

Nehru, Jawahartal

Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote his autobiography while serving a jail sentence in 1934-1935. It was not his first time he had been imprisoned for campaigning for Indian independence. It was his fourth. In fact, between 1920 and 1947, when India gained Independence, Nehru spent a full ten years in prison.

Though it begins with family origins, Nehru's autobiography is a long and detailed record of India during the 1920s and 1930s. As such, it is an incomparable source for understanding the political and social developments that led to the independence of India. But it also contains a good deal of introspection by the author, who tries to fashion a sort of philosophy out of the events he witnessed and participated in.

Nehru, after Gandhi, is probably the best-known Indian from the colonial and early Independence period. Educated at Harrow School in England and then at Cambridge University, he became India's first Prime Minister and influenced world politics, especially the so-called 'non-aligned bloc' (not aligned to neither East or West) during the Cold War. He led a privileged life yet sacrificed it all by throwing himself full-throttle into the campaign for Indian independence. Although he succeeded in his goals, his successors (the 'Nehru dynasty') have been marred by tragedy. After he died in 1964, his daughter and her son both served as Prime Minister, and both were assassinated.

Themes

anti-imperialism and Independence; political goals vs ethical means; autobiography and history

Essay Questions

1. Nehru planned 'to trace my own mental development' and not to write 'a survey of recent Indian history.' Did he succeed?
- 2 Discuss the significance of Gandhi in Nehru's story.
- 3 How did the Independence Movement shape Nehru's life?
- 4 Discuss the role of either Kamala (his wife) or Motilal (his father) in the autobiography.

Reading

Nehru, *An Autobiography*

Supplementary Readings

Arnold, 'The self and the cell'

Brown, *Nehru*

Tharoor, *Nehru*

Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, pp. 203-251

Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, pp. 167-181