



Jawaharlal Nehru's Scientific Sensibility

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Science is a systemic study of an object or an idea. Sometimes we use a synecdoche to call a scientific invention. In the extended sense, science also implies a rational approach to ideas. Nehru in his writing uses the word, 'science' in all these senses. Like J.B.S. Haldane, Nehru had a deep fascination for the marvels of science. He partly inherited his interest in science from his father who was keenly interested in the practical science. Motilal Nehru's library contained books on subjects such as "Practical Bell-fitting" and "A Practical Treatise upon the fitting of hot water apparatus". Nehru himself described in the **Autobiography** how his boyhood tutor Ferdinand T Brooks initiated him to the mysteries of science. *We rigged up a little laboratory and there, I used to spend long and interesting hours working out experiments in elementary physics and chemistry.*¹ At Cambridge he came in contact with the ideas of Darwin, Maxx, Bernard Shaw and the Fabian socialists. He was greatly impressed by the Russian Revolution and Lenin's determination to build a society on egalitarian and scientific principles. All these had a lasting influence on Nehru's thinking and his approach towards the role of science in solving social problems. Good scientific convention fascinated him. Krishna Hutheesing narrates how in 1948, when Nehru received his first electric razor, he was so excited that, at dinner, he gave a demonstration to his guests by shaving himself at the table. In the Autobiography Nehru reiterates his faith in science again and again. He calls science a great gift of the West and is convinced that it was a good thing for India to come in contact with the scientific and industrial West. He expressed his thanks to the British for one splendid gift of which they were the bearers, the gift of science and its rich offspring. It is his faith that makes him criticize Gandhi's blindness to its severely. Thus, he is socked at Gandhi's statement that the Bihar earthquake in 1934 was a punishment for the sin of untouchability, and remarks: *Anything more opposed to the scientific outlook it would be difficult to imagine.*² And his complaint against Gandhi's creed of non-violence is that he has never considered in public all its implications, philosophically or scientifically. Again, when a strange is brought to the gaol, scientific curiosity is aroused and finally assuaged on finding its name from a book on forest animals. Nehru admires Marx because *he dealt with the development of history and economics dispassionately and the scientifically, avoiding all vagueness and idealism.*³ In spite of his dislike of dogmatism and the excessive use of violence in normal times by the Russian Communists, he is convinced that *while all other systems and theories were groping about in the dark. Marxism alone ... offered a real solution...to the great world crisis.*⁴ At the same time he is a severe critic of contemporary Indian communists and shrewdly notes their weaknesses that *instead of spreading a scientific knowledge of communism and trying to convert people's mind to it they have largely concentrated on ...the abuse of others and they have not realised that in India today the middle-class intellectual is the most revolutionary force.*⁵ His own vision of an ideal socio-economic order for India includes complete collective and co-operative enterprises and the growth of industry.

Nehru believes in Darwin's theory of evolution which is based on science. For Darwin each species of animals had changed and developed by natural selection. This comes into conflict with the orthodox version of the history of the world. Nehru takes science to find out the truth. Science

takes nothing for granted and does not stick to dogmas. It seeks to encourage an open mind and tries to reach truth by repeated experiments. Nehru says:

This was really dabbling in some kind of magic in the hope of gaining wealth and power and long life. It had nothing to do with the spirit of science. Science has no concern with magic and sorcery and the like.⁶

Science gives us new ideas and corrects our wrong notions of the past. In the past the supernatural bodies of the solar system were viewed with surprise and awe. Nehru points out that:

Long ago the earth and all the planets were part of the sun. The sun was then as it is now a mass of flaming matter, terribly hot. Somehow little bits of the sun got loose and they shot out into the air. But they could not wholly get rid of their father, the sun. It was as if a rope was tied to them and they kept whirling round the sun.⁷

Nehru's approach to Nature and its phenomena is scientific and rational whereas that of the early people was narrow, credulous, superstitious, emotional, irrational and imaginary which lead to close and limit the mind of man and to produce a temper of a dependent, unfree person. They imagined that early misfortune was caused by angry and jealous gods whom *they tried to worship and offer peace offsprings, as if nature were a wild beast which had to be appeased and cajoled. Thus, thunder and lightning and epidemic diseases frightened them and they thought that these could be prevented only by offerings.*⁸

The methods and approach of science have revolutionised human life more than anything else in the long course of history and opened doors and avenues of further and even more radical change, leading upon the very portals of what has been considered the unknown. The technical achievements of science are obvious enough to transform an economy of scarcity into one of abundance. Its invasion of many problems which have so far been the monopoly of philosophy is becoming more pronounced. It has changed the entire cosmos and tied human destiny to the rhythmic energy of nature, as is evident from the following citation.

Space, time and quantum theory utterly changed the picture of the physical world. More recent researches into the nature of matter, the structure of the atom, the transmutation of the elements, and the transformation of electricity and light, either into the other, have carried human knowledge much further. Men no longer see nature as something apart and distinct from himself. Human destiny appears to become a part of nature's rhythmic energy.¹⁰

Nehru wants us to develop scientific approach, the adventures and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial. He wants us to adopt the principles of logic and reason, the two instruments of philosophy as our guides and to develop the inquisitive spirit for seeing the transcendental reality. He, therefore, feels that with the temper and approach of science, allied to philosophy and with reverence for all that lies beyond we must face life. Thus we may develop the integral vision of life which embraces in its wide scope the past and the present, with all their heights and depths and look with serenity towards the future. He wants men to develop an integral vision consisting of the essentials of

science, philosophy and religion. This wide vision includes both the past and the present – the philosophic and religious temper for the present. And this synthetic outlook, Nehru believes, will deliver the good and guide our present and future life as well.

Conscious artists like Nehru fear that science can lose its objective and become destructive in the hands of a self-centred and power-hungry man. He can use its gifts not for the welfare of mankind but for evil ends, as is evident here:

The very progress of science, unconnected with and isolated from discipline and ethical consideration, will lead to the concentration of power and the terrible instruments of destruction which it has made, in the hands of evil and selfish men, seeking the domination of others – and thus to the destruction of its own great achievements.¹¹

REFERENCES

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7. ***Nehru's Letters from a father to his daughter***, O.U. Press, Calcutta, 1994, p. 8
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