associative principle of a shared ideal and forms the crucial basis of harmony which Nehru held as an ideal goal of human culture. This cultural definition of the nation-state acts as an ethical principle for Nehru. In all this however, Nehru doesn't really show us how the values would historically or politically find space within the Indian nation. It was a kind of top-down view with an optimistic note about how communities would adjust by themselves to the laws of the state. In this, democracy of course was taken to be the political normative.