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## Nehru as a Historian: Kosambi as a Reader of Nehru

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### Abstract

This paper examines Jawaharlal Nehru's contribution as a historian, through the lens of D.D. Kosambi's critique. Kosambi argued that Nehru's writings were inaccurate and biased, focusing on the Muslim League as the primary threat to Indian independence, while ignoring the real threat from a bourgeois coalition. Kosambi also criticized Nehru's writings for being romantic and idealistic, and for not accurately reflecting India's complex history. Kosambi argued that Nehru had made a mistake in focusing on the Muslim League as the primary threat to Indian independence, and that the real threat came from a bourgeois coalition. Kosambi also argued that Nehru's writings were romantic and idealistic and did not accurately reflect India's complex history. Despite these criticisms, Nehru's writings are still valued for their insight and clarity. He was able to present the history of his country in readable prose that was full of impressions from his travels. Overall, Nehru's writings are a valuable contribution to the study of history and politics.

**Keywords:** Historian, Kosambi, Muslim league

### Introduction

When assessing Nehru's contribution as a historian, it is important to remember that he did not receive any formal training in the discipline. He wrote about history during his imprisonment, and naturally, without access to sources. Despite this, he was able to write history with such flowing prose and his subjective voice was never shy of expressing itself. This is a matter worth admiring – to present the history of his country in readable prose and laden the text with the impressions acquired from his travels. One just needs to recall his critique of the idea of *Bharat Mata* <sup>[1]</sup>. And yet, D.D. Kosambi, one of the greatest historians of India, refrained from recommending this book to the general reader, despite admitting his admiration for Nehru <sup>[2]</sup>. Why? Kosambi may have felt Nehru's book was subjective, poorly researched, or too dense for general readers.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a complex figure who was influenced by a variety of political and philosophical ideas. It is often pointed out, by critics and admirers alike, how Nehru was intellectually, at least, affected by Marxism. The late Prof. Bipan Chandra <sup>[3]</sup> has contributed to the literature on this subject, and pointed out how Nehru saw his most radical phase in the two or three year period in the early 1930s, so much so that he had to undergo “nursing”, under the distinguished tutelage of Purushottam Thakurdas, Birla and Gandhi. He was drawn to Marxism in his youth, but he also admired Gandhi's non-violent methods. Nehru's early radicalism led to him being “nursed” by the likes of Purushottam Thakurdas, Birla and Gandhi, who helped to moderate his views. However, Nehru never abandoned his belief in socialism, and he implemented a number of socialist policies during his time as Prime Minister of India. Bhagat Singh, another radical Indian leader, also admired Nehru's socialism, but he believed that Nehru's outlook was more “scientific” than that of Subhash Chandra Bose, whose philosophy was marked by spiritualism. Even Bhagat Singh, a few years before he was hanged, had an article written in *Kirti* wherein he compared the “socialism” of Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. A radical Bhagat Singh sided more with Nehru, as he perceived that his outlook was more ‘scientific’ compared to that of Bose, whose philosophy was marked by spiritualism, even as he admired them both for taking up issues of class-struggle <sup>[4]</sup>.

In his book *Glimpses of World History*, written in 1934 <sup>[5]</sup> In prison, there are fascinating accounts of Ashoka and Akbar, Napoleon and Garibaldi, Kemal Pasha etc. but the same book also has the most sympathetic contemporary accounts of Marx and Lenin, with a great deal

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of information and specific details. The Hindi translation of that book suggests that reading about Lenin had the effect of prompting him to study the history of the Russian Revolution. Even with his limited sources, Nehru was able to draw a detailed narrative of the Russian Revolution that is more insightful than Robert Service's accounts of Lenin today. He had also read John Reed, the American journalist who covered the Russian Revolution, and even cited a Russian folk song at the end of his chapter on the revolution. Nehru was a true representative of an era in which politicians were among the most cultured classes, and that alone is enough reason to evaluate him very positively. Nehru discusses the immediacy of the international political environment, which is so confusing to a nationalist's mind, with clarity.

Even while he was confined, he was able to maintain an enlightened view of world events. However, what distinguishes his historical works is not his fresh approach to class analysis (at least from the perspective of his own time), but his romanticism and nationalism. And we see a lot of both in Nehru. Of course, romanticism is also abundant in Marx's writings, particularly when he writes about ancient Greek literature or when he contrasts his youthful concept of "alienation" under capitalism with his later Gotha Programme, in which he imagines "doing one thing today and another tomorrow, hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, raising cattle in the evening, criticizing after dinner, just as I please, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic <sup>[6]</sup>." But, the romanticism that Marx had could be transcended with the Enlightenment part of his philosophy, which was much more powerfully abundant. The problem with Nehru was that his romanticism could not be, for his rational half was subordinated to the former. He said it himself: he did not "do" history for its facts and analyses, rather, for "[p]ast history merged into contemporary history: it became a living reality tied up with sensations of pain and pleasure <sup>[7]</sup>." In this sense, his history was a utopia: a search for a sublime past outside a gloomy present. In Freudian terms, doing history for Nehru is kind of a search for paternal authority in the past when his quasi-filial affiliation with Gandhi had put him in jail. He himself was to put it in so many words:

"The past remains; but I cannot write academically of past events in the manner of a historian or scholar. I do have not that knowledge or equipment or training; nor do I possess the mood for that kind of work. The past oppresses me or fills me sometimes with its warmth when it touches on the present, and becomes, as it were, an aspect of that living present. If it does not do so, then it is cold, barren, lifeless, uninteresting. I can only write about it, as I have previously done, by bringing it in some relation to my present-day thoughts and activities, and then this writing of history, as Goethe once said, brings some relief from the weight and burden of the past. It is, I suppose, a process similar to that of psychoanalysis, but applied to a race or to humanity itself instead of to an individual <sup>[8]</sup>."

The tone of his preface, where he lays out his methodology, suffices to see that he was not much attached to history as an academic discipline, rather as a means of passing time. His attraction of the non-dualism of Vedanta, and the repulsion of non-dualism in Marxism, are contradictory ideas, just as

his espousal of historical materialism and his renunciation of the "finer points of doctrine" reflect a basically anti-intellectualist stance, if not the effort. Just revoke the imagery that he has used to describe the ancient Indian world:

"Caste was a group system based on services and functions. It was meant to be to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowing the fullest latitude to each group.' Mercifully free from what had handicapped the Greeks, it was 'infinitely better than slavery even for those lowest in the scale. Within each caste there was equality and a measure of freedom; each caste was occupational and applied itself to its particular work. This led to a high degree of specialization and skill in handicrafts and craftsmanship,' in a social order that was 'noncompetitive and nonacquisitive'. Indeed, far from embodying any principle of hierarchy, caste 'kept up the democratic habit in each group' <sup>[9]</sup>."

All this is very fanciful and flies in the face of historical research. For, Ambedkar had a finer sense of history when he confronted Gandhi in the early 1930s on the untouchability question, when Gandhi had taken the position that while *varna* was a good idea, *jati* was not, while castes system was largely justified, untouchability was not and could be removed of Hinduism. Ambedkar had argued how it was impossible to separate caste-system from untouchability as they were part of the same phenomenon. This idea was never contested by Nehru who had written his historical writings then <sup>[10]</sup>.

Kosambi criticized Nehru for not taking facts into account. He dismissed Nehru's analysis of ancient India as flawed because there are hardly any facts about that period. He also challenged Nehru's use of the word "race" in referring to a nation. Kosambi questioned Nehru's economic analysis, which should have been central to a writer declaring commitment to the Marxist method. Nehru did not see how certain communities got ahead of others (Parsis compared to Muslims) and how the Indian financial elite benefitted from the inflated share prices under the very British rule which was, in Nehru's understanding, being opposed by Indian people as a 'race.' While Indians in South Africa were certainly fighting for equality with the white races in South Africa, they were not fighting for equality with blacks. Though aware, Nehru did not take such facts into account. Kosambi's criticism of Nehru is important because it highlights the need for historians to be accurate and objective in their work. It is also important because it shows how different interpretations of history can be based on different sets of facts.

Nehru attempted to prevent the rise of the new middle classes in India. However, these new middle classes were demanding their share of the wealth. The living conditions of the peasant workers, factory workers, and even the lower-paid office workers and intellectuals were deteriorating, while the upper middle class was getting richer. This was a striking contrast, and it was only getting worse. The upper middle class was trying to hide their wealth by wearing simple clothes and caps, but it was clear that they were getting richer at the expense of the poor. Nehru's fallacy was that he thought that the new middle classes would be satisfied with just a little bit of wealth. He thought that they would be content to live in peace with the old upper class.

However, the new middle classes were not satisfied. They wanted more, and they were willing to fight for it. This led to the rise of a new kind of inequality in India. The old upper class was still rich, but the new middle class was getting richer even faster. This led to a lot of resentment and anger. The new middle class felt like they were being cheated, and they were determined to change things. Nehru's fallacy also led to the rise of a new kind of politics in India. The old political parties were still powerful, but the new middle class was starting to form its own political parties. These new political parties were more radical than the old ones, and they were more willing to fight for the rights of the poor. It led to the rise of a new kind of inequality, and it led to the rise of a new kind of politics and still being felt today <sup>[11]</sup>.

Kosambi argued that Nehru was mistaken to focus on the Muslim League as the primary threat to Indian independence. Instead, he argued that the real threat came from the bourgeois alliance, which included various sub-classes such as the urban upper-middle classes, financial elites, industrialists, and rural zamindars. Kosambi argued that this alliance was only interested in protecting its own interests and did not represent the interests of the majority of Indians. He also argued that the Congress bourgeoisie was not interested in mass action, even though the people were willing to participate. This was because the Congress bourgeoisie had secured its own position for the time being and did not want to risk losing power. Kosambi concluded by reminding Nehru of his own calls for analysis rather than romanticizing India's past. This was reflected in Nehru's vision of himself and India's past. He praised Ashoka and Akbar for their liberalism, and hinted at how antagonistic and isolationist tendencies had been assimilated into a certain Indianism. Perry Anderson coined the term "Indian Ideology" for this idea. It is this ideology that marks the here-progressive-there-romantic flavor of Nehru's writings about history. It rather seems a more self-assuring tale of optimism and tolerance.

Nehru's writing is clear and concise, and he does an excellent job of explaining complex topics in a way that is easy to understand. Kosambi's criticism of Nehru is important because it highlights the need for historians to be accurate and objective in their work. It is also important because it shows how different interpretations of history can be based on different sets of facts. Nehru was an amateur historian who wrote with a subjective voice and was criticized by Kosambi for being inaccurate and biased. However, Nehru's writing is still valuable for its insights and clarity. Overall, Nehru's writing is a valuable contribution to the study of history and politics.

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