

## CONTOURING CASTE IN JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S *THE DISCOVERY OF INDIA*

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### **Abstract:**

*Caste as an important aspect of Indian society continues to shape and mould India's socio-political history from the ancient to the present age. It has always been a subject of debate and discussion in the Indian socio-polity. Jawaharlal Nehru, as a man of letters, as an eminent statesman and a dexterous writer, happens to be one of the chief architects of modern India. Significantly both caste and Nehru played a vital role in development of Indian politics since the time of independence. Several works have examined Nehru's role in national and international history and politics from different perspectives. Nehru's prose writings have also been examined to find out how far his socio-political views are reflected in these works, though Nehru's views on the system of caste have not been properly studied. So it becomes imperative to know Nehru's insights on caste as reflected in *The Discovery of India*. This paper attempts to study the representation of caste in his masterpiece *The Discovery of India* and explore his approach and reaction to it.*

**Key Words:** *Caste, backward groups, discovery, nationalist movement, Indian history, Socio-polity*

Jawaharlal Nehru, as a man of letters, as an eminent statesman and a dexterous writer, happens to be one of the chief architects of modern India. Understanding Nehru has always been important for understanding early modern India. Several works have examined Nehru's role in national and international history and politics from different perspectives. Nehru's prose writings have also been examined to find out how far his socio-political views are reflected in these works, though Nehru's views on the system of caste have not been properly studied. This paper attempts to study the representation of caste in his masterpiece *The Discovery of India* and examine his approach and reaction to it.

Caste is an important aspect of Indian society. Any knowledge of the Indian social system would be complete only with a proper understanding of the caste structure. As an ever burning issue caste continues to shape and mould India's socio-political history from the ancient to the present age. Social scientist Nicholas Dirks thinks that “caste is a specter that continues to haunt the body politic of postcolonial India” and has become “the focus of progressive movements and of debates” about “the character of postcolonial politics” (16, 17). Caste has been a recurrent motif in Nehru's *the Discovery of India*. In *the Discovery*, Nehru while narrating the history of his country makes a detailed analysis of the caste system.

*The Discovery of India*, written during the final and longest term of Nehru's imprisonment, traces the journey of the nation from the Indus Valley civilization to the 1940s. It is the “thought” of India's “particular heritage” and “its application to the present” that motivated him to survey the annals of India (37). He intended to discover the spirit of India and to use it as a guiding force for building the “house of India's future” (59). His reading of India's past may be divided into three notable phases. In the first phase he narrated the period of Indian history which enjoyed continuity between the different ages. Nehru argues that despite the various upheavals and internal conflict, India “during the first thousand years of the Christian era” was pulsating with energy and flourished in every field of life- literature, philosophy, art, science and mathematics (221). He locates it as a golden phase of his nation's history. But ultimately India

was seized by an inner weakness which destroyed its dynamic quality and crippled its political status and creative activities. In his attempt to decipher the cause of this weakness Nehru finds that probably this shrinking nature of India resulted from the “rigidity and exclusiveness of the Indian social structure” (225). In the second phase, Nehru laments that the arrival of the British invaders marks a notable disruption of the continuity of the vital link between the past and the present. He recorded the inhuman suffering and the agony of the Indian masses and in this context examined the rise of the Indian national movement, the emergence of the Indian National Congress and the arrival and impact of Gandhiji on Indian socio-politics. The Third and the final phase may aptly be described as an expression of Nehru's nationalist creed. According to him the cause of India's suffering was the lack of “dynamic outlook” and the rigid social structure (506). The prospect of India's progress lies in its ability to grow and develop out of the past. Nehru feels that science accompanied by an efficient economic system will enable India to liberate herself from the prison of exclusiveness and narrow religiosity and move out in the path of progress and “equality” (521).

Nehru's analysis of caste as enumerated in the *Discovery* probably, enables us to form an idea of his perspective on caste. Nehru introduces the caste system as a product of the “conflict and interaction of races, which in the course of” time continued “to affect Indian life... profoundly” (84). Nehru describes the caste system as an attempt to socially organize the different conflicting races by separating them from each other. Nehru's observation unquestionably is more a historical account of the origin of caste system. However, his historicization of caste remarkably differs from the conventional historical treatment of caste. Nehru, instead of viewing caste as a means of subordinating the inferior dark dasas by the superior Aryans considers it as “peaceful solution” encouraging fluidity and assimilation (85). He categorically states the four main castes- the Brahmins, i.e. “the priests and thinkers”; the Kshatriyas or “rulers and warriors”; Vaishyas, “the agriculturists, artisans and merchants” and the Shudras or “the labourers and unskilled workers” (85). It is significant that Nehru dwells on the four main castes at length, but he tends to exclude the untouchables from his analysis of the four main castes:

If we leave out for a moment those who were considered outside the pale of caste, the untouchables, there were the Brahmins... the Kshatriyas... the Vaishyas... and the Shudras. (253)

Nehru examined the untouchables or the depressed classes as the “number of castes near the bottom of the scale” (253), who are “engaged in scavenging or unclean work” (254). It may be pointed out that Nehru simply takes into consideration the menial nature of their job and completely ignores the exploitation and oppression of the untouchables by the society. Nehru rather seemed to accept their economic and social servitude as a part of their daily normal job.

After describing the various categories of the social scale Nehru proceeds to refer to the fluid nature of caste which enabled the indigenous tribes to be assimilated and included in the social pale of the caste structure (85). He further pointed out that:

There was always a continuous process of new castes being formed as new occupations developed, and for other reasons the older castes were always trying to get up in the social scale. (253)

Nehru probably, was referring to the process of mobilization embedded in the system of caste. However his postulation may better be analysed using Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization. Srinivas used the term “Sanskritization” to describe “the process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice born' caste” (*Social Change in Modern India* 6). A close reading of *The Discovery of India* reveals that the text seems to echo Srinivas' words:

Among the indigenous tribes many were gradually assimilated and given a place at the bottom of the social scale, that is among the Shudras. This process of assimilation was a continuous one. (85).

However there is a subtle difference between Nehru's proposition and Srinivas' observation. Whereas Nehru focussed on the assimilation of the indigenous tribes among the Shudras, Srinivas' Sanskritization implies mobility in the direction of the twice born castes.

Nehru contends that the Indian civilization which is firmly rooted on the principles of "stability and security", is supported by the elements of its social structure (144). The caste system and the joint family, the two integral elements of the Indian social structure are functional in "providing social security for the group" (144). Thus the caste system enabled the society to work "harmoniously" thereby creating a "common national bond" (251). That is why Nehru defines the caste system as:

a group system based on services and functions. It was meant to be an all-inclusive order without any common dogma and allowing the fullest latitude to each group (252).

For Nehru, group becomes synonymous with the caste. He seems to emphasize on the collective nature of Indian society where the individual identity is subordinated to the claims of the group. Significantly Nehru's definition of caste strikingly parallels Risley's definition of caste<sup>1</sup> and he like the latter focuses on the group centric nature of caste. However, a close reading of the definition divulges that Nehru, who has focussed on the various features of the system, has somehow overlooked the hereditary nature of caste. He seemed to forget that the membership of this group is determined "not by selection but by birth" (Ghurye 39).

Nehru in *The Discovery of India* has rendered a detailed illustration of the virtues of the caste system and acknowledged the tremendous significance of the system in the Indian social structure. He believed that caste despite "all its evils kept up the democratic habit in each group" (256). According to Nehru the proper functioning of the castes or the groups enabled the society as a whole to work "harmoniously" and followed "elaborate rules of procedure, election and debate" (251, 256). Moreover, by sharing a common culture, common tradition and common beliefs, these castes were essentially instrumental in generating "a common national bond which would hold all these groups together" (251). However, the community perpetuates the superiority of the upper groups. Nehru seems to emphasize on the collective nature of Indian society where the individual identity is subordinated to the claims of the group. The caste system along with the joint families was "successful in providing social security" and stability to the social structure (144). He even thinks that a complete dismantling of the system without having a proper alternative could be disastrous:

The break-up of a huge and long standing social organization may well lead to a complete disruption of social life, resulting in the absence of cohesion, mass suffering... unless some other social structure, more suited to the genius of the people, takes its place. (247)

So, from the above analysis it becomes clear that in the *Discovery* Nehru considers caste as one of the major pillars of the Indian society and believes that its disruption would surely rock the foundation of the Indian social structure. Caste is so significant to Nehru that it becomes synonymous with the identity of India. He writes:

Almost everyone who knows anything at all about India has heard of the caste system... (245)

Nehru was apprehensive about the future of the system which has strongly endured the "powerful impact of Buddhism and many centuries of Afghan and Mughal rule and the spread of Islam as well as the strenuous efforts of innumerable Hindu reformers who raised their voices against it" (246). He believed

that the system has been “seriously threatened” and its “basis has been attacked” and wishes to leave the system intact by lessening its abuses and rigidity (246). Significantly, following Andre Beteille's observations it may be argued that Nehru perfectly represents the “urban Indians” (151), who exhibit a “characteristic ambivalence” in their “orientation to caste” in the contemporary situation (152). Beteille opines that they tend to attach exaggerated significance to caste or reject its importance. This ambivalence seems to be vividly noticeable in Nehru's discourse on caste. He in a similar manner has not only evaluated the virtues of caste but also acknowledged the perils of the system. He has highlighted the limitations of the hereditary tendency of the group or the caste system. He opines that:

The Indian social structure...developed crafts and skill and trade and commerce, but always within each group separately. Thus particular types of activity became hereditary and there was a tendency to avoid new types of work and activity... (226)

Nehru further points out the caste system restricted the release of fresh talents, energy and innovation. It promoted exclusion and prevented the “growth of a larger freedom” (226). The strength and cohesion provided by caste obstructed expansion and “larger cohesion” (226). He trenchantly criticizes the brutality of the upper caste people and highlights their lack of responsibility. According to Nehru the “idea of ceremonial purity” has constructed “barriers against social intercourse and narrowed the sphere of social action” (520). The caste system “strictly limited” the chances and opportunities of the lower caste people and prevented them from using the resources of the society. He believed that the caste system:

Degraded a mass of human beings and gave them no opportunities to get out of that condition- educationally, culturally or economically (257).

Nehru was of opinion that the caste system has no acceptance and recognition in the contemporary social order and pointed out that “much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive and barriers to progress” (257). Nehru, however, like Beteille's typical “urban” middle class Indians wished to “wither” it (caste) away through rapid “economic development, through the spread of education and through science and technology” (159). Nehru, just like these Indians was convinced that India can progress by turning towards “science” and getting rid of the “exclusiveness in thought and social habit” (*Discovery* 520). He thinks that “this outlook has to change completely, for it is wholly opposed to modern conditions and the democratic ideal” (520). Any stable and progressive society, according to Nehru, is a combination of fixed basic principles and a dynamic outlook. India always searched for the “absolute” universal principles but lacked the “dynamic outlook” (*Discovery* 505, 506). Nehru expresses the earnest desire to liberate India from its prison of exclusiveness by pushing it towards the path of dynamism and progress.

Famous critic Nicholas Dirks has also noted the “ambivalence” present in Nehru (3) and observed that “Nehru neatly captured the conceptual contours of most recent debates over caste: he evaluated it in relation to its place as fundamental to Hinduism, as well as in terms of basic opposition between the individual and the community, an opposition that has provided the bounds of most modern social theory and political imagining” (4). Significantly, Andre Beteille's theory undeniably proves Dirks' statement that Nehru provided the “bounds of most modern social theory” (4).

In this context one may refer to Beteille's postulation in which he has spoken about “the metaphorical use” of the term caste (174). He states that a proper understanding of caste in today's India requires a comprehension of the “switch from literal use of the term caste to its metaphorical use” and points out that presently, Western writers make an extensive metaphorical use of caste to describe status, the sense of distinction or the strategies of exclusion in Western societies (Beteille 174). Surprisingly, a close reading of *The Discovery of India* reveals that Nehru had already anticipated Beteille's apprehension about the “unreflective switch from the literal use of the term caste to its metaphorical use”:

But while we struggle with caste in India (which, in its origin, was based on colour), new and overbearing castes have arisen in the west with doctrines of racial exclusiveness, sometimes clothed in political and economic terms, and even speaking in the language of democracy. (121, 122)

However, it is really peculiar and problematic to decipher why such an erudite and farsighted man like Nehru had remained glaringly silent on his observations on the contemporary twentieth century caste-centric historical events. In the *Discovery of India*, Nehru embarks on his quest to discover India of the “past and of the present” (68). The book records the journey of the nation, where the past merges with the present and thereby prepares the ground for the future. In the course of his narration of the variegated annals of Indian history, Nehru refers to the innumerable historical incidents which influenced and moulded the fate of India till the 1940s. In this context, Nehru narrated the origin of the caste system, its gradual process of evolution and its impact on the Indian society during the colonial and pre-Independence period. He gave a detailed description of the various turn of events and developments like the formation of the Muslim League, the Govt. of India Act, the formation of the provincial government by Congress in 1937, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Resolution and so on. However there is no single reference to the formation of Justice Party, the signing of the Poona pact and Gandhiji's role in the Harijan movement. Moreover, though Nehru has mentioned many of his distinguished comrades and contemporaries like Gandhiji, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Govind Ballav Pant, Jinnah and others yet there is no single record of Jyotibarao Phule and Ambedkar. It is significant to note that Ambedkar, who shared a distinctively different “position on the Indian past and present and for whom the people were not a homogenous mass of undifferentiated quality but, as they showed in their work, were placed in a hierarchical relation of power along the caste, class, regional and linguistic axis”, has not been remembered by Nehru for a single moment in the *Discovery* (Srivastava 3). Not only that, Nehru has maintained “total silence” in his representation of the divergent caste and non-Brahmin movements which produced a temporary jolt in the workings of the freedom movement under the guidance of the Indian National Congress (Srivastava 3).

However, it cannot be asserted that Nehru was antipathetic towards the lower caste people. *The Discovery of India* reveals his awareness of the harmful ramifications of the caste system and his realization of the irrelevance of the institution in the contemporary social system. Nehru observed that:

Caste in the past has not only led to the suppression of certain groups, but to a separation of theoretical and scholastic learning from craftsmanship, and a divorce of philosophy from actual life and its problems...this outlook has to change completely, for it is opposed to modern conditions and the democratic ideal.(520)

So, he wanted to get rid of this system and to create a more humanistic system that will acknowledge the “fact that backwardness or degradation of any group is not due to inherent failings in it, but principally to lack of opportunities and long suppression by other groups” (521). To remove this, Nehru has suggested some reformative measures and has spoken of “special opportunities” for the “educational, economic and cultural” betterment and growth of the backward groups (521). But somehow, Nehru failed to realize that no opportunities are suffice to reduce the mental trauma of the discriminated and exploited lower caste people, whose membership has been refused and rejected by the society. A close reading of his observation reveals that Nehru, instead of using a specific term of categorization for the caste victims, tried to homogenize them under the nomenclature of the “backward groups” (521). Following the readings of the Dalit critic Raj Kumar, it may be argued that Nehru's *Discovery* does not make a faithful documentation of the “conditions under which they (the Dalits) have lived” (*Dalit Assertion in Society Literature and History* 132). The *Discovery* does not articulate the “details of violence, as well as processes of labour and

resistance through education” of the Dalits (qtd. in Rege 13). He has highlighted the evils of the caste system and untouchability but “without a single mention of caste-based exploitation” (Rege 26). His idea of the new social order which would provide opportunities for the growth and upliftment of the backward groups does not include a provision for the reconstruction of “dignity and self-respect” of the Dalits (*Dalit Literature and Criticism* 60).

Rege has rightly observed that the “nationalist articulation of caste” had not only “inferiorised lower castes” but also the “women” (28). Naturally, Nehru who tried to evade the issue of the Dalits in general would remain silent on “issues related to Dalit women” (*Dalit Personal Narratives* 211). Kumar has aptly contended that “the issues related to Dalit women have hardly been taken up seriously either by political leaders or by scholars until very recently” (*Dalit Personal Narratives* 211). *The Discovery of India* has a few sporadic references to the position of women in the different historical periods. Nehru has observed that:

I have no doubt at all that among the causes of India's decay in recent centuries, purdah or the seclusion of women, holds an important place. I am even more convinced that the complete ending of this barbarous custom is essential before India can have a progressive social life. (243)

He further pointed out that the various “political and social movements” by the Indian National Congress played a vital role in the liquidation of purdah and in bringing the women out of their claustrophobic cloisters and making them an active participant in the Indian national movement (243). However *The Discovery of India* makes no elaborate representation of the plight and predicament of the women who have been continuously subordinated and suppressed by the patriarchal society. Consequently, the conditions of the voiceless Dalit women, which “demanded special attention”, are also not depicted in Nehru's prose work (*Dalit Personal Narratives* 213). Nehru believed in providing the necessary provisions for enabling the weaker sections to “compete with the privileged caste and classes” but he became short-sighted to realize that without proper emancipation and empowerment the underprivileged Dalit women were not in a position to make a use of these provisions. Innumerable Dalit women were mobilized by Ambedkar and they actively participated in the various phases of the Indian national movement like the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 or the Nasik Satyagraha of 1930 but significantly Nehru in *The Discovery of India* has completely avoided a reference to these contributions.

It would be highly unjust to make a final statement on Nehru's discourse of caste without taking into considerations the time and context of the publication of the *Discovery of India*. Nehru's seminal work the *Discovery* was published at a crucial juncture of India's history. It was the time when India's struggle for independence was at its climactic stage and the nation was preparing for a revolutionary change. It is obvious that Nehru, as one of the stalwarts in the nation's liberation movement was “obsessed with the thought of India” (*Discovery* 49). He was curious to know “the spirit of India” and to use it as a “key to the understanding” of his “country and people”. Nehru believed that this discovery of the mainsprings of the Indian identity” will enable him to provide a “substance and personality” to the emerging Indian “nation state” (Gill 110). *The Discovery of India* may succinctly be described as the manifesto of Nehru's nationalist creed, where the visionary envisions the image of the nation, India. In this context it must be remembered that Nehru was also one of the main architects of Modern India. *The Discovery of India*, may, thus be regarded as the platform where Nehru prepared the “ground for the real effective future planning” (*Discovery* 396). In this context one may refer to the observations of Alok Prasad and contend that the “Nehruvian discourse of caste system or social exclusion should be seen within his larger concern to search for a stable, secure and dynamic basis of social organization for India” (41). *The Discovery* graphically depicts the preparation of a country ready to make its debut as a nation. However it may be argued that political problems assumed such a great importance in Nehru's life and thought that he decided to

temporarily put aside the internal problems of the country arising out of caste issues. Consequently the *Discovery of India* makes no elaborate articulations on caste and concentrates on the “mobilization of the nation” (Rege 27). Nehru wanted to have a fixed political objective which should not be flouted by any other causes. Following the words of Partha Chatterjee it may be observed that:

[...]the objective of all such campaigns had to be clear: it was the establishment of a sovereign national state. That was the political objective... as far as the success of these social movements was concerned, the attempts at social reform could be successful only after power had been captured and a national state established. (132)

Chatterjee argues that it was the shifting of the political focus from a broader issue to a narrower one that disturbed Nehru. Famous historian Romila Thapar has also agreed that “Nehru's historical writing...was limited by his primary concern with the national movement and the imminent coming of an independent nation state (451). Following the observation of these critics it may aptly be contended and concluded that probably Nehru, despite his awareness of the evils of the caste system, also conformed to the tradition established by the nationalists and thereby deliberately tried to temporarily separate caste issues from his political agenda. Consequently, *The Discovery of India* makes no elaborate articulations on caste.

### Note

1. Risley defines caste as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community” (qtd. in Hutton 47).

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