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Revisiting Nationalism in Jawaharlal Nehru's Letters from a Father to His Daughter

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Abstract: Jawaharlal Nehru, a key architect of India, presents a narrative of a diverse India with its rich history and civilisation in his *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*. His letters discuss the values embedded in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, along with reflections on history, geography, society, culture, and traditions. The study examines select letters from the collection, analysing how Nehru narrates the rich history of ancient India, emphasising cultural diversity and shared heritage. It explores how his letters function as ideological tools in shaping national identity and fostering unity in diversity, contributing to the construction of the idea of nationhood. In this context, the study draws on the critical frameworks of inclusive nationalism and Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity. It employs qualitative techniques of thematic and content analysis to examine Nehru's ideology, perceptions, and vision. The study highlights the significance of Nehru's epistolary discourse in forming historical consciousness and nationalism, making his letters vital to understanding India as a nation.

Key Words: Nationalism, Epistolary discourse, Nationhood, Historical consciousness and Diversity

Introduction

The late 1920s in colonial India were marked by rising political consciousness, increasing dissatisfaction with British rule, and growing demands for self-governance. The rejection of the Simon Commission in 1927, due to its all-British composition, ignited nationwide protests and united diverse political voices in opposition. In response, Indian leaders undertook the task of drafting a constitutional vision that reflected national aspirations, culminating in the Nehru Report (1928), chaired by Motilal Nehru. This period witnessed intense debates over dominion status versus complete independence, the rights of minorities, and the future structure of the Indian nation. Prominent leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose began to articulate increasingly defined ideological positions, shaping the discourse of the nationalist movement.

It was within this politically charged atmosphere that *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* was written in 1928, during Jawaharlal Nehru's imprisonment in Allahabad Jail. These letters, first published by the Allahabad Law Journal Press in 1929, were initially intended as a means for Nehru to connect with his young daughter, Indira. He did not anticipate that this private correspondence would later enter the public domain and be recognized as part of India's literary and political canon. The letters not only reflect India's rich historical and cultural legacy but also articulate Nehru's evolving vision of the nation, an idea he sought to communicate in an accessible and intimate form.

Drawing on Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity and the concept of inclusive nationalism, this study explores how Nehru's letters function as more than personal reflections. They emerge as formative texts that contribute to the construction of national identity and historical consciousness. This paper argues that Nehru's narrative, structured through the epistolary form, participates actively in the broader discourse on Indian nationalism. Furthermore, it highlights the power of letter writing as a medium for fostering unity, shaping collective memory, and imagining the Indian nation. Ultimately, Nehru's letters are not merely records of the past but active instruments in the making of nationhood.

This narrative literature review explores selected letters of Jawaharlal Nehru and their ideological contribution to the discourse of Indian nationalism. It also engages with critical theories that contextualize the study's central theme, offering deeper insight into Nehru's intellectual legacy and its lasting impact on nationalist thought.

In her article *Jawaharlal Nehru's Views on Nationalism and Internationalism* (2016), Kanta Devi examines Nehru's conception of nationalism as grounded in individual liberty and democratic ideals. She emphasizes that Nehru's nationalism was not parochial but cosmopolitan in nature, blending patriotism with internationalism to envision a just and equitable society. Her research provides essential context for understanding the ideological foundations that informed Nehru's vision of India.

D. S. Salunke, in *Father-Daughter Relationship in Nehru's Letters from a Father to His Daughter: A Pedagogical Perspective* (2019), focuses on the educational intent behind Nehru's letters to his daughter, Indira. He underscores how Nehru employed narrative techniques, such as simplified storytelling and personal anecdotes, to foster critical thinking in a young reader. Salunke's interpretation reveals both Nehru's pedagogical strategy and the emotional and intellectual formation of a future leader through epistolary dialogue.

S. Gopal, in *The Formative Ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru* (1976), explores the ideological nuances and contradictions within Nehru's thought. He argues that, despite such complexities, Nehru played a pivotal role in formulating a unifying nationalist ideology. Rejecting rigid dogma, Nehru envisioned an inclusive political framework capable of accommodating India's diverse social groups. This analysis situates Nehru's letters within the broader matrix of Indian nationalist ideology.

Robert Adams Day, in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1984), reflects on Janet Altman's theoretical framework for understanding letter-based fiction. Rather than treating letters as mere narrative devices, Altman investigates how the epistolary form itself structures narrative, a concept she terms "letterness." Day highlights that this approach moves beyond genre classification, focusing instead on how prose fiction is shaped by its epistolary structure. Altman's research, spanning over sixty-five works from Ovid to Derrida, particularly privileges French literature for its dialogic richness.

Janet Altman's seminal book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) provides the theoretical core for this study. She conceptualizes letters as acts of confidence, in which the writer entrusts thoughts to a confidant. Altman also emphasizes the interpretive role of the reader and the temporal disjunction intrinsic to epistolary texts, where narrative closure is resisted and subjectivity is foregrounded. Her work enables a nuanced reading of Nehru's letters, especially in their capacity to generate ideological engagement.

Amit Kumar Jha, in *A Comparative Study of Nehruvian Socialism and Rao's Socialism and Their Impact* (2024), traces the ideological and economic trajectory of Indian socialism. He demonstrates how Nehru's cooperative socialism shaped post-independence India until economic liberalization under P. V. Narasimha Rao ushered in a shift toward pragmatic reform. This comparative analysis situates Nehru's economic thought within a broader historical continuum.

Collectively, this review offers a multidimensional understanding of Nehru's ideology as expressed through his letters. It draws from research across disciplines such as history, education, politics, and literary studies, to underscore the diversity of scholarly engagement with Nehru's thought. However, there remains a critical gap: the need to revisit *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* as narrative texts that illuminate deeper dimensions of Nehru's ideology. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how Nehru's epistolary narrative constructs an inclusive vision of nationhood and enriches the broader discourse on Indian nationalism.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing convenient sampling to select three letters from Jawaharlal Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter: The Aryans Come to India, What Were the Aryans in India Like?, and The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*. These letters were selected for their thematic focus on India's cultural and historical narratives, conveyed through storytelling in a simplified and accessible manner. The study applies textual analysis, emphasising close reading to examine how Nehru communicates ideas of nationalism, history, and cultural identity. Additionally, content analysis is used to interpret underlying meanings within the texts, identifying recurring themes, symbols, and imagery related to nationalism. The analysis is grounded in the theories of epistolarity and inclusive nationalism, investigating how the letter form operates as a communicative medium for disseminating the idea of nationhood.

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in 1889 in Allahabad, India, into a distinguished Kashmiri Brahmin family that had migrated to Delhi in the early 18th century. His father, Motilal Nehru, was a renowned lawyer, a key figure in the Indian Independence movement, and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi. As the eldest of four siblings, Nehru received his early education at home, where he studied Hindi and Sanskrit. His deep engagement with literature and history was nurtured during these formative years.

At the age of sixteen, he travelled to England to continue his education, first at Harrow, and later at Trinity College, Cambridge, earning an honours degree in natural sciences. Following this, he qualified as a barrister after two years at the Inner Temple in London. His time in England broadened his intellectual horizons, deepening his understanding of global political thought before he returned to India, poised to play a crucial role in the nation's struggle for independence.

Despite his legal training, Nehru showed little interest in practising law, instead devoting himself to politics and writing. His writings reflect what he once described as a “queer mixture of East and West” (Moraes). Nehru himself admitted, “I have become a queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere” (Moraes). This duality of identity profoundly influenced his intellectual and literary work, shaping his perspective on nationalism, history, and global affairs.

Nehru's writings reflect his vision of India's past, present, and future, emphasising unity, diversity, and historical consciousness. *The Discovery of India* (1946), written during his imprisonment from 1942 to 1945, explores India's cultural and historical heritage, critiques colonialism, and envisions a unified nation, making it a cornerstone of Indian historiography. *Glimpses of World History* (1934), a collection of letters to his daughter Indira Gandhi, presents a broad yet accessible analysis of global history and its contemporary relevance. His autobiography, *Toward Freedom* (1936), offers a deeply introspective account of his political and ideological journey, reflecting on nationalism, socialism, and democracy.

On August 15, 1947, Nehru became independent India's first Prime Minister, leading the nation through the challenges of nation-building until his death in 1964. His passing marked the end of an era, but his legacy continues to shape India's progress.

These letters *The Aryans Come to India*, *What Were the Aryans in India Like?*, and *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata* not only narrate historical developments but also integrate cultural memory and reflections, making them crucial to understanding Nehru's vision of nationalism. The titles of all three letters are simple and engaging, making them accessible and interesting for a ten-year-old child. In narrating the story through these personal letters, which later became public documents, Nehru demonstrates how intimate communication can also serve as a powerful tool for socio-cultural and political consciousness.

The first letter, *The Aryans Come to India*, introduces the migration and settlement of the Aryans, offering an engaging historical account. Nehru maintains continuity from the previous letter, *Fossils and Ruins*, stating, "So far we have discussed very, very old times" (Nehru 143), thereby sustaining the pedagogical flow and engaging Indira's curiosity.

The letter may be thematically divided into six distinct segments. The first segment transitions from prehistory to history, tracing early human development. The second focuses on the Dravidian people, their culture, and their trade with early Egypt and Mesopotamia. The third and fourth describe the Aryan migration from Central Asia through Persia and Greece to India. Nehru notes that the Aryans crossed into India "...over the mountains near Kashmir" (144) and gradually moved into the northern plains, while the Vindhya mountains kept the southern regions largely Dravidian. The fifth segment introduces the Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata as cultural repositories: "When you grow up you will know more" (145). The final segment explains geographical naming conventions like Brahmvarta and Aryavarta (146), linking history and space.

Nehru uses simple, conversational language to cultivate curiosity rather than impose information. His pedagogical intent is evident in phrases such as, "...how man developed and what he did" (Nehru 143). His metaphorical language "...wave after wave of the Aryans must have come to India from the north-west" (144), evokes movement and change. Descriptive imagery like 'thick forests' and 'banks of rivers' aid the reader's visualisation of geographical and civilisational transformations.

However, the letter also reveals a historical bias. Nehru's portrayal of the Aryans as a dominant force "...Aryans were a strong fighting people, and they drove the Dravidians before them" (Nehru 144), reflects an Aryan-centric perspective, marginalising Dravidian contributions. Despite this, the letter underscores themes

of migration, civilisation, and cultural continuity. Trade links "...ships carried Indian goods to Egypt and Mesopotamia" (144) and references to Aryavarta and Gandhara emphasise India's interconnectedness. Nehru portrays India as a cultural mosaic shaped by historical movement and integration. This vision reflects the principles of cultural nationalism, where unity emerges through the fusion of diverse identities.

The second letter, *What Were the Aryans in India Like?*, is structured around five thematic segments. Nehru begins with a vivid account of Aryan migration, writing, "The Aryans must have come to India five or six thousand years ago, or perhaps even more" (Nehru 147), and further notes, "They did not come as tourists do nowadays. They came to stay, or fight and die" (148). This statement imbues the Aryans' arrival with gravity and historical significance. The next section explores Aryan intellectual and literary traditions, especially the Vedas "...perhaps the oldest books in the world" (148) which were memorised and orally transmitted. He writes, "They were learnt by heart and recited and chanted to others" (148), highlighting the cultural centrality of oral tradition.

This civilisational continuity provides a moral foundation for national unity, an essential tenet of cultural nationalism. The third segment characterises the Aryans as joyful, adventurous, and nature-loving. Nehru writes, "In their joy they made beautiful songs and sang them out to the gods they worshipped" (Nehru 149), and emphasises their love for freedom: "To the Aryans of old, death was better than dishonour or slavery" (149). He laments that contemporary Indians "...have little courage and hardly feel the loss of their freedom" (149), drawing a parallel between the past and the anti-colonial present, thereby infusing the letter with nationalist sentiment.

In the fourth segment, Nehru critiques the Aryans' desire to maintain racial purity, explaining its connection to the caste system: "The Aryans...made laws and rules to prevent this mixture, so that Aryans could not marry the other" (Nehru 150). He adds, "Long afterwards, this developed into the caste system, as it is called today" (Nehru 150). While simplistic by modern standards, this explanation was conventional during Nehru's time. Importantly, Nehru later opposed caste-based discrimination through constitutional reform, reflecting a progressive political agenda aligned with inclusive nationalism.

The final segment discusses Aryan reverence for nature. Rivers, cows, and bulls were venerated for their practical utility: "...great friends and benefactors" (Nehru 150). He critiques blind religious practices, stating

that reverence for cows “...as if that was any good to anybody” (150) has deviated from its original significance. The letter’s vivid imagery and personification bring ancient history to life. Nehru’s narrative voice blends instruction with emotional investment, reinforcing both moral and intellectual development.

The third letter, *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*, offers a layered cultural analysis. The first segment introduces the Epic Age: “...when the Vedas were written” (Nehru 151), and discusses the spread of Aryans to the Vindhya Mountains: “...the Aryans have spread out all over northern India up to the Vindhya Mountain” (152). Nehru notes the symbolic naming of Aryavarta and its association with the moon: “...like Benares...crescent-shaped places especially holy” (152). These geographical and cultural references serve to root civilisational memory in physical space.

Nehru’s personal connection to Indian spirituality is evident. Raised in Prayagraj, he recalls, “Sometimes I accompanied my mother or aunt to the Ganges for a dip... or went to see a sanyasi reputed to be very holy” (Joshi 37). This cultural grounding informs his narration of the Ramayana in the second segment, where he introduces Rama and Sita’s fight against Ravana “...the king of Lanka that is now Ceylon” (Nehru 153). He acknowledges Valmiki as the original author and Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* as its Hindi counterpart.

In the third segment, Nehru distinguishes between the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The latter is described as a civil war among Aryans: “...a great fight between Aryans and Aryans” (Nehru 153), and he extols the Bhagavad Gita: “...a jewel of a poem which it contains—Bhagavad Gita” (153). The fourth segment highlights the epics’ moral and literary grandeur: “...who but the greatest of men could have written them?” (154).

Finally, Nehru presents the epics as cultural foundations of Indian identity. He emphasises their intergenerational appeal, noting their capacity to transmit values and sustain national unity. These letters, excerpted in published form, omit traditional letter-writing conventions, thereby focusing the reader’s attention on content. They serve both as affective communication and educational instruments.

The letters function within the epistolary frame of intimacy and mediation. Nehru’s tone is gentle and didactic, presenting his daughter not merely as a child but as a fellow thinker. He invites her to draw her own

conclusions: “You must read them for yourself” (Nehru 153). The letters thus blend affective and intellectual labour, using the familial bond to transmit cultural heritage.

These texts are rich in content, lend themselves to thematic and theoretical analysis, and are pedagogical in nature. They project a vision of inclusive nationalism, where diverse linguistic, ethnic, and regional identities coalesce into a unified civilisational narrative. Nehru’s reference to “...singing the hymns and songs of the Vedas to worship the gods” (Nehru 149) underscores the cultural roots of national identity. His appeal to honour and liberty “If our ancestors could die for honour and liberty, how can we accept foreign domination?” (149) is both rhetorical and ideological.

Nehru’s cultural nationalism is premised on a shared past and moral aspiration. While he occasionally reproduces historical oversimplifications, his broader effort is to nurture national consciousness through shared memory. The letters remain part of India’s educational canon, demonstrating their enduring influence. Arun Sharma recalls gifting a copy of *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* to his granddaughter, calling it “...a masterpiece in its content and style (Sharma),” and noting that Nehru’s tone made it feel “as if he is physically present and talking to his little daughter, Indira” (Sharma).

Nehru’s letters embody the ideals of cultural nationalism, employing epistolary narrative to engage the young reader in a shared civilisational journey. They transform private communication into a medium of public instruction, linking individual growth with national awakening. These letters continue to inspire generations, not only as historical texts but as enduring instruments of ideological formation and cultural education.

The above analysis reveals that culture played a vital role in India’s independence movement by fostering national consciousness and unity. Nehru’s letters stand as a testament to this vision, reflecting the ideals of cultural nationalism through the revival and celebration of a shared heritage.

Conclusion

In light of the arguments presented, it is evident that the selected letters of Nehru are more than private communications and affectionate correspondence between a father and daughter. These letters serve as active instruments in constructing an inclusive idea of Indian nationalism. The study demonstrates that Nehru’s letters unveil a Nehruvian vision of nationalism that is inclusive in nature and deeply rooted in historical

consciousness. Through narrative reflection and cultural memory, Nehru presents nationalism not as an aggressive or exclusionary force, but as a unifying principle that harmonises India's vast diversity. His idea of nationalism is grounded in compassion, reason, and responsibility. The diversity reflected in the fields of history, politics, and culture is intricately woven into the letters, contributing to the ideological dimensions of Nehru's thought and enriching the broader discourse on cultural and Indian nationalism. These letters cultivate both personal and political awakening in Indira, shaping her consciousness and, by extension, influencing the people of India.

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