

# Jawaharlal Nehru and 1857 : A Critique of Nehru's Ideas on 1857 and Its Historical Significance

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## *ABSTRACT*

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) is much better known as first PM of India rather than as a Historian. Undoubtedly Kashyap focused on the excellence and versatility of Nehru except as a historian. (Kashyap 1990: Preface) Nehru was not only a voracious reader but also a prolific writer because as a historian Nehru wrote many famous books viz., Glimpses of World History (1934), The Unity of India (1942) and The Discovery of India (1945) etc. These books are highly significant to one and all, especially to the students and scholars of history. As a historian his writing embraced the creative thrust and splendor of the continental and Indian civilization, his thoughts and ideas about Indian history and its historical events, especially on the National Revolt of 1857 also greatly influenced India and Indian people. Nehru was one of the early scholars who expressed their ideas on the National Revolt of 1857 and described it as an expression of the people's emotions against the establishment of British Rule in India. In his Autobiography, Nehru referred 1857 with other national events. The paper after a brief focus on Nehru as a historian contains an analysis of Nehru's ideas on 1857 and its historical significance.

**Keywords:** War, 1857, Independence, Indian, Events, National, Revolt.

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## **Introduction:**

The National Revolt of 1857 was the biggest armed challenge to the foreign rule in India. It was not sudden, but the culmination of growing discontent for years against the rule of the East India Company. (Nehru 1934:414) Undoubtedly the British had successfully suppressed earlier revolts, but those revolts became the precursors of the National Revolt of 1857. It began on 10 May 1857 in the form of a mutiny of sepoys of the Company's army in the garrison town of Meerut. It then erupted into other mutinies and civilian rebellions chiefly in the upper Gangetic plain and central India, also in north and east India. (Nehru 1934:414) The revolt posed a considerable threat to British power in India. However, the British brutally suppressed it and captured and hanged most of its leaders. The revolt

is variously described as the Sepoy Mutiny, the Indian Mutiny, the Great Rebellion, the Revolt of 1857, the Indian Insurrection, the National Revolt of 1857 and the First War of Independence by scholars and historians, including Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru addressed Lok Sabha on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1957, exactly a hundred years from the day on which the First War of Independence (some scholars and historians call it Mutiny) began in the city of Meerut and mentioned a book released on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1957 by well known historian Sen (1957) and also told about another published book giving graphic details of the incidents of 1857. (PD. 1957) In his childhood Nehru had heard stories about 1857 and these stories made a deep impression on him and filled him with anger. Nehru also highlighted the

impact of the events of 1857 on the minds of the common Indian people. He expressed the experiences of his visits to Awadh and rural areas of Allahabad district and found even the minds of the peasantry filled with the events of 1857. (NBT2007:3-4)

### **Methodology:**

The study is completely based on published materials in shape of Books, Articles, Reports etc. available in archives and libraries. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote many books but his above noted books have been specially observed and quoted with an intention to depict characteristics of Nehru as a historian and his ideas on 1857. His address on 1857 published by National Book Trust forms an underlying source of the study. It is in detail with other facts but keeping in mind the topic of the study, main aspects are culled from it to assess the ideas of Nehru on 1857.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

The main purpose of the study is to trace and discuss Nehru's ideas on 1857 with his characteristics as a historian. An assessment of Nehru's ideas on 1857 is also within the purpose of the study to examine the main aspects of Nehru's ideas on the National Revolt of 1857.

### **Nehru as a Historian:**

Nehru wrote a brief account of world history in 196 letters he wrote to his daughter Indira between 1930 to 1933. (Nehru:1934) He was of the opinion that no part of the world could be understood in isolation from all others. In fact, this was the main characteristic of his description of world history. According to Nehru, the proper scope of history could never be local or even national. He wrote, "It is quite impossible to have a separate history of nations." (quoted in Roychowdhury, 2017). It is to be noted that Nehru preferred to focus on the common conditions that existed over the globe leading to the rise of the great reformers, viz. Confucius in China, Buddha in India and Zoroaster in Iran. Undoubtedly Nehru wrote on feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism in Europe but he was much fascinated by the historical

events that took place in Russia. (Nehru 2010:16-17). Nehru was so excited by the events in Russia that the Soviet Union was the ultimate epitome of hope to Nehru. As a historian Nehru attempted to draw consistent connections between Asia and the world. It is one of other major achievements of Nehru's history writing. As far as Nehru's dealing with the Indian past is concerned, it is to be noted that Nehru was a rationalist and was aware of the country's achievements and shortcomings. He spoke about her epochs of glory and the moments when she fell to decay. But at the same time, Nehru was also emotional about the Indian past and spoke passionately about the 'soul' and 'destiny' of India. Nehru observed that "The awakening of India was two-fold: she looked to the West, and at the same time she looked at herself and her past." and remarked that "Indian nationalism was a result of both a revolution against the British and against her own past." (quoted in Roychowdhury 2017) His passion for India is most pronounced in his 'The Discovery of India.' A noted Historian David Kopf calls the book to be a gift of Nehru to the Indian renaissance movement. After going through the book it became apparent that the book is a brilliant attempt at a comparative history of India and the world. Roychowdhury rightly pointed out while on one hand, Nehru took pride in the ancient Indian achievements of medicine, science, and arts, he did so in the context of how India depended on Greek, Iranian, European and Islamic civilisations for these achievements. For Nehru therefore, the Indian past was not just a matter of pride for her citizens, but also something that the world could gloat over. (quoted in Roy Chowdhury 2017) The attitude of Nehru is also reflected in his lecture on 1857.

### **Nehru on 1857 :**

According to Nehru, the War of Independence broke out in Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow and other parts of the country but very few people know the details of the struggle. Nehru pointed out as most of the earlier books and accounts of the events of 1857 were written by Englishmen, they are naturally biased, the role of Englishmen is

praised, the Indians are dubbed as traitors and mutineers. But some Englishmen have also accepted that the movement could have another aspect and praised the leaders of the movement, especially Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. According to Nehru, "the Indians did not dare to write anything because during the period immediately following the events of 1857 great atrocities were committed and the people were crushed with a brutal hand. So they were afraid. Even the accounts written by Indians a little later were not very balanced historical records. They tended to lean the other way." (NBT2007:2) In his lecture on 1857 Nehru said, "In May, 1857, the Indian army at Meerut mutinied. The revolt had been secretly and well organised but a premature outburst rather upset the plans of the leaders. It was more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and war of Indian independence. As such a popular rebellion of the masses, it was confined to Delhi, the United Provinces (as they are now called), and parts of a central India and Bihar. Essentially it was feudal outburst, headed by feudal chiefs and their followers and aided by the wide-spread anti-foreign sentiment. Inevitably it looked up to the relic of the Mughal dynasty, still sitting in Delhi palace, but feeble and old and powerless. Both Hindus and Moslems took full part in the Revolt.

"This Revolt strained British rule to to the utmost and it was ultimately suppressed with Indian help. It brought out all the inherent weaknesses of the old regime, which was making its last despairing effort to drive out foreign rule. The feudal chiefs had the sympathy of the masses over the large area, but they were incapable, unorganised and no constructive ideal or community of interest. They had already played their role in history and there was no place for them in the future... There was hardly any national and unifying sentiment among the leaders and a mere anti-foreign feeling, coupled with a desire to maintain their feudal privileges, was a poor substitute for this...

"It is clear, however, that there was lack of nationalist feeling which might have bound the people

of India together. Nationalism of the modern type was yet to come; India had still to go through much sorrow and travail before she learnt the lesson which would give her real freedom. Not by fighting for a lost cause, the feudal order, would freedom come..." (NHE2014, Nehru2010:352-354)

In "Glimpses of World History" also Nehru pointed out that "All over the country there was a great deal of dissatisfaction and discontent against the British. The East India Company's policy was to make money and to do little else; and this policy, added to the ignorance and rapacity of many of the officers, had resulted in widespread misery. Even the British Indian army was affected, and there were many petty mutinies. Many of the feudal chiefs and their descendants were naturally bitter against their new masters. So a great revolt was organized secretly. The organization spread especially round about the United Provinces and in Central India ..... a date was fixed for the revolt to begin simultaneously in many places. But some Indian regiments at Meerut went ahead too fast and mutinied on May 10, 1857." (Nehru1934:414) According to Nehru this premature outburst upset the programme of the leaders of the revolt, as it put the government on their guard. The revolt, however, spread all over the United Provinces and Delhi and partly in Central India and Bihar. (Nehru1934:414)

#### **Nehru and the Causes of 1857:**

Describing the 1857 as "great outburst" ,Nehru pointed out that "it was an expression of the people's anger against the British take over the country, and an attempt to get rid of them." He further noted, "As far as it is known, it was not a coordinated movement. But there was a general feeling of resentment spread over the whole of north India and one spark was enough to ignite a whole conflagration." (NBT2007:4) Nehru rightly observed that "the British conquered India because they were advanced in modern science and technology. They were tougher, more inquiring, disciplined and had the quality to work in unity. India had become stagnant. And the people were divided into small compartments." (NBT2007:7) Discussing social

organization that prevailed then Nehru observed that the princes and big landlords revolted because the British were gradually reducing them in stature. Some revolted in the name of their state or religion and others for personal benefit. All these factors came together in 1857 “but finally concluded “..... it was an Indian struggle for independence. It was an expression of resentment against the yoke of foreign rule and an attempt to get rid of it.”(NBT2007:8-9) According to Nehru, it is true that the religious sentiments of the Hindus and the Muslims were hurt by the suspicion that the British were forcing them to use bullets which had pork in it. But it is wrong to say that was the cause of the revolt. The real reason was people’s anger against British rule and other factors including religion were part of it. Therefore Nehru pointed out that “It was not merely a military revolt; it was a general popular rebellion in these areas against the British ... The Revolt developed into a war of independence against the hated foreigner...”(Nehru 1934:414).

#### **Nehru and the Nature of 1857:**

Nehru spoke about an attempt at some coordination and stories of chapattis distributed among the people. He made it clear that the movement was not organized and noted, “It was more a question of everyone taking advantage of the widespread resentment among various sections of society, particularly in the upper classes, the princes, zamindars and jagirdars and to some extent among the masses.... it was an expression of deep-seated resentment against British rule and an attempt to oust it.... the revolt was expression of the people’s emotions against the establishment of British rule in India, It was not an organized movement when it began.” (NBT2007:4-5) According to Nehru “incidents in one place triggered a chain of reaction because a great deal of resentment had existed among the people and Both Hindus and Muslims participated in the movement and in victory as well as in defeat, they marched shoulder to shoulder. This is something praiseworthy. (NBT2007:9, Nehru 1934:414; Nehru 2010:353) Noted Historian

**R.C. Majumdar** tried to summarize the revolt differently. According to him, the revolt was neither the first, nor was it national, nor was it a war of independence for there is not the slightest doubt that the rebels wanted to get rid of the alien government and restore the old order of which the king of Delhi was the rightful representative”. (Majumdar 1963:, Majumdar 1997: 150-156) But historian Surender Nath Sen observed that “The mutiny became a revolt and assumed a political character when the mutineers of Meerut placed themselves under the king of Delhi and a section of the landed aristocracy and civil population declared, in his favour. What began as a fight for religion ended as a war of independence for there is not the slightest doubt that the rebels wanted to get rid of the alien government and restore the old order of which the king of Delhi was the rightful representative”. (Sen 1957;398-418) Thus Nehru’s ideas echoed the patriotic sentiments of Indians and corroborated the findings of historian Sen. Noted Social scientist V.P. Varma also pointed out that the messages that were sent to the leaders and activists did contain patriotic sentiments. (Varma 1988:10)

#### **Significance of Nehru’s Ideas on 1857:**

Nehru pointed out that the events of 1857 proved that by and large, except for stray incidents, there was communal harmony. He observed that “The rift appeared only later and widened because the British followed a policy of divide and rule in order to maintain their hold over the empire. So they adopted the policy of deliberately fomenting communal passions and religious antagonism. They had separate regiments of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs because they did not want them to develop a spirit of nationalism.” (NBT2007:9-10) After 1857, the people were too afraid to raise their heads but gradually regained their spirit and the Indian National Congress was born in 1885. According to Nehru, the absence of one central leadership and the lack of proper arrangements or resources were grave shortcomings of 1857. Nehru also pointed out that the fate of the Revolt was settled by the Indian themselves. He observed, “The Sikhs and the Gurkhas supported the British. The Nizam in the

south, and Scindia in the north, and many other Indian States, also lined up with the British. . . . It was fighting for a lost cause, the feudal order; it had no good leadership; it was badly organized, and there were mutual squabbles all the time.' (Nehru 1934:414) It is also to be noted that Nehru not only wrote of about massacre of English by Indian rebels but also pointed out barbarous acts of and destroying of prosperous villages by English officials during the crushing of the revolt. (Nehru 1934:414-415) Nehru praised the spirit and ability and undaunted courage of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi who died while fighting. It ended the line of Mughals and the Company's rule in India. (Nehru 1934:415)

### Conclusion:

Thus Nehru beautifully described his ideas on the National Revolt of 1857 and properly discussed its various aspects and its repercussions on subsequent historical events in India. Nehru rightly pointed out that it was not organized when it began. But incidents in one place triggered a chain of reaction because a great deal of resentment had existed among the people, So Nehru described it as an expression of deep-seated resentment against British rule in India in which both Hindus and Muslims participated and marched shoulder to shoulder in victory as well as in defeat. (Nehru 2010:353) Admittedly as a historian Nehru was quite aware of historical facts and courses of Indians' war for independence during 1857-1858 and noted "It was much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular rebellion and a war of Indian independence." (Nehru 2010:353)



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