Chapter 5

Nehru’s The Discovery of India: A Play on Imagination

Orientalism as a mode of knowledge was integral to the construction of India. This knowledge was to trace the ‘origin’ of the Indian past. Hence, the Indologists’ engagement with history produced ‘factual’ accounts, which were interpreted to characterise India within the co-ordinates of European essences. This implied the fixation of India by the Orientalists within certain categories and was essential to the identification of the Western Self. Interestingly, the Orientalists dug out India’s past that provided a readymade historical framework for the nationalists. However, the Orientalist’s assertions were appropriated. The nationalists defined ‘Indian’ and ‘Indianness’ in terms of their readings of Western texts. Nationalism, as anti-colonial struggle, resisted Indian stereotypes established by the West. The nationalist ideology emphasised a radical change of the Indians from passive to active agents of power. It was to change and reverse the role of the spectator/colonised and the performer/coloniser. However, Indian tradition was structured within the parameters of European essences. In fact, this is the ambiguity in the nationalist imagination of India which negates Orientalist stereotypes of an ‘eternal’ India, but in doing so the nationalist discourse remains trapped in the colonial myth of a ‘superior’ Self and its ‘inferior’ Other.

Examining Nehru’s The Discovery of India, I wish to critically analyse the need for the ‘discovery’ by “an alien critic” (50), as Nehru called himself, “soaked in Western culture”, who wants to “find his roots” (Gopal, “Formative Ideology” 788). As he himself accepts in his Discovery, his approach towards India was “via the West” (50). Being an Indian he wants to ‘discover’ that very India. I shall analyse the Discovery as a contradictory and peripatetic writing that grasps certain moments of India’s past to selectively present historical events. In the Discovery the past narratives haunt Nehru’s mind. In order to understand Indian culture, he revisits the past without effacing the colonial discourse of an ‘eternal’ ‘glorious’ Indian past.
Significantly, the nationalists who generally travelled abroad considerably favoured the pattern of binaries already established by the West. The term ‘discovery’ gradually transformed from geographical lexicon to a cultural metaphor of identity. This reinforced the colonial mission of “civilizing” and “rescuing” the Indian subject (Singh 4). European merchants had ‘discovered’ India as a land of trade and wealth. Later, the trading company gave way to colonial political power. Interestingly, the symbol of ‘discovery’ persists in nationalist fictions. Nehru ‘discovers’ India in her past and the corresponding virtues of tolerance, assimilation and solidarity that distinguished India from its Others.

The *Discovery*, written in prison on the eve of Independence, was a search for a Self. It was also to recognize the complexity of India’s past. The *Discovery* was spurred by an insight into Indian culture through the imagination of “shared history of a single political community” (Khilnani, *Idea of India* 169). It is a memory-stirring account of India’s past, the endurance and continuity of Indian culture despite its ups and downs. Astonishingly, Nehru’s version of Indian history was woven out of European surveys, translations and testimonials (Gopal, “Formative Ideology” 788).

The colonialists’ writing on the Indian past advocates the merits of colonial culture and displaces Indian culture as the Other of the ‘superior’ West. On the contrary, the nationalists invest the ‘grandiosity’ of the past either in its spiritual achievement or in its capacity to absorb diverse cultures and yet retain its distinctive ‘Indianness’. The colonial historiography retrieves the Indian past and contrasts the European Self with its Other. On the other hand, the nationalists construct the past as it is crucial in “annexing the past” from the masters (Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* 171). Interestingly, the interpretation of the past proves to be a ‘site’ of ‘pristine’ Indian identity. Gandhi resurrects Indian traditions which for him survive in Indian spirituality and distinguishes it from Western materialism (M. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* 57). Nehru weaves a story of Indian history that fits into his vision of a secular and tolerant nation.

Nehru attempts to shift the “glare of history’s floodlights” from Western to Indian discourse (Fanon 28). The people of India, he emphasizes, possess a “potential strength” (Nehru, *Discovery* 58). Probably this was to put forward the need for a leader whose responsibility was to ‘represent’ the masses. It is to fulfil this responsibility
towards his countrymen that he set out to write the Discovery. He consolidates his epistemological position through the colonial legacy of romanticising India’s past as textually established by European travellers, historians and Indian scriptures.

Nehru’s readings of Indian history and travel records left by the Europeans, his wanderings in the Himalayas, the plains of India and places where the ruins of ancient civilisations or empires were excavated formed the background of his ‘discovery’ (Nehru, Discovery 50-1). The Discovery was written during Nehru’s gaol days and its memories shaped his historical perspective. The memories are a medley of knowledge acquired through textual readings and imaginative faculty. It is understandable that no imagination can work on an objective plane and is shaped by the narrator’s ideology and cultural understandings. Therefore, the examination of Nehru’s play of imagination in the writing of Indian history shall reveal India as a ‘site’ of construction, which draws upon the Orientalist and indigenous paradigms.

In the Discovery, Nehru demonstrates his dilemma as a nationalist who articulates his ‘Indianess’ by drawing on Indian “traditions and the norms associated with western education” (Brown, Nehru 188). I shall limit my study on Nehru to pre-independence, that is, when India was not a nation-state. However, before the formation of the nation-state, the nationalist discourse often visualises the nature of Indian polity after the end of colonialism. The analysis of Nehru’s political philosophy is focused on the pre-independence era but often a cursory reference to his post-independence policies shall illuminate the use of native vocabulary for a modernised administrative system.

Nehru believes in transforming India as a secular, democratic and economically sufficient nation which could compete in a global market. Nevertheless, Nehru’s sense of history recognises the formative stages of his ‘new’ India in its past. But the past had lost its creativity and Nehru is enthusiastic to restore its former glory (Nehru, Discovery 54-5). Despite his penchant for Indian past, Nehru had no yearnings for a return to a primitive age. In fact, the “cultural and historical antecedents and the continuity of the Indian heritage from the days of the Indus Valley Civilization to the privations of British rule” eloquently expressed in the Discovery, were instrumental in displaying India’s potential strength, and were consistent with Nehru’s construction of India (Tharoor 126). For instance, Nehru retells Muslim invasion without a mention of the destruction of the
Somnath temple. Instead, he emphasises the ideal of oneness anticipated by Akbar (Nehru, *Discovery* 259). Such a selective writing of history is a testament to Nehru’s vision of a secular and a unitary image of India. Nehru imagines a panoramic Indian history without a “break with the past” and a “definite continuity” (55).

For Nehru change implies a variation of the old. Therefore, modernity can be read as a variation of the old, the traditional. Hence, by modernising tradition or as a “critical modernist”, Nehru believes working in terms of the spirit of inquiry, globalised and scientific temper, but following these entire yardsticks of modernism, he seeks to find a foothold in Indian traditions (Parekh, *Colonialism* 58). Nehru can be located or rather positioned within the ambit of this theory of modernity that incorporates indigenous tradition without strictly following either the traditionalist or the modernist trajectory. According to Nehru’s historical account, European industrialisation gave a facelift to the once decadent and ignorant European civilisation (Nehru, *Discovery* 282). Nehru, therefore, desires to be at par with the European ideals of progress. He endeavours to march forward with Western powers and simultaneously claims a rich Indian culture and heritage. Nehru forges the idea of India whose progress is measured in terms of European standards, but retains India’s ancient noble heritage. Nehru’s historical odyssey perceives Indian myths, epics and folk tales as an adhesive which bind the people (100). However, it was not a political cohesion comparable to a national community formed during India’s struggle for freedom. Significantly, colonialism prompted the “self-invention of a national community” (Khilnani, *Idea of India* 155).

Certainly, Nehru had to alter European modernism and make it consistent with indigenous values. For this he seeks to remove the economic and political evils associated with colonialism. In contrast to the Western economy that was solely based on personal gains, Nehru proposes a mixed economy that took care of the private and the public sectors (77). His economic pattern offers equal distribution of wealth and cooperative methods of farming (Nehru, *Discovery* 396, 399). Nehru disavowed the idea of a primordial past where religion and caste were marks of identity. Instead, the classical age was equipped with scientific materialism required to replace Western modern culture. The alternative Indian modernism incorporates native elements so as to indigenise Western modernism and to “fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is
nevertheless not Western” (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 6). Nehru responded to colonialism as a “critical modernist”. His affinity towards science is traceable in his preference for scientific methods in the Indian political machinery. Science was at the top of the agenda for a free India. The dams for hydroelectricity and highly reputed technological centres exemplify Nehru’s worship of science (Brown, Nehru 200). The Discovery impresses upon the reader Nehru’s wide European readings (Nehru, Discovery 70-2, 80, 165, 317). Significantly, Nehru’s world historical insight is fortified by comparing India with Greece, China, Russia and Iran (Nehru, Discovery 143-6).

As a sequel to the Autobiography, the Discovery is a self-exploration. Instead of presenting a personal chronicle, Nehru re-visits the past and compares it with the present. Though the medium of Nehru’s self discovery and the ‘discovery’ of India is history his historical narrative is hardly credible. Nehru’s historiography is a compelling record of the ‘making’ of a nation. For this he walks on the shadows of the past, imagines himself to be a part of the ‘glorious’ age, and conveys the effect of the coming of the British followed by the birth of the national movement. Nehru’s fictional narrative fantasizes “the Buddha preaching his first sermon.” Moreover, he could hear Ashoka’s pillars narrating the greatness of the emperor As Nehru remarks: Ashoka’s pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor.” Nehru plays a story teller who relives the past events in imagining “Akbar holding converse and debate” during Nehru’s visit at Fatehpur Sikri (Nehru, Discovery 52).

Nehru’s Orientalist methodologies are similar to British ideology, which postulates a disjunction between India’s past and present to explains the cultural degradation. Such cultural representations nourish imperial ideology and imagination. On the one hand, Nehru idealizes India’s past and draws resemblances between the East and the West, and on the other, views contemporary Indian society as fallen and degraded, in need of radical reforms. Nehru tries to retain the grandness of India’s past. He believes that creativity of the past had been exhausted and it was mandatory to revive that ancient vitality. He locates creativity of Indian culture in its flexibility and synthesis. Nehru often adopts the Orientalist’s view of India and he retains the stereotypes depicted in their discourse. His Indian is “lethargic” and passive and he
intends to “waken them up” from their slumber to force them into patriotic action (472). The reference to the “parochial outlook”, “rigidity” and “political lack of cohesiveness” is central to Nehru’s historiography (226, 54, 251). Nehru desires the degenerate, static and tradition-bound Indian society to become energized and radically overhauled, and its people made to think in a rational and scientific manner. His primary contribution is the vision of India with a central government and parliamentary democracy. As against Gandhi, Nehru posits that industrialization unite the country economically and generates shared perceptions of interests.

Nehru’s works, namely, Glimpses of World History, the Autobiography and the Discovery were valuable narratives of a romanticized past. Nehru relies on Orientalist histories, but alternates the act of writing history. European historians depicted India as a self-enclosed community, always in the absence of a centralizing state. James Mill in this context concluded:

Of all the results of civilization, that of forming a combination of different states, and directing their powers to one common object, seems to be one of the least consistent with the mental habits and attainments of the Hindus. It is the want of this power of combination which rendered India so easy a conquest to all invaders; and enables us to retain, so easily, that dominion over it which we have acquired. (Cited in Inden, Imagining India 170)

In referring to the Arthashastra as the “Science of Polity,” Nehru expresses to the colonisers the grandiosity of the Indian past premised on a unified concept of government. According to the Europeans, the absence of a centralised governance made India vulnerable to invasions. In counteracting this argument, Nehru falls into the trap of the European norm which supported a centralised state that would prevent further degradation of India. Nehru’s imagination of India as a nation opposes the colonisers’ version of the Indian past. However, he articulates his cultural pride in those values which were approved by the West. In countering the European accounts of the absence of a centralised government, Nehru mentions the Maurya empire as the “first strong centralized state in India” (Nehru, Discovery 72). Further, Nehru gives a textual example
of Chanakya’s *Arthashastra* that records the presence of a regulatory and centralised government.

To reverse the Western masters’ historical voice, Nehru produces India’s past neither as meaningless nor as a glorified Hindu state but as a conglomeration of “cultural miscegenation” (Khilnani *Idea of India* 169). In Nehru’s own words India is, “an ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously” (Nehru, *Discovery* 59). The Orientalists conjures the Indian mind as imaginative in opposition to the rational faculty of the West. They underline that the entire Indian philosophy and literature contributes to the realm of imagination. Various Orientalists maintain that the “peculiar character of the whole intellectual culture of the Indians” is the “predominance of the imaginative faculty” (Cited in Inden, *Imagining India* 68-9).

British colonialism has Orientalist underpinnings in engineering an imagined India. Nehru participates in the Orientalist discourse only to reverse its negative connotations. He holds Indian mythology as a unifying force that gives the Indians a “strong and abiding cultural background” (Nehru, *Discovery* 102). Nehru gives the epics and Indian legends the credit of shaping an “imagined community” of a heroic past (Anderson 6). Such allegories inspired the people to follow the ideal of their forefathers (Nehru, *Discovery* 74). In stating the significance of Indian mythology Nehru affirms the Orientalist stereotype of an imaginary/irrational faculty of the Indian mind. The *Discovery* is replete with ambiguities peculiar to the elite who endeavours to map India in a terrain antithetical to Western history, but contradicts his earlier stance in favouring Western history to myths. In agreement with European historiography, Nehru felt that the absence of chronology contributed to a vague perception of India’s past (75).

On comparison with the *Autobiography*, the *Discovery* is about the transformation of a statesman who cannot comprehend the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* to a patriot who finds some solace in them. Nehru was fascinated by the cultural continuity of India in spite of a series of invasions. The staying power of Indian culture was because of its characteristic feature of cultural synthesis. In contrast to Nehru, Gandhi locates India’s unity in its religious traditions and epic narratives. Nehru’s means of unifying India is situated in the relics of history and the search for a shared past.
Significantly, the challenge to European Indology by the nationalists came from the ‘glorified’ ancient past that had been a touchstone for the Orientalists and the nationalists. Nehru’s endorsement of the past ideals was cited from the discoveries made by European scholars. Needless to say, Nehru’s historiography did challenge European claims to Indian history. Veer Savarkar dubbed the 1857 uprising as a “war of Indian independence” whereas the colonisers called it the “mutiny”. Siding with neither Hindu fundamentalists nor the colonialists, Nehru chose to give a “contrapuntal” (Said, Culture and Imperialism 59) reading to the 1857 event. The revolt of 1857 started as a military rebellion took the form of a feudal uprising. The British authority decided to rule directly and eliminate the power of the intermediaries. As a result the feudal officials, fearful of losing their authority, assembled to overthrow the British rule. Nehru believed that the attempt was not a success since it was more of a desire to regain the lost feudal power than an assertion of nationalist aspirations (Nehru, Discovery 269).

On comparing myths and allegories as alternatives to written history, Nehru finds history valuable in maintaining the chronology whereas the myths provide an understanding of the Indian mind (290). Paradoxically, Nehru’s dependency on history for visiting the past pulls him towards British versions of historiography. In wrestling with the compulsion to define his ‘Indianness’ he harks back to Indian myths which associated the origin of India with “Bharata [. . .] the mythical founder of the race” (59).

The psychological cleavage with the advent of British colonialism is evident throughout the Discovery. Time and again, Nehru’s perplexity of his identity is reflected in his ‘discovery’ of India. One part of Nehru’s psyche echoes the past glory of India and another the European ideas of progress. In other words, Nehru is a “Hindu-European” caught in the paradox of identity (Verma 345). Nehru in his anti-imperial struggle for swaraj takes the shield of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, the Jataka tales, and other treatises, and reads the Vedas and the Upanishads in the spirit of scientific inquiry. (Nehru, Discovery 89). The intertwining of Indian traditions and Western academics mixes up the image of India for Nehru and produces the “stories of Akbar and Birbal [. . .] King Arthur and his knights, the Rani of Jhansi” (100-1). This mosaic concept of India was influenced by the “Orientalist facts,” which could provide a “secular alternative” to the religiously transfixed India (Veer, “Foreign Hand” 40).
Indologists considered Indian villages as “unchangeable” static organisation. The villages “survived all the religious, political, and physical convulsions from which India (has) suffered from time immemorial [. . .] but the simple, self-contained Indian township [. . .] preserved its constitution...and peculiar institutions unchanged and unchangeable amid all other changes” (Cited in Inden, Imagining India 134). The villages were microcosmic Indian societies. The puzzle of the staying power of Indian civilization and the difference between Indian and Western society had been explicitly formulated within the Oriental essence of village India. The Orientalist discourse continuously erected the differences between the East and the West. Although the essences became a part of the nationalist discourse, it was given an “essentialist twist” in favour of the Indians (Breckenridge and Veer 11). For instance, Nehru regards the uniqueness of India in the continuity of its culture. Overwhelmed by the preservation of Indian culture, he appreciates the “unsubdued and unconquered” spirit of India. (Nehru, Discovery 563). Indeed enamoured of the endurance of Indian civilisation, Nehru espouses the symbol of a ‘timeless’ Indian culture, which was able to adjust to different cultures without removing the “life-giving garment of her age-long culture” (Gopal and Iyengar 786-7). The Discovery spells out assimilation, tolerance and community living—village and caste system—as the mainstay of Indian cultural identity. Similar to the Orientalists who fostered the image of village India premised on textual ‘discovery’, Nehru’s discovery is loaded with textual underpinnings. For instance, in demonstrating the Indian polity structured on self-government, Nehru cites Nitisara, a book on Indian polity (Nehru, Discovery 248). This book explained the self-regulatory village government in which the elected members performed the judicial and executive functions. Nehru’s focus is akin to Gandhi’s vision of an idyllic village community where the rural life was highly organized and there was no coercive hierarchy. Gandhi’s metaphor of “oceanic circles” substantiates his blue print for rural administration (M. Gandhi, Collected Works 85: 33). Nehru too shares Gandhi’s vision of village government and concentrated on village administration. It was the organized and autonomous government at the rural level practiced in ancient India that served as a prototype for Nehru’s construction of a democratic India.

Vincent Smith, a British historian who has been cited in the Discovery endorsed his view of a patriarchal Indian state through his readings of Kautilya’s Arthashastra
Nehru too adhered to this ancient text but he reversed the colonial paradigm that regarded Indian governance as "despotic" (Mill ii: 131). The Arthashastra is referred in the Discovery to illustrate a model of modern government that had been anticipated during the classical Indian period (123-7). Nehru’s voyage into India’s past included European history as a “silent referent” (Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality” 2) as well as the Ur texts of Hinduism. This locates the nationalist imagination as “mimetic” in its methodology of difference and resemblance (Bhabha, Location of Culture 87). Nehru states the caste system as essential to Indian social organization. His defensive stance on caste as a “national bond” is not without the mention of the West (Nehru, Discovery 251). The community life of the caste system in India is juxtaposed to the individualism in the East (255).

In stark contrast to Gandhi who records his religious ‘discovery’ initiated in England, Nehru had no such experience to narrate. Instead his study of science in Cambridge stimulated a scientific temper so vital to his vision of India. Both Gandhi and Nehru had internalised either science or theosophy when they were abroad. Nehru’s metaphor of discovery corresponds with the European curiosity to discover new lands. The expansion of colonialism was the result of overseas voyages and the subsequent information gathered. The cultural project of discovery of new lands is oriented in favour of ‘discovery’ of Indian culture that had a “rich and immemorial past” (Nehru, Discovery 49). Thus culture that had been a project of control during colonialism transforms to a ‘site’ of difference (Dirks, “Introduction” 15). In his endeavour to recover a suppressed selfhood, Nehru reanimates a classical age when Indian civilisation was spiritually and materially superior to European civilisation. Gradually the story of ‘discovery’ progresses and traces the birth of a nation that could “realize itself within the frame of a modern nation state” (Khilnani, Idea of India 166). Nehru’s retelling of the tale of Indian history to the Indian and Western audience was the result of his literary scholarship in prison. Like his political ideal Gandhi, Nehru valorises the Indian past through the narration of pilgrimages made by the ancient seers. In fact, both Gandhi and Nehru hold the spiritual journeys of the ancient philosophers responsible for unity in India (M. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj 43, Nehru, Discovery 191).
Nehru’s historiography accepted the Orientalist perceptions of the Indian past that had attained tremendous success in arts and sciences. In agreeing to the Orientalist typecast of a ‘grandiose’ past Nehru undertakes the task of restoring historical agency to India. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, culture became the locus of identity/counteridentity and subjugation/resistance. Both the colonisers and the colonised were engaged in approaching culture as a ‘site’ for establishing their own political ideologies. As a cultural project the (re)construction of India was imperative to the formulation of identity in terms of the Self an the Other. The study of culture in the imagination of India implied the ideological interpretation by the nationalists and the Orientalists for political expediency. The nationalists felt culturally uprooted due to colonialism and therefore revived the Indian past. However they conceptualised it in terms of Western notions. In this context, Nehru’s virtual tour in the Discovery recognised the foundation of Indian civilisation science and rationality. The classic Indian past, he believed prefigured European modernity. Therefore, Nehru remarked: “Darwin’s and other similar theories could not create in India the turmoil and inner conflict which they produced in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century” (Nehru, Discovery 116).

Contrary to the view that Nehru’s conception of the scientific temper is a Western import, Sunil Khilnani, Nehru’s biographer argues that Indian history acknowledges rationality since antiquity (Khilnani, “Nehru’s Faith” 4794). It is exemplified in the metaphysical questioning of self-identity in the ancient religious texts. As Nehru expresses that scientific elements in the Upanishads have a tremendous impact on the Indian mind and character (Nehru, Discovery 92). Further, this argument is buttressed by Makarand Paranjape’s indigenous stance. He explains Rammohun Roy as an “indigenous champion” who believes in the fusion of Western and traditional Indian knowledge. This implies the denial of science as the monopoly of colonialism and reverses the European hierarchy in favour of a nativised science (Paranjape, Reworlding Homes” 117). Paranjape’s thesis also holds true for Nehru. In the Discovery, Nehru narrates a brilliant Indian past that was far more advanced than the contemporary European civilisation. In the past, in all the disciplines of sciences India had made remarkable achievements (Nehru, Discovery 113-117). In suggesting science as the criterion for evaluating the genius of a culture, Nehru nativises his discursive
methodology in demanding scientific humanism or the synthesis of science and inner quest of life (558). Though the nativist views try to resist colonial assumptions of the Self and Other dichotomy, they suffer in examining Indian nationalism as a response to the colonial encounter. Nationalism responds to colonialism and consequently engineers India as a foil to the West. The indigenous theory believes in the erasure of the Self as an antithesis of the Other. This implies that nationalism is not dialectical or “endless opposition [. . .] but autonomous without being either subservient or repressive” (Paranjape, “Reworlding Homes” 116). However, Western discourse remains intact as a cultural ‘site’ of contest. Certainly, nationalism is not shadow boxing since it creates its Other. No doubt, nationalism resisted imperial impositions, but the resistance revived India’s ‘pristine’ traditions formulated by the Orientalists. Moreover, the anxiety to define ‘Indianness’ emerged after British colonialism.

In Nehru’s script for India’s past, ancient India becomes “the classical source of Indian modernity” (Chatterjee, Partha ChatterjeelOl). Modernity was at that time associated with Western thought. Nehru emphasizes that the essential trait of Indian culture was tolerance and flexibility of mind. With this tolerance, the assimilated culture of India had accumulated the wisdom of its ancestors, and the present age of imperialism requires the tolerance and synthesis of science and humanity. Nehru posits that “scientific humanism” harmonizes faith with rationality and provides a purpose of life (Nehru, Discovery 558). Science was represented by Western concept of industries, state-controlled apparatus, rational enquiry and internationalism. Nehru envisages India at the threshold of Western modernity. However, he also asserts that the values embodied by the Vedanta and the Upanishads were the quintessence of India. With a keen interest in history, Nehru persistently evokes a glorious past that could be reanimated within the framework of the modern state.

Nehru’s construction of India was to lessen her religiosity, expel its exclusivity, and politically and economically drive her in the direction of modernity. Further, Indian modernity was patterned on the Western model. Planned economy in tune with world standards and a centralized democratic government, radically restructured modern India. Nehru devises national goals/objectives to refashion a cohesive India. As a nationalist reformer, he felt the need to reorganize the economic and political policies. Nehru’s
“voyage” was amply signposted by European historians and “discovered” little that was new” (Parekh, “Jawaharlal Nehru” 29). He emphasises that India had the capability to wipe out its deficiencies and approach problems scientifically. In order to regain India’s creativity, Nehru seeks to charter his sense of inferiority in trying to catch up with the West. This did not allow him or his ‘native’ self to design a modern model for India. Nehru concedes that India has to programme a unique identity suitable to its cultural heritage and yet should not remain enclosed within its traditions (565-6).

Nehru inverted Indian history and directed it along a scientific temper. The past was unforgettable: a mixture of good and bad memories. The good/idealized memories had to be reformulated and retained for a modern India and the bad rejected as “dirt” and “dust” (Nehru, Discovery 509). The good memories came from India’s participation in world progress. Indian economy was open to international market. This implied the absence of a narrow outlook and insecurity of being overpowered by foreign intrusions. The tolerance and inclusive approach towards other cultures had been a marked feature of India. Nehru’s idea of progress was premised on rationalist development and a quest to learn the mysteries of life. The epic narratives of Indian history—the Gita, the Mahabharta and the Ramayana—were a medley of fact and fiction. The intellectuals and the unlearned had internalised these narratives alike. Nehru interpreted these sacred scriptures not in the light of spiritual mysticism, but as texts that symbolized action in contrast to quietism, a “spirit of inquiry” (89) instead of passive reception and an “idea of a single centralized India” instead of unorganised forms of social structure (107). Thereby certain negative stereotypes were debunked and replaced by an affirmative model of Indian polity.

Nehru accepts the degeneration of India. Like most nationalists, he justifies his methods by resuscitating a grandiose past. According to Nehru, India had lost its previous creativity but had the potential and inner strength (56, 224). The past had been variously interpreted. Gandhi’s conception of the past is studded with India’s spiritual vigour, whereas Nehru’s reading of the past is based on a sceptic and scientific spirit whose seeds had been sown during the ancient period (114-7).

During the Renaissance, Sanskrit literature was compared to the classical Greek literature. The Orientalist, Schopenhauer acknowledged: “Sanskrit literature will be no
less influential for our time than Greek literature was in the fifteenth century for the Renaissance" (Cited in Schwab 13). The impact of Sanskrit literature on Europe considerably produced an effect which the Greek texts had during the Renaissance. Interestingly, Nehru's investigation of the past identifies common links with Iran and Greece. Nehru supposes the Iranians to be products of the Indo-Aryan racial bifurcation (Nehru, Discovery 146). The usage of Persian words in the modern Indian language and the various seals excavated from Mesopotamian civilization exemplify the cultural and trade contacts between India and Iran. Greek civilization in antiquity is presumed to be the fountainhead of European civilization (150). But the pagan outlook, perennial search for philosophy of life, the mythology unconnected from history and tolerance towards other cultures were the hallmarks of the Indian spirit rather than those of European culture. Nehru claims that the Indian spirit has affinity with Hellenic culture. The cultural contacts and civilizational similarities are indices to a shared past. He views the Indian past as a 'site' of cultural mixing which bubbles with cultural vitality. Thus, in spite of occasional invasions, the "ancient palimpsest" cannot break with the past. The allusions to "palimpsest", and "sphinx-like face" symbolize the complex and layered cultural identity of India (59).

In fact, Nehru himself cannot identify completely with India nor be estranged from his cultural roots (Nehru, Autobiography 596). The Autobiography written almost ten years earlier reflects the persistent dilemma in the Discovery. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru does not support cultural revivalism through religious idioms. He is of the view that Indian traditions are tattered and in dire need of modernity and change in outlook. Nehru believes that industrialization is one of the keys to change the face of India and "give her the garb of modernity" (Nehru, Discovery 50).

The Discovery is a mixture of personal accounts, national and international events. These different narrative strands are digressions in the dramatisation of India’s past. In order to relieve himself Nehru relates the past events to the contemporary period and determines his identity in fashioning a “different past” (Khilnani, “Gandhi and Nehru” 153). In fact, Nehru’s anglicised academic background often intrudes upon his historical sensibility. Nehru, the Western intellectual is compelled to follow the footmarks of the Orientalists. Nevertheless, he calls upon his countrymen to “remain
true Indians” (Nehru, Discovery 566). Evidently, Nehru’s narrative is punctuated with a predicament of a Western intellectual and an ‘Indian’ rooted to his culture. Although, Nehru is not a worshipper of the past, yet he evokes it “to understand the mentality of new India” (Gopal and Iyengar 514). The past was useful in tracing a common cultural heritage and discarding the humiliation that colonialism imprinted on the Indian mind.

Nehru envisages India as a ‘site’ where the old and the new co-exist. The new trend leaned towards internationalism. This trend could not ignore indigenous needs and “it had to grow out of national cultures” (Nehru, Discovery 565). While the Western model of democracy and economic set-up impresses Nehru, he turns towards Indian mythology and ancient scriptures in studying about his inheritance. Nehru’s political discourse is contradictory. His fascination for Western ideals of progress and resistance against colonialism for asserting a distinctive ‘Indian’ identity seeks to appropriate Western modernity. Nehru justifies this appropriation in essentialising India as tolerant and having an “astonishing inclusive capacity to absorb foreign races and cultures” (73-4). For Nehru, an ‘unchanging’ nature of Indian civilisation contributes to its continuity (88). He disavows the idea of a primordial past where religion and caste were marks of identity. Nehru’s nationalist imaginings perceives the classical age equipped with scientific materialism which was capable of replacing Western modern culture (112-7). Nehru’s model of an alternative Indian modernity incorporates native elements so as to indigenise Western modernism and to “fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 6). Nehru’s political language of historically representing India revolves around an imaginative discourse. He situates India in a space where the ‘pristine’ traditions co-existed with Western modernism.

Nationalism as a critique of modernity generally subscribed to materialism and consumerism that effected social perceptions and enslaved the minds. Of course, there were certain aspects of Western modernity that had influenced Nehru’s concept of India as a nation, but the simultaneous usage of vernacular metaphor provided Nehru a safe passage from which he could escape the charge of slavishly following the West. Nehru favoured the fusion of the ideals of the West and the East. The panchayat raj, panchayat samiti, vikas adhikari and zila parishad were the idioms used to indigenise colonial state apparatus (Parekh, “Jawaharlal Nehru” 47). Apart from these recastings there were...
certain institutions that borrowed the colonial modes of governance without any metamorphosis. For instance, after independence Nehru retains the powers granted to civil servants, who formed an important constituent of decision-making (Brown, Profile 80). The economic and political control was to be vested in the state. Nehru asserts that the introduction of heavy key industries would eliminate poverty and improve the standard of living. His approach towards a modern India emphasizes equal distribution of profits. Nehru postulates that like imperialism Indian industrialization shall not be based on personal gains but aim for the betterment of society. Nehru’s idea of nationalism is not limited to Indian independence and is redesigned to align India globally. As Nehru underlines:

> It can hardly be challenged that, in the context of the modern world, no country can be politically and economically independent, even within the framework of international interdependence, unless it is highly industrialized and has developed its power resources to the utmost. Nor can it achieve or maintain high standards of living and liquidate poverty without the aid of modern technology in almost every sphere of life. An industrially backward country will continually upset the world equilibrium. (Nehru, Discovery 407)

The National Planning Committee, chaired by Nehru, was set up during the end of 1938. Its objectives were to promote a modern infrastructure and submit a proposal for a technically advanced India. Besides the Congressmen, the National Planning Committee was comprised of economists, scientists and industrialists. The concept of such a scientific organisation was influenced by the Soviet Union plan of economy. The Planning Committee started as a body of economic policies after independence transformed its objectives more suited to a nation-state (Pillai 267).

Similar to the colonial project of “rescuing” (Singh 4) the ‘backward’ culture of India, Nehru aims to position India according to his intellectual make-up. In citing European historians, Nehru infers that the India of the past was rationally oriented. In reviving the incipient stages of the pre colonial past and linking its scientific spirit to modern India, Nehru attempts to revive the ‘glorious’ Indian past (Nehru, Discovery...
215). Of course, the caste rigidity and intolerance of thoughts which contributed to the degeneration of ancient India was not to be included in this pattern.

Nationalism does not completely identify with Western standards rather its ideology is established upon differences from Western modules. The nationalist myth fashioned the “inner”/spiritual and “outer”/material domain (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee120). Only by creating the binary differences India’s spiritual tradition was imagined as an exclusive and ‘uncorrupted’ site. Indian reformers and the nationalists resisted colonial interference in the spiritual terrain. During the colonial regime, a precolonial past was invented which contrasted India’s ‘pristine’ ancient culture with a ‘degenerated’ contemporary culture.

Unlike Gandhi, Nehru’s Indian self lies not in religious idioms, but through the act of historiography. Nehru turns to India’s past and like European historians periodises Indian history into the ancient, the medieval and the modern. In the Discovery’s narrative the precolonial era begins with the Indus valley civilisation, the coming of the Aryans, the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the tremendous achievements in the fields of literature, art, astronomy science and mathematics. The Discovery records social organisation in the ancient Indian society which was divided into four stages: that of the student, householder, the elder statesman and the ascetic (Nehru, Discovery 86). Nehru quotes Max Müller to emphasise continuity between the past and the present: “the ancient phases of Hindu thought” were “in fact an unbroken continuity between the ancient and the modern ideologies” (88). The names of various Orientalists, travellers and European historians appear as citations or footnotes in the Discovery.

As a storyteller, Nehru proceeds to expound: “We thus see that India was drying up and losing her creative genius and vitality [. . .] there was a strong tendency to shrink” (224-5). The growth in rigidity and exclusiveness was represented by the tenacious caste system. The next stage of Indian history was marked by the rise of Arab Empire and the subsequent arrival of Islam. Under the reign of Akbar, the Mughal emperor there was outpouring of art, literature and cultural. At this moment, Europe was passing through the dark ages. The Arab world advanced in science and art. In this regard, Nehru emphasised: “The use of gun powder came to Europe through [. . .] Mongols from China” (230). India had trade and cultural contacts with the Arab world which was
superior than the “backward” Europe (229). The Arabs succeeded in developing their culture since they learned from the discoveries and knowledge of other parts of the world. The Arabs translated the works of Indian scholars who had worked on numerals and astronomy. They carried this knowledge from India to spread to Europe. In fact, Nehru marks this out as the creative vigour that gave a fillip to the Arabs in the fields of philosophy, science, and culture (232). In referring to Arab culture, Nehru intends to prove his point of cultural interaction and intellectual curiosity as necessary to any superior civilisation. Moreover, he dismisses the Orientalist stereotype of an ‘irrational’ and ‘passive’ East. The proposal of an alternative to the essentialist description of the East paradoxically based science and rationality as a yardstick to measure Indian culture.

Nehru asserted that Akbar could lay the foundations of a politically united India, but he could not succeed due to his ignorance of the world events. Nehru mentioned that had Akbar concentrated on global happenings and the revolutionary changes that took in Europe, he could have politically organised India. The clocks, for instance, were “brought by the Portuguese and later by the English” in the Mughal courts, but no one was curious about the manufacture of clocks and were contented with the sundials and water clocks (261). The static mindset had taken hold of Indian culture and this was one of the reasons for India’s enslavement. Thus, the difference between European and Indian civilisation occurred due to the “paralysis of creative energy and inventive faculty” that occurred during the medieval period (261). Unlike the Autobiography in which Nehru envisages a free India in strengthening the socio-economic forces, the Discovery, besides stressing on the socio-economic conditions, relates culture as essential to Indian polity and history.

The modern age marked the beginning of the British rule. Unlike the earlier invaders, the British were unable to merge with Indian culture and Indianize themselves (302). The fear and suspicion of British conquest snapped India’s link with other countries. This helped the colonisers insulate India from European influences and the international arena. Nehru considers this isolation to be the major hindrance to India’s freedom. The national movement in its opposition to the imperial power endeavoured to make sense of India’s past. The colonisers too created the past, but it was biased in favour of the white man. The ancient age was elevated to show the disjuncture between
an 'idealised' past and the 'degenerate' present. Indian history was catalogued into the ancient, medieval and the modern. The medieval/Muslim age was conceived as the age of chaos and decay. The modern age marked the advent of British Empire and with it the 'progress' and revitalisation of India. The tabulation of history helped in comparing and contrasting different periods and eventually contest the justification of British rule in India.

Besides the interpretation of the Indian past, the issue of gender provides the colonial masters a discursive terrain to highlight the “degraded” and “objectionable” Hindu customs such as the sati (Kopf 103). Not only did it justifies colonialism that is committed to “elevate the moral and intellectual character” (Cited in Veer, Imperial Encounters 44) of the natives but it also confirms women as textually codified and embodiment of spirituality (Mani 94-5). Therefore, the condemnation of the status of Indian women enables the colonisers to reinterpret Indian traditions and assert their own identity. The fascination with gender politics constructs the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised. Masculinity embodies power whereas femininity reflected subordination. Macaulay eloquently constituted Indian identity as effeminate and feeble in stating:

The physical organization of the Bengalee (sic) is feeble even to effeminacy [. . .]. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid [. . .]. Courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and situation are equally unfavourable. (Cited in Veer, Imperial Encounters 95)

Ronald Inden concedes that Hegel’s analogy between dream and imagination of India formed a dialectic relationship between irrational/female India and the rational/masculine Europe (Inden, Imagining India 96). Nehru too reduces India to a female body with “weary” eyelids, “battered body”, but with a majestic soul (Nehru, Autobiography 429). He perceives femininity with virtues essential to the survival of Indian culture. In this regard, Nehru wrote:

I have always felt that India, for all her manly qualities, is specially noted for the feminine virtues—gentleness, tenderness, a
Nehru struggled to understand the symbol of *Bharat Mata*. His traditional self branded India with a “feminised identity” (Singh 154). In context of such an identity he wrote: “She is a myth and an idea, a dream and a vision, and yet very real and present and pervasive [. . .] shameful and repellent she is occasionally [. . .] this lady with a past. But she is very lovable” (Nehru, *Discovery* 563). It is striking to note the tenor of a rationalist whose imagined India is mystified in femininity. The idiom of *Bharat Mata* bespeaks of a nationalist who identified India in terms of gender. Moreover, Nehru fancies *Bharat* as “the holy land of the Hindus” (Gopal and Iyengar 514). Interestingly, such an essentialist evocation of India is similar to Gandhi’s image of India as a holy land as analysed in chapter 2.

In his challenge and opposition to the British invasion, Nehru was compelled to assert a national identity premised on Indian traditions. Paradoxically, a modern framework for the Indian nation relied on the revival of India’s past. There had to be the existence of the modern along with the traditional. India “rooted in herself” was “eager to learn from others” (Nehru, *Discovery* 564). Therefore, India had to assume an international character and modernise while retaining its cultural essences. The dichotomy between the backwardness/progress and spiritual/material operated in the nationalist discourse (Chatterjee, Partha Chatterjee 120).

The essential trait of toleration and opening of Indian trade to the world market were the preferred ancient models for the future of free India. Unlike his spiritual mentor, Gandhi, Nehru does not elevate religion as the foundation for his vision of India. However, to access Indian culture he examines the ancient scriptures as an extension of scientific spirit (Nehru, *Discovery* 558). The discourse which proposed an alternative to colonialism’s narrative, accepted the Orientalist essence of a spiritual India in need of mobilisation.
In spite of contesting for a cultural space free from the Orientalist stereotypes, the nationalists rework on the theme of a textual India. The Gita continued to inform the political ideologies of the nationalists. The interpretations varied: for Gandhi the Gita embodies non-violence and moral action whereas for Nehru it symbolises inquiry and creativity of mind. Nehru did not admire the Gita and the Mahabharata for their religiosity but “more as literature and historical testimony than as revelation” (Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru 175). Further, Nehru remarks that the Gita is not “sectarian or addressed to any particular school of thought” (Nehru, Discovery 110). Nehru is hostile to the politicisation of religion and fancies the idea of an independent India free from religious constraints. However, Nehru states, with time the caste system became rigid and made India vulnerable to British invasion. Thus, the Orientalist trope of the lapse of ancient ‘glory’ continued to inform Nehru’s imagination of India (520).

The usage of certain religious idioms like karma and yugadharma, Western testimonies and historical records are indices to Nehru’s cultural predicament (554, 557). It conveyed the dilemma of inducting modernism without being culturally uprooted. In fact, Nehru’s cultural predicament was the consequence of his parental influence. Nehru imbibed much from his father who was a rationalist and did not succumb to religious pressures. This is exemplified by Motilal Nehru’s refusal to undergo the purification ceremony after his return from Europe. The influence of his mother, Swarup Rani, was contrary. The females of the Nehru family used to take Nehru for a holy dip in the Ganges and recited to him the tales from Hindu mythology (Tharoor 4-9).

The Orientalists had labelled Indian society as divided and fragmented by a rigid caste system. They generated the idea that Indian religion divided the people and the Europeans with “good government, economic advance and sound religion” were able to revive India’s lost ‘glory’ (Brown, Profiles 9). Nehru posited that religion aligned to dogmatic theology relegated India to a ‘backward’ state. His perceptions too were entrenched by caste and religion. Nehru stated: “India must therefore lessen her religiosity and turn to science [. . .] . Caste is the symbol and embodiment of [. . .] exclusiveness [. . .]. This outlook has to change completely, for it is wholly opposed to modern conditions and the democratic ideal (Nehru, Discovery 520).
Nehru condemned certain preserved institutions and practices that had atrophied Indian vitality and insisted on continuing those practices that had provided strength to Indian civilisation in its endurance to innumerable invasions. But Nehru suffered in his assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Indian civilisation. Any social practice/institution depends on the prevailing circumstances for its survival. For instance, caste hierarchy and the concept of rural India was thought to weaken India’s economic development, yet caste held people as a community against foreign aggressions and kept traditional values intact (Parekh, “Jawaharlal Nehru” 28). Further, Nehru’s reliance on history for an objective interpretation of the past was ironical. The writing of history was the coloniser’s engagement with India’s past that helped the rulers to understand the nature of Indian society and polity. A shared sense of past and collective cultural imagination fundamentally constitutes history writing. No doubt, before British colonialism, there was community living and co-operation among the people, but they never felt the need to record and recall the past for collective action or national consciousness. Nehru’s research on India was premised on the colonial tool of history. His historical memory was conditioned by the European historical archive.

To proliferate a positive image of Indian traditions, Nehru’s approached India through a historical perspective. Through the historical lens, he investigated the colonial textual production that claimed to ‘speak’ for India. But Nehru’s alternative discourse was unable to escape history entwined in the “power/knowledge” nexus (Foucault 27). Although the empiricism inherent in his ‘discovery’ was not an exact replica of the colonial discourse, yet it insisted on cultural essences structured by the ‘master’ race. Spirituality, caste hierarchy, passivity/toleration and the village republics were displayed as the marks of Indian civilisation. Nehru does sound uneasy with Western civilisation making inroads in the ‘preserved’ sphere of culture since Western science was divorced from humanity. Nehru believed that the negative aspect of modern civilisation was in its inhumanity (Nehru, Discovery 556). Therefore the fusion of science and humanity—the former represented by Western rationality and the latter by Indian metaphysics—formed the image of Nehru’s India. To buttress his argument, Nehru cited Einstein saying: “The serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people” (558).
Nehru's imaginary travelogue reverts to the past. The past disturbs him as it recalls the disjuncture between the 'grandiose' past and the contemporary degradation. Sometimes the stigma of the past makes him feel ashamed. Vacillating between shame and pride, his idea of India remains in a flux. To dislodge the privileged position of the coloniser, nationalism requires the forging of a distinctive knowledge of India. This accounts for the bifurcation of 'us' and 'them'. The indigenous way to wear "the garb of modernity" was in constituting the coloniser as the Other (50).
Notes

1 See, Edwin Bryant. The Quest for the Origin of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate. 16-17. Where he discusses that according to the Bible, Noah’s sons were “accepted as being the progenitors of the whole of humanity.” This version of unified humanity fed the Indo-Aryan myth.