

My Discovery of Nehru: Autobiography as History

This is an essay on autobiography as history and was originally written for a conference on 'Nehru and non-alignment'. This was organised by the Centre for Indian Studies, University of Sydney, to celebrate the Centenary of Nehru. In this essay I reflect on the influence of Nehru on myself and men and women of my generation. For this reason I thought that I should look back to my own childhood.

If history is 'self-knowledge', as Collingwood¹ has put it, then autobiographies are important to historians and the autobiographies of historians are doubly important. 'The autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought' he says. His own autobiography has chapters like 'Bend of a Twig', 'Minute Philosophers', 'Question and Answer', and 'Theory and Practice'.

Taylor, who wrote a fascinating story of his life, which was a good example of narrative history, could not but speculate about the ends of history. Take, for example, his views on the Soviet Union:

soon after the end of the war there broke out that obsession with anti-communism which came to be called the Cold War and I was on the wrong side. I had not been a Communist since 1926 and had often taken an anti-communist line in home politics. Nor had I the slightest illusion about the tyranny and brutality of Stalin's regime. But I had been convinced throughout the nineteen thirties that Soviet predominance in eastern Europe was the only alternative to Germany's and I preferred the Soviet one.²

Like Collingwood, Taylor's business was 'thinking'. He thought that writing an autobiography was a good exercise for the historian:

Every historian should, I think, write an autobiography. The experience teaches us to distrust our sources which are often autobiographical. Either the autobiographer exaggerates his

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, Oxford, 1939, pp. 113-16.

² A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History*, London, 1983, p. 181.

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success, as Napoleon at St. Helena even came to imagine that he had won the battle of Waterloo, or more often he exaggerates his failures and humiliations which are more likely to have happened; this is particularly true of events in youth and I suspect, also in extreme age. However, the experienced historian ends by striking out the more fantastical episodes even if they happen to be true. At any rate I have run over my text with a critical and often destructive eye.³

The main reason for writing autobiography with historians as with others, is to leave a record behind for others to read and judge. Men and women of my generation have witnessed some really earth-shaking events at close quarters. There are records of such events, well preserved in public and private archives; but how these events affected ordinary people and ordinary families may never be known without the autobiographies of ordinary people. Nehru, talking about his family's involvement in the cause of national freedom, said, 'the greatness touched us all'. The Mukherjees of Khaskenda Colliery Limited were not the Nehrus of Anand Bhavan, but nationalism was such an overpowering force that no one could escape it. Our family was not an important family in the national history of India, nor was it particularly political. But Gandhi, Nehru, Bose and Tagore were familiar names in our childhood and public events such as the death of Tagore and the Quit India Movement affected our daily life. I think that the finer points of nationalism can only be understood through familial histories and a historian can record his/her family history better than anyone else.

There is, however, a serious problem about writing one's own autobiography at the mature age of sixty. Memory often betrays us — something that appears very important today might not have been so important then, or something that was important then may now be forgotten. It is also hard to confirm 'the facts' from other sources. The events that I can recall vividly cannot always be confirmed by my brother or sister much like Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*⁴ was a personal view of his childhood which could not be confirmed by others who shared that childhood with him. My story is also a very personal history—not a total history of my family, not even of myself.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. IX.

⁴ Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*, London, 1973, p. 9.

With the passing of time, there is also the inevitable loss of innocence. Tagore in his *Reminiscences* recalled his visit to a village in Bengal: 'This was forty years ago, since then I have never set foot again in that *champak* shaded villa garden. The same old house and the same old trees must still be there, but I know it cannot any longer be the same—for where am I now to get that fresh feeling of wonder which made it what it was?'⁵

I know for certain that my journey into my own past will not have that important 'feeling of wonder'. In 1988 I went back to my maternal ancestral home after thirty-nine years. This village was the place where we used to spend our annual *Puja* (autumn festival) holidays. In 1988 the village was no longer a village, but a small Indian country town with many brick houses, electricity, telephones, televisions and so on. In my childhood there were only two brick houses—my grandfather's, the famous *rajbari* (palace, literally raja's house), and our cousins' small house, with no electricity and no telephone. In 1988 the *rajbari* appeared small, empty and silent, the trees at the back of the house having almost vanished. The wonder and the charm the place had for us can no longer be found there; it is just another small Indian country town.

So the readers must recognise the limitations of this autobiographical note. A lot of it is nostalgia; one's childhood is always the lost paradise, never to be regained, and only dimly re-captured in this journey into one's past. Some of it may be considered as the confession of a prodigal son who never returned home and who is searching for his own identity. I said as much in 1977 in my book on Calcutta:

There is an additional reason why I am interested in Calcutta. I am weary of presentism in history. I have no desire to select some factors of history out of context to make them relevant to current concerns. Yet we must recognise that historians are not mere chroniclers of past events. We study the past from the present, recognising the fact that both history and historians are part of a process of development of awareness of ourselves and our environment. If we were to borrow a phrase from Collingwood, then history is a process of 'self-knowledge'. I often think that in the lanes and bylanes of Calcutta in 1806 I am trying to discover

⁵ R. N. Tagore, *Reminiscences*, India edn., Calcutta, 1971, pp. 48-9.

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my own identity and I think that Collingwood would have liked us to write history in this way.⁶

Two books by Jawaharlal Nehru have great significance for me. They are the *The Discovery of India* and *An Autobiography*. Although the first edition of *An Autobiography* was published in 1936 and *The Discovery of India* ten years later,⁷ I discovered his *Discovery* only in 1948 during my *upanayana* (sacred thread ceremony), as one of the many presents that I received during the ceremony. In 1949 my father presented my mother with a Bengali translation of Nehru's autobiography.⁸ I have lost my copy of *The Discovery*, but I still have my mother's copy of the Bengali version of *An Autobiography*. The two books are related, for *The Discovery of India* is in most part autobiographical (six out of ten chapters) and some episodes are mentioned in both. These two books are without doubt two important documents of modern Indian history. No historian of twentieth century India can ignore them; they are records of the nationalist movement and the nationalist outlook of India and her past. But what is also significant is the fact that generations of Indians have been influenced by these two books. Many events mentioned in them were the events that I remember well: the fear of war, the declaration of war, the Gandhi-Bose controversy, the disappearance of Bose, the 1942 movement, the 1943 Famine, the release of Gandhi in 1944, negotiations for independence and the INA Trials in 1945. But what is more important is that my ideas about India, her past, present and future, were shaped by Nehru and his book. Elsewhere I have shown that professional historians, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, could not escape from Nehru's views on the 1857 uprising.⁹

In this essay I have attempted to show how Nehru and the world outside entered our home and moulded our lives; how economic, social, cultural and political events outside shaped familial life at home.

I was born in Calcutta into a family of colliery owners. We were Radi kulin brahmin by caste. I was, however, brought up in our colliery near Ranigunge, 109 miles north-west of Calcutta. In my childhood I

⁶ S. N. Mukherjee, *Calcutta, Myths and History*, Calcutta, 1977, p. 81.

⁷ J. L. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 4th ed., London, 1956.

⁸ *Idem.*; *An Autobiography*, was first published in 1936. It was translated into Bengali by Satyendra Nath Majumdar in 1937. My mother's copy of *Atmacharit* (autobiography) is the 3rd ed. of the book (Calcutta, 1948).

⁹ S. N. Mukherjee, 'Marxist Historians in Search of a Revolution', in S. N. Mukherjee and John O. Ward (eds), *Revolution as History*, Sydney, 1989, p. 102.

was well aware of the status of my class. We were addressed as *malik babu* or *malik saheb* (lord and master) by the miners and the clerks of the colliery. We lived in a bungalow with a large garden and a garage for our car. A number of clerks and other qualified employees, such as *Kampas Babu* (the Surveyor), *Khajanchi Babu* (the Cashier), *Daktar Babu* (the Doctor), etc., lived in 'quarters' (if they were married); the bachelors or single men lived in *meshbari* (mess). Beneath this class there were the *Malkatas* (miners), loaders, *Kamins* (female labourers), *Kulis* (unskilled workers), etc., who lived in *dhawras* (coolie barracks). These *dhawras* were often specified for a particular tribe or caste; there were, for instance, *dhawras* for Baoris, Bhuiyas, Bilaspuris, Majhis, etc. There were also Muslims and Sikhs who worked with heavy boilers and heavy machinery and they had their own separate quarters. The only other family to have a bungalow in the colliery was the colliery manager's family. The managers had to be mining engineers and/or had to pass the government examination specially arranged for the colliery managers. The managers, as chief executive officers, were closer to us (*maliks*) than to other employees of the colliery.

So there was a three-tier class system. The situation was complicated by caste and education. A considerable number of the lower middle class employees were our relatives from my father's or my mother's ancestral homes. Other employees of this rank were Kayasthas, Baidyas or Brahmins. There were, however, some Tanti (weaver) or Banik (merchant) caste *babus*. There were only two 'respectable' Muslim employees in all the years that I grew up in the colliery. One of them was a nephew of the famous poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose ancestral village was only two miles from our colliery.

We were allowed to play with the children of our *babu* employees and our families socialised on familial and ritual occasions, such as brothers day, Saraswati Puja (worship of the Goddess of Learning), etc. In winter we would often go out to the nearest jungle for picnics. There was no electricity until 1942. We spent our evenings studying or listening to a radio operated on batteries, or played games, or listened to music either sung or played by our parents, mostly by our mother. There were occasions when we went to visit our father's friends or they visited us. Most of my father's social friends were not colliery owners, but were colliery managers, classmates of his college days at the Bengal Engineering College, Shibpur. As a special treat we would visit Asansol, the nearest subdivisional headquarters and a railway junction to see a film or have a meal in a restaurant or visit relatives and friends.

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The big dividing line in our social world was between 'us', the upper and middle class Bengali *bhadralok* and 'them', the miners and other members of the lower order, who lived in *dhawras*. The caste rules and education created a barrier which was rarely crossed. The heterogeneous working class had their own tribal or caste festivals and except for Kalipuja (worship of the Goddess Kali — the goddess had to be pacified, for the collieries were accident-prone) they did not join in any of our social functions. But 'them' and 'us' were ruled and discriminated against by the Europeans. The European colliery owners and colliery managers, the European officers of the police force, the civil administration and the railways socialised exclusively among themselves. There was a strong resentment against this class in our family. For instance, the European colliery owners had their own Indian Mining Association. In 1913, my maternal grandfather and my paternal grandfather, with many other Indian colliery owners, established a separate association. It was called the Indian Mining Federation. There were constant rivalries between these two associations to gain favours from the British Government.

We knew only a handful of Europeans well. They were mostly educationists or missionaries or European wives of my father's Indian friends. Most Europeans associated with the collieries were employees of the big Agency Houses in Calcutta. Generally we avoided socialising with the Europeans and in the last decade of the British Raj the English in India were usually very rude to us. There were, however, one or two exceptions. There was a white Russian colliery owner, who was unfortunately disliked by the Indians and the English alike. And there was Mr Sample. He inherited a colliery, but lived with a tribal woman and he too was socially boycotted by both the Bengali *bhadralok* and the Englishmen. Whenever we went on holiday to hill stations we stayed in boarding houses run by Europeans or Anglo-Indian (Eurasian) ladies. The memories of some of these places are extremely pleasant. Mrs Cripps of Kalimpong, who became a close friend of my mother, loved to curse Hitler. We still have photographs of her boarding house and one of the boarders, Mr Dick, whom we called Sada Dadamasay (white granduncle).

There was just one area where the differences due to class, caste and race were forgotten. That was football (soccer). Most collieries had football teams and the quality of the player counted more than his social origins. In our colliery team we had men from all castes and social groups. I can remember a *majhi* who was a very good goalkeeper. My

father and Mr Sample, who had referees' certificates, used to act as referees in the competitive games.

Life in the colliery was not always peaceful. There were accidents at the pit-head or inside the mine. There were conflicts amongst the miners and between miners and the *babus* (clerks). There was not yet any serious union movement to take on the employers but there were serious dacoities. We had to keep guns in the bungalows and had armed guards. Collieries were spread round Ranigunge town and often there were no proper roads only cart tracks, and people were often isolated.

The public events in the British Empire in India touched our daily life. The War and the Quit India Movement left deep imprints on our minds as children. I was at that time eight years old and had started shouting 'quit India' whenever I saw a white face. This was not always a light-hearted affair. Once a friend of mine and I stood in front of a military truck with a piece of board on which was written 'quit India' or something to that effect. The truck stopped, soldiers got out. I escaped inside the bungalow but the other boy was taken by the military to his parents and beaten by his father for such mischievous activity. The most important thoroughfare near our colliery was the Grand Trunk Road, which the British had declared a security zone for the defence of the Empire against Japanese aggression. Every vehicle had to have a special permit to use the Grand Trunk Road and we were often harassed by the military demanding to see the permit.

During the War we were also harassed by the police authorities which made us conscious of the might of the Empire and racial discrimination. One incident that still sticks in my mind occurred when we were coming back from a social evening in another colliery. Driving in the night was not easy. There were no streets, no street lights, only tracks. We had to find our way by natural signposts such as a solitary palm tree or a pond. On this occasion my father, who was driving the car, had to break the blackout order and drive with headlights on. We were stopped by a young English Sub-divisional Officer. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two or so, was smoking a cigarette and had the smell of whisky on his breath. He humiliated my father and fined him for breaking the law. Then he proceeded to put on his torchlight, staring at my mother and my sister in the back of the car in a rude fashion. I still feel angry about it. This incident to me is an example of the haughty arrogance of the imperial rulers of India in the last decade of the Raj.

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The worst effect of the Second World War on India was the Bengal Famine of 1943. It is now estimated that some three million people died from this man-made famine. If the Quit India Movement made us politically aware, then the Famine made us socially conscious of poverty and death. My parents operated a soup kitchen in our colliery. We were asked to go round collecting rice and lentils from middle-class households. Every family was asked to put aside a fistful of rice and lentils each day for the soup kitchen. The soup kitchen provided free meals for the victims of the famine. A scene which still haunts me was of a poor woman who came with two children and died at our doorstep. I remember my father reassuring the dying woman that her children would be safe. They grew up in a foster family who lived in our gardener's quarter and my father paid for their food, shelter and schooling.

The rising tide of nationalism was at our doorstep. We heard anti-British slogans and saw demonstrations everywhere we went. We listened to the clandestine Radio organised by the resistance movement and the Azad Hind Radio from Singapore. The names of Bose, Nehru and of course Gandhi were frequently mentioned in our family conversations, and after 1942, Jinnah. Gandhi was a saintlike figure, deeply respected, but nobody felt that one ought to imitate his lifestyle. He appeared as an odd figure to the Bengali middle class. Bose was respected and loved, but it was felt that he was not a shrewd politician capable of running the country. Somehow people who wanted to see India modernised and industrialised felt that only Nehru could provide the leadership that India needed.

In 1945, the end of the War, the INA trials, the demonstrations on the streets, the revolt in the Navy, the rising union movement and the peasant movement made us all restless. We started attending big rallies whenever we visited Calcutta or organised meetings supporting the anti-Imperialist cause. It seemed to us that no one in India wanted the British to stay longer than was absolutely necessary.

In 1944 already our family was convinced that the days of the Empire were over. In December that year we went for a holiday to Hazaribagh, a town in Bihar. My sister's boarding school, Gokhale Memorial Girls' School, had been shifted there from Calcutta because of the War. We stayed in a European boarding house where we met a single English lady who used to dine alone. My father feeling sorry for her, invited her to join us. However, her anti-Gandhian, anti-Nehru and

anti-nationalist feelings were so strong that our conversations soon turned into arguments and we had to ask her not to dine with us.

During 1945-46 our family tried to attend all the rallies held in support of the INA and went out to welcome Nehru, Sarat Chandra Bose and of course Gandhi. When Gandhi was in Sodepur my mother dressed us all in Khadi and hoped that we would be blessed by this great saintlike figure. There were hundreds and thousands of mothers who must have thought the same. But, of course, we could not get anywhere near Gandhi and my head was not blessed by the Mahatma.

In 1946 we moved to Calcutta. The most important event during this period was the notorious communal riot of the 16th of August. Certainly, we children felt the unity of the country shattered. We had a handful of Muslim friends who were already feeling alienated by the nationalist trend. One of my brother's friends was a Muslim named Lal Muhammad; we called him Laluda. Until 1946 I was not aware of the fact that he was a Muslim nor that he was a supporter of the Muslim League. After 1946 he did not socialise with us. The Muslim League, which was in power in Bengal, became a real alternative for a majority of the Muslims. As children we did not understand the complex problem of politics, but we felt the Muslims were drifting away from us. During the riots many of our relatives who lived in Muslim areas came and took shelter in our house. One of our house servants was a Muslim. He was sent out to a Muslim area, but we were told that he was killed by a Hindi mob before he could reach safety. One early morning we heard a cry from the Deshapriya Park in front of our house. An innocent Muslim fruit vendor was being ruthlessly killed and we could do nothing about it. It was the first time we saw jackals and vultures in front of our house, feasting on the dead body. We heard similar horror stories about Hindu victims in Muslim areas. Suddenly, it seemed that all humanity had deserted us and all that was wanted by our Hindu relatives and friends was vengeance. For weeks there was civil war in Calcutta. The traumatic effect of the riots could be seen in the faces of the refugees who started pouring into Calcutta from the end of 1946. In Bengal most middle-class high caste Hindus left East Bengal (a Muslim majority area) for Calcutta.

However, the spirit of nationalism could not be dampened and in 1946 Nehru appeared to us, as he must have appeared to most other Indians, as the person who was going to lead independent India. The INA and Netaji Subhas Bose had made us politically conscious, but Gandhi and Nehru were figures who loomed large in our family. This is

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not to say that there were not other alternatives and the Communist Party was emerging as a significant force. I first heard about Lenin and the Soviet Union from the famous writer Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay who was married to my father's cousin. I remember once he visited us with his family. I was asked by my grandfather to take him back to his house in Tallah in our family car. As a young boy sitting on his lap in the car I heard about the sacrifices that Lenin had made for the people of Russia. I found out later that these stories were a garbled version of Krupskaya's *Memoirs of Lenin*.

It was, however, Nehru and his *Discovery of India* that drew me to Marxism and Leninism and gave me an insight into the history of our people. In 1946 when Nehru became the Vice-President of the Interim Government, my father, as the Chairman of the Indian Mining Federation, sent him a congratulatory telegraph. There began a close collaboration between the Indian coal industry and the newly formed Government, dominated by Nehru. Then came the 15th of August 1947. India was independent but divided. There were jubilations in the streets of Calcutta which lasted until the early hours of the morning. The fanatical communal rivalries of 1946 were forgotten for the day. There were national flags, arches and lights, and singing of the national anthem everywhere. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, old and young, men and women, were out on the streets.

Within months of this, in early 1948, I had my *upanayana* (sacred thread ceremony) which was celebrated in our colliery. I received a huge number of presents and the most important were books, amongst them *The Discovery of India*. The radical mood of the time, I think, led me to read more about Marxist alternatives in this text than the nationalist programme which was the primary concern of the author. Nehru ended his book with a quotation from Lenin:

Man's dearest possession is life, and since it is given to him to live but once, he must solace as not to be feared with the shame of a cowardly and trivial past, so live as not to be tortured for years without purpose, so live that dying he can say: 'All life and my strength were given to the first cause of the world — the liberation of mankind.'¹⁰

¹⁰ J. L. Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, p. 582.

My discovery of Nehru led me to discover India and Marxism. Many things that one felt in one's childhood about class, caste, religion, race, nationalism and our great culture were clarified by this book. It gave voice to my feelings and raised my hopes high for a modern industrialised India. Disillusionment came much later, but that is another story.

