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**PRISON AND CHOCOLATE CAKE BY NAYANTARA SAHGAL:
A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE**

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Nayantara Sahgal, being the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, had a celebrated childhood with lots of sweet memories to cherish all lifelong. She shares the special glimpses of her childhood in her first book *Prison and Chocolate Cake*. Along with the description of day to day happenings in the life of a young girl, there are some rich excerpts from her rare experiences at Anand Bhavan - Allahbad, the precious moments spent with her Uncle Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. The memoir gives a magnificent account of the Anand Bhavan household with a pinch of the British impact on the life of all family members. Above all, it brings out a remarkable portrayal of Pandit Nehru as a family man-his friendly humanity and his inborn greatness that often filled the young authoress with awe and admiration for her beloved uncle. The book is a splendid narrative of an exemplary family that upheld the nation above everything, a family that did not hesitate to forsake its comforts and unmatched luxury, for the Motherland.

The title of the book *Prison and Chocolate Cake* gets its name from the parallel dualities running contemporarily - the sacrifice to the nation and the gay gallantry that carried India through the years of her struggle for freedom. It is a fine amalgamation of the account of the ongoing freedom struggle during the years when Mahatma Gandhi was leading the movement for independence and the contemporary lifestyle of the elite, an account of the days spent by Nehru in the prison and his life at Anand Bhavan adorned with all good things of life.

“Our earliest association with politics was far from unpleasant. One day, when I was about three years old, we had chocolate cake for tea. It was a treat because ordinarily we had bread and butter. It was a rich, dark cake, chocolate through and through, with chocolate swirls on top. While we were at tea, a group of policemen arrived at the house. When Lekha asked why they had come, Mummie explained that they had come to take Papu to prison, but that it was nothing to worry about, that he wanted to go. So we kissed him good bye and watched him leave, talking cheerfully to the policemen. We ate our chocolate cake, and in our infant minds prison became in some mysterious way associated with chocolate cake.”(21-22)

Sahgal paints vivid descriptions of instances from the lives of political personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Indira Nehru and Kamala Nehru.

She first met Gandhi Ji when she was mere four years old when he was staying at Anand Bhavan, her Uncle's home. She gives an interesting account of her first meeting with Bapu when she attended his prayer meeting with her mother Vijaylakshmi Pandit. “Bapu gave his gleeful laugh and lightly slapped my cheek, which was his way of showing affection.”(26)

Thereafter she attended several prayer meetings of Gandhi Ji and even sang for Bapu at one of them. In another reference to the members of Nehru family, she talks about her Maternal Grandmother.

Born and bred in luxury, a typical example of the flower of Kashmiri womanhood, helpless, beautiful and pampered, she had willingly given up all her comforts and shed generations of orthodoxy to follow her husband when he joined Gandhiji's ranks. Uncompromisingly she had discarded her lovely clothes for coarse white khadi, had seen her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and daughters go to jail, and had herself proudly courted arrest and imprisonment at a time when her age and ill-health could well have excused her from taking an active part in politics (41-42).

Nayantara Sahgal talks of her being highly fond of the speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru. When she was ten, her Mamu made a speech that impressed her so much that she copied it and even learnt it by heart:

Wherever in this wide world, there goes an Indian, there goes a piece of India with him, and he may not forget this fact or ignore it. It lies within his power, to some extent, to bring credit or discredit to his country, honour or dishonour... (126)

She holds her Maternal Uncle in very high esteem. She cherishes the sweet moments spent with Mamu. Each time Nehru Ji went to visit them, he would organise some new game or activity for the kids.

Nayantara Sahgal justifies the title *Prison and Chocolate Cake* time and again, saying that all through her pleasant journey of life, the imprisonment of her father, her mother and her maternal Uncle was like a shadow over her sunshine life. It was only on their return from their regular visits to the prison that life used to come to full swing.

In one of the anecdotes, she remembers coming back from Woodstock, finding her parents stand in provincial elections. It was a time of excitement and activity for young Nayantara. During the campaign, the kids accompanied parents on their tours, listening to their speeches, playing with the children they met and drinking tall glasses of thick, creamy milk sweetened with chunks of jaggery which the villagers of her father's constituencies brought them. Sometimes they were held back by Nanima and Bibima (author's great-aunt), who did not think it suitable for children to roam on dusty roads and attend political meetings.

The election campaign was as inspiring a milestone in our lives as it was in the life of the nation. It was the Congress Party's first decision to co-operate with the Government in its appraisal of the various political parties. It was more stirring than any election in a free country, because it was a challenge an indulgent government had decided to see whether an enslaved people could rise to such an occasion and take the first step toward eventual self-government. (62-63)

Sahgal reflects upon the piousness of the Indian masses. The Congress had called upon the Indian people to go to the polls in the same dedicated spirit with which they went on their pilgrimage to bathe in the Ganges, walking many miles for a dip in the sacred river. The election was also compared to a pilgrimage and its success depended on the participation of the masses. Moreover, the citizens were greatly inspired by Gandhi Ji who had walked many miles to the ocean to make salt.

For us the days before the results were announced were spent in a fever of suspense. We could neither eat or sleep, and rushed to the telephone every time it rang. One night we were having dinner, the three of us alone in the dining room, when a telegram arrived. Lekha (sister) tore it open and read: "Yes for Mummie." We looked at each other bewildered.

Once her father brought home a baby deer from his constituency and another time a crane which they named Johnny Walker. This reveals the family's love for animals.

All in all, the book is an engrossing account of a family that held its patriotic ideals foremost, but not at the cost of the small things of delight. Light-hearted humour did not fail to prevail even in the direst of situations. Children were not made to give up the good things of life. A high-spirited family indeed!

Sahgal very successfully paints a vibrant picture of her childhood days with intricate details of the happenings taking turn every now and then, it being a turbulent time in Indian politics and Nehru family being at the pivot of the whole scenario. The book keeps you deeply engrossed, getting to know the Nehru's closely. Another charm that lies, going through book is the fact that it is based on real life stories and not fiction.

References

1. Nayantara Sahgal. *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Harper Collins, 1954.