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Semester 4**

**Paper 17**

**Contemporary Indian Writing in English II**



**Contents:**

**Block I : Indian Drama**

**Block II : Indian Prose**

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**Contributors:**

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**Block I: Indian Drama**

Unit 1	: Rimi Nath Reseach Scholar Dept. of English, GU
Unit 2 & 3	: Manab Medhi Guest Faculty in English IDOL, GU

**Block II: Indian Prose**

Unit 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 5(half)	: Dr. Uttara Debi Assistant Professor in English IDOL, GU
Unit 5(half)	: Dibyajyoti Borah Assaitant Professor in English, H B Girl's College, Golaghat

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**Editorial Team**

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Dr. Kandarpa Das	Director, IDOL, GU
Dr. Uttara Debi	Assistant Professor in English IDOL, GU
Sanghamitra De	Guest Faculty in English IDOL, GU
Manab Medhi	Guest Faculty in English IDOL, GU

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**Cover Page Designing:**

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Kaushik Sarma	Graphic Designer CET, IITG
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## **Block I**

### **Indian Drama**

#### **Block Introduction:**

This block brings to you three plays by three major contemporary playwrights namely Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan. Though the block is entitled *Indian Drama*, we are referring to drama written originally in English. Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan use English as their first language in their artistic creations. On the other hand, Girish Karnad composes his plays in both English and Kannada. Most of his plays are first written in Kannada, but he translates them to English soon; as such, his works are also considered within the paradigm of Indian English plays. It is interesting to note that, the English versions of Karnad's plays, in many occasions, are deemed far superior in their artistry, aesthetic and intellectuality than their Kannada versions.

India has a long history of highly rich, popular and different theatrical traditions spanning across the vast geographical area. Different dance and music forms have been integral parts of Indian theatrical traditions. Though theatre is an art form that works within the domain of performativity, there have been literatures, both critical and creative, produced throughout ages. Among the classical texts, Bharata's *Natyashastra* is hailed as the Fifth Veda.

Indian-English drama got influenced by British drama in the last part of the nineteenth century. In its early days, with initiatives from playwrights like Krishna Mohan Banerjee and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, vernacular plays modelled on Western lines began to be performed, mainly in Calcutta. Later, playwrights like Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and others contributed towards Indian English drama during the pre-independence period. After independence Indian theatre saw playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, among others. These playwrights have touched upon different themes starting from the earliest nationalistic concerns to the radically subversive and daring themes like homosexuality, communal violence etc.

One of the earliest debates surrounding Indian English theatres is the question of expressing an Indian sensibility in a language which is not native to the soil. The other important challenge that the Indian English theatre activists faced was to negotiate between the rich Indian theatrical tradition and the Western performance forms. So, Indian English theatre saw series of experimentations on the form and technique of the plays where, on various occasions, everything except the language seemed to be Indian. With the increase of literacy in English, English theatre in India is witnessing a rapid growth of popularity in the metropolis like never before. Today, Indian English theatre has posited itself at a respectable position in the larger field of Indian theatrical traditions.

The three plays that you will be reading in this block will deal with some of the themes that the Indian English dramatists take up. While Karnad's *Tughlaq* deals with the question of rewriting history and reconstructing the past, Dattani's *Where There's a Will* and Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* deal with issues based on the changing terrains of Indian urban life. It is important to note that all these three playwrights make extensive use of the stage space and apply different innovative techniques in the stage performance of their plays. As such, while reading the plays as literary texts, do follow the directorial notes because they tell much more than what the characters on the stage do. Take the following three units on the three plays as the window to peep into the creative worlds of the playwrights you will read. Your actual reading will take place only after you move forward to explore these playwrights by reading more on them and their contexts.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1: Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

Unit 2: Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

Unit 3: Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

# Unit 1

## Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 The Playwright
- 1.4 Stage History of the Play
- 1.5 Reading the Play
  - 1.5.1 A Post-colonial text
  - 1.5.2 The Title of the Play
  - 1.5.3 Historical and Political Underpinnings in the play
  - 1.5.4 A Play of Contradictions
  - 1.5.5 Symbolism in the Play
- 1.6 A Critical History
- 1.7 Summing up
- 1.8 References and Suggested Reading

### 1.1 OBJECTIVES:

This unit is designed to help you read the play *Tughlaq* and relate it to the context in which it was written. With the information provided in this unit you should be able to:

- *situate* this play in the development of Indian English Drama in the post-colonial context
- *analyse* the notions of history and historiography through the study of the historical subject
- *explain* Karnad's inclination towards the 'theatre of the roots'
- *describe* the psychological domain of the protagonist
- *trace* the symbolism in the play

## 1.2 INTRODUCTION:

Drama has had a rich and glorious tradition in India. Bharata's *Natyashastra* was hailed as the Fifth Veda, which was revealed to Bharatamuni by the Creator, Brahma, to celebrate ancient rituals and seasonal festivities of the country. These rituals, traditions and festivities constitute the backbone of Indian drama.

Indian-English drama got initiated with playwrights like Krishna Mohan Banerjee and Michael Madhusudhan Dutt. The British drama influenced Indian English drama in the twentieth century. In fact, in the last part of the nineteenth century, plays modelled on Western lines (in Indian languages), began to be performed, mainly in Calcutta. Playwrights like Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and others contributed towards Indian English drama during the pre-independence period.

By the time India attained independence Indian theatre was trying to cope with the rising popularity of Indian cinema. The post-independence era saw playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan, among others. These playwrights have shown that the language (English) can conveniently be drawn into the Indian setting with Indian characters.

Modern Indian theatre seems to counteract dislocation from tradition. In the formation of national identity in this context, historical fictions play a remarkable role. Mohan Rakesh's *Ashadh ka ek din* (1958), Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964), Badal Sircar's *Baki Itihas* (1965), for instance, narrativize history for contemporary audiences. *Tughlaq* was Girish Karnad's second play. Its primary source was the *Tarikh-I Firoz Shahi* (1357), a chronicle history by Zia-ud-din Barani. Karnad uses Barani's basic narrative and thus arranges the thirteen scenes of *Tughlaq* putting bits of his own narrative discourse into the play. In the representations of myth and history in his plays, Karnad explores the choices of the individuals who have to confront the burden of culture and history. The inspiration for *Tughlaq* is said to have come from Camus' *Caligula*, which provided the playwright with the conception of existential human situation and the technique for handling a historical myth for the modern theatre. As for the form of the play, Karnad relied on the traditional indigenous theatre.



**SAQ:**

Write down at least two points of resemblance between the historical figures of Muhammad Tughlaq and Caligula. (50 words)

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**1.3 THE PLAYWRIGHT**

Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, near Bombay, in 1938. His childhood was spent in a small village in Karnataka. During his childhood, Karnad was exposed to two kinds of theatre: touring productions put on by troupes of professional actors in natak companies, and folk-theatre performances of yakshagana. Karnad shifted to Bombay for his post-graduate studies and then he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. He got exposed to western theatre productions both in Bombay and abroad. All these gave him a necessary insight into drama.

**Stop to Consider :**

Karnad’s childhood exposure to traditional forms of theatre helped him in shaping his own choice of theatrical form. His tenure abroad also proved fruitful in the sense that it made him reconsider his own cultural background and its relationship to his creative writing. Karnad, as a playwright, showed his interest in the performance style of folk-theatre, especially Yakshagana and Bayalata. The plots of Karnad’s plays enable the use of masks, puppets, snakes, dogs, as well as folk styles of enactment with ‘framing tales’. The use of puppets in *Hayavadana* and the snake and other animals in *Nagamandala* can be cited as examples.

Karnad has been recognised nationally and internationally as one of the pre-eminent playwrights in contemporary India. He belongs to the generation of writers who reshaped India’s theatre after independence. Along with contemporaries like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir and others, Karnad’s works ushered in a new era in Indian drama.

A multi-faceted personality, Karnad, besides his chosen literary identity as a playwright, is a film and television actor, a director and a screen-play writer. He has also held key positions in cultural institutions. He has been the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune (1974-75), Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Academy in New Delhi (1988-93) and Director of the Nehru Centre in London (2000-03). Karnad was conferred many awards and honours. As a playwright Karnad has won two of India's most prestigious literary awards – the Jnanpith and the Kalidasa Samman.

Karnad preferred writing in an indigenous language (Kannada). However, some of his plays were translated into English by Karnad himself. Karnad's plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary context. Karnad's plays, such as *Yayati*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, are steeped in myth. The line of history plays moves from *Tughlaq* to *Tale-danda*, and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Folk-tales from different periods and sources provide the basis of *Hayavadana*, *Naga Mandala* and *Flowers: A Monologue*. Karnad's *Broken Images* is the only play to be set in present-day India. In Karnad's exploration of myth, folktale and history, Karnad comes close to the kind of modern writer T.S. Eliot imagined in his 'Tradition and Individual Talent'. Tradition can be considered to be a fusion of the past and the present and Karnad's plays beautifully bring up the fusion.

**SAQ:**

Attempt to justify the modern Indian writer's preoccupation with traditional indigenous forms of literary writing. Would you call it a simple, anti-colonial stance? (60 words)

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#### 1.4 STAGE HISTORY OF THE PLAY

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* was published in Kannada in 1964. It was an immediate success on the stage. The play was first produced in Kannada in 1965 and was also produced in Hindi by the National School of Drama. Bengali and Marathi productions followed, and in 1970 there was an English production in Bombay, which was a huge success. The theatre audience responded immediately to the play. The interesting plot, the spectacle, the dramatic conventions like the use of the comic pair, Aziz and Aazam, gripped the immediate attention of the theatre audience.

Moreover, the scope of situating the play in the contemporary political context appealed to the Indian audience. As a play of the sixties, it was often seen as a play depicting the mood of political disillusionment of the age.

In the staging of *Tughlaq*, Karnad incorporated aspects of natak productions that he had seen as a boy. The natak companies performed on semi-permanent 'end-on' proscenium stage, with simple wings and backdrops. In the plays of the natak companies there was an alternation in the presentation of the scenes, in which the 'shallow' scenes were enacted downstage, in front of the curtain alternating with the main scenes that used the full stage. The comic interludes were mainly enacted downstage, functionally allowing time for the setting up of the main action. For *Tughlaq*, just such a pattern of scene alternation was used.

**SAQ:**

Which scenes in the play would be enacted on a full stage? What kind of significance would you attach to resemblances in stagecraft between *Tughlaq* and *natak* performances? (40 + 60 words)

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Karnad used the techniques and stage conventions of the Parsi Natak Company to structure his play and develop its characterization. However, the play cannot be confined to a fixed given structure as it has taken up different forms and is subject to different interpretations in the hands of different directors.

**Stop to Consider:**

**The influence of the Parsi theatre on Karnad**In Bombay the Parsi community had, since the mid-nineteenth century, established supremacy in the presentation of secular musical dramas. The plays drew on Hindu myths, as well as adaptations of foreign romances. During his stay in Bombay Karnad got exposure to such theatre. The impact of stage lighting inspired Karnad as it not only helped in creating the interior and the exterior space but also helped in the exploration of the character's psyche.

### **1.5 READING THE PLAY**

*Tughlaq* is a historical play which draws from the controversial figure of Muhammad Tughlaq, a fourteenth-century ruler in the turbulent history of the Delhi Sultanate. Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq ascended the throne of Delhi in 1325 A.D. and ruled India till his death in 1351. His reign is seen as one of the most spectacular failures in India's history. The play explores the paradox of this visionary king, Tughlaq, whose idealistic vision comes in conflict with the realities of the time and his own self.

Tughlaq's secular ideals and sense of justice were viewed by his subjects with discontent and suspicion. The character, Aziz, a low-caste Muslim washer-man, skilfully uses all the schemes of Tughlaq for his own designs. Tughlaq decides to shift his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad because Daulatabad was a city of the Hindus, and this would symbolize the bond between the Hindus and the Muslims. The wishes of the people (who were reluctant to leave Delhi) were not considered by the sultan, and that inflicted pain upon the people, and made them despise the king and his despotic policies; and when the action resumes in Daulatabad after an interval of five years, Tughlaq's subjects were hardened to a life of punishment, starvation

and violence. Tughlaq's policy of introducing copper coins led to economic chaos until finally we witness the loneliness of the sultan and the collapse of Tughlaq and his empire. Tughlaq's relentless murders become horrific, yet Tughlaq seems unable to stop them and fails to feel sorry for them. The play thus ends with the disillusionment of Tughlaq himself.

**SAQ:**

Explain the irony behind Muhammad's actions in Scene 13 of the play.  
(80 words)

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**1.5.1 A POSTCOLONIAL TEXT**

'History' constituted an important and powerful element in India in the pre-independence anti-colonial theatrical movement, and it continues to grip the imagination and consciousness of the people in the postcolonial era. *Tughlaq* offered the postcolonial Indian audience with multiple levels of interpretation and experience. *Tughlaq* has resemblance to particular phases in the political experience of postcolonial India which we will discuss in the next section. This has increased the appeal of the play for the Indian audience. The political disillusionment which Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, exhibits can also be valid in the context of the political scenario of postcolonial India.

A 'return to roots' is what Karnad's plays exemplify. It is not simply a going back to traditions or the professing of an anti-Western idiom, but Karnad uses the form of traditional theatre for critical and subversive ends and he thus tries to synthesize the plays, merging the traditional aspects with the modern, in order to come to terms with contemporary sensibilities.

**Stop to Consider:**

Karnad happens to be one of the exponents of what Suresh Awasthi terms as the 'Theatre of Roots' movement. The term refers to the unconventional theatre that has been evolving in India as a result of modern theatre's encounter with tradition. It is deeply rooted in regional theatrical culture and is inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. The 'Theatre of Roots' transcends linguistic barriers, and it appeals to all equally. It becomes a part of the great cultural renaissance of the post-Independence period. The 'Theatre of Roots' is modern in the sense that it conforms to the conventional realistic theatre; it is traditional in that it becomes part of the *Natyasastra* tradition. Karnad's use of myth and history in his plays, and his conformation to the indigenous theatrical tradition marks him out as one of the exponents of the 'Theatre of Roots' movement.

Karnad incorporated indigenous traditions of performance in his contemporary postcolonial playwriting and his choice of Kannada as a language of expression also testifies to Karnad's indigenous inclinations.

There is an attempt at achieving a coalition between language and identity through a 'return to roots' in postcolonial writings. Playwrights like Badal Sircar continued writing in indigenous languages, in his case, Bengali, which resists a completely successful translation into English.

The 'return to roots', in the case of *Tughlaq*, was historical rather than mythological, as the character is drawn from history.

**Stop to Consider:**

History sometimes provides people with the means for restoring of the indigenous personality which involves a 'return to the roots'. The African writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo, talks of the fundamental aim of restoring the African personality to its true human creative potentialities in history. This exhibits the general desire for cultural self-determination and an integrated identity. African dramatist Wole Soyinka called for the evocation of an "authentic tradition". Soyinka and Ngugi have articulated the need to restore the African cultural personality as a major element of social development. This 'return to roots' is exhibited in the dramas of Derek Walcott and Soyinka, who embraced the West African and Caribbean storytelling performance, Yoruba ritual dramas, etc., just as Karnad embraced the Indian classical and folk forms.

In a colonial world the colonizers' sense of superiority and their self-imposed role as the perpetrators of history, makes them the victims of a delusion. Tughlaq embodies such a kind of delusion.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Write a brief note on the significance of the sub-plot involving Aziz and Aazam in *Tughlaq*.
2. To what extent is Muhammad Tughlaq a psychologically plausible character? Does the playwright invest him with the qualities of a superman for dramatic effect? Give reasons for your answer.
3. In what way do Scenes 8 and 9 in the play project the decline of Muhammad Tughlaq? Do these scenes contribute to the spectacle that is often said to account for the success of the play?

### 1.5.2 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

'Tughlaq', the title of the play, is drawn from the historical figure of the fourteenth-century Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughlaq. The plot of the play is drawn partly from the historian Zia-ud-din Barani's chronicle history *Tarikh-I Firoz Shahi* (1357). It is believed that Barani spent seventeen years at the court of Tughlaq, but died in self-imposed poverty the year the work was completed. Karnad used the basic narrative of Barani for the plot of the play. In his play Karnad has projected Barani himself as one of the characters and merged reality with illusion, fact with fiction, in different ways. Although the principal character of the play is drawn from history and although most of the events that constitute the framework for the plot of the play are documented as historical events, *Tughlaq* is much more than a chronicle play. The title of the play can be seen as ironic in the sense that it represented the Indian and European modes of projecting Indian history where it can be seen that one's convictions and viewpoints play an important role in the making of history. In this regard, the title also marks the articulation of both political and psychological ironies.

Tughlaq is the central figure in the play, while all the other characters of the play qualify this central figure in one way or the other. The main plot of the play revolves round Tughlaq, and the sub-plot again qualifies him. Tughlaq, who is projected as a historical and a political figure, can also be seen as a model for contemporary politics of different ages. Karnad has projected various dimensions of the character of Tughlaq in the play. Even while Tughlaq stands as a historical and political figure he also stands as a psychological and symbolic figure. The play, *Tughlaq*, brings out the varied nuances in the character of the protagonist, and hence the justification of the title.

**SAQ:**

Would you agree with the comment that Muhammad Tughlaq is a symbolic figure? What does he symbolise? Does the symbolism involve political disillusionment or moral chaos? Give reasons. (20 + 30 + 50 words)

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**1.5.3 HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL UNDERPINNINGS IN THE PLAY:**

Aparna Dharwadker in ‘Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation’ asserts: “...a serious historical ‘fiction’ both emerges from and returns to ‘history’” (p-44). The play, *Tughlaq*, literally emerges from history and has itself become a popular historical play. The protagonist of the play was very much conscious of his role in the making of history:

“...I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history...” (*Tughlaq*, p-56)

The play takes part in the discourse that has shaped the European and Indian constructions of India’s history since the late eighteenth century. The



play presents a protagonist whom medieval Muslim and nineteenth-century British orientalist historiographers have constructed as an exceptionally intelligent ruler, but who is a largely incapable king, often referred to as the ‘Mad’ Muhammad.

**Stop to Consider:**

The construction of history often depends on the historian’s convictions, conveniences and viewpoints. Historian Zia-ud-din Barani, for instance, defined history from the Islamic point of view. He thus found Tughlaq violating the rules of Islam. On the other hand, the Orientalist historians treated the turmoil of Islamic rule in India as a sign of the necessity of the British colonial rule in India.

Karnad dilutes history, historiography and fiction in the play. Karnad uses historical sources from Barani’s *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, yet Karnad deviates from it in many ways in his narration or dramatization. For instance, in Barani’s account, Tughlaq’s Step-Mother was stoned to death for adultery, while in Karnad’s play the Step-Mother was condemned to death for her confession of the murder of Najib. Again, the suspicion of patricide against the historical Tughlaq is a matter of speculation, whereas Karnad’s character admits that he has killed his brother and father “for an ideal” (p-65).

*Tughlaq* is a self-sufficient historical narrative that a contemporary audience can apply to its own situation. The play presents a convincing synchrony between pre-modern and contemporary India. For the audience of the sixties, Karnad’s play may have represented the disillusionment that followed the end of the Nehru era (1947-64). Tughlaq’s secular, idealistic and visionary politics reflected the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru. It is also suggestive of the problems faced by a newly -emerged nation experimenting with the democratic form of society.

“I have hopes of building a new future for India.” (*Tughlaq*, p-40)

Nehru was remarkable in the propensity for failure like Tughlaq, despite having an extraordinary intellect. The political event of the partition of India mocks the secular ideals of the leaders. Tughlaq’s secular ideas are put into question by his subjects. Imam-ud-din warns the Sultan:

“Religion! Politics! Take heed, Sultan, one day these verbal distinctions will rip you into two.” (*Tughlaq*, p-21)

*Tughlaq* explores the problems in the unification of the nation in a historically inherited plurality of religion and community.

**SAQ:**

Attempt to justify the argument that Tughlaq’s “ideals” are centred on his own perceptions of himself as a maker of ‘history’. Would you say that Karnad is here showing the pitfalls of self-obsession? Give textual support for your answer. (60 + 60 words)

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The play, *Tughlaq*, later might have appeared to be a reflection of the authoritarian and opportunistic politics of Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi. Karnad’s play, *Tughlaq*, can however be read without any specific associations and can be seen not as the reflection of any specific political figure but as a reflection of the general disillusionment in the political arena of any age. The varied historical convergences in Karnad’s play appeals to readers and spectators of different times. The play depicts Tughlaq’s futile attempts at politics and this is often read as allegorical. However, it need not be regarded as an allegory of any one political figure or event.

In a 1989 essay on Indian theatre, Karnad observes, in the context of *Tughlaq*, that the interesting fact about the politics of the times was “the way the newly enfranchised electorate was slowly becoming aware of the power placed in its hands for the first time in history. The other equally visible movement was the gradual displacement of pre-independence idealism by hard-nosed political cynicism” (*Theatre in India*, p-342).

Political theatre has often relied on farce and satire, which engages in veiled commentary on different political trends. *Tughlaq*, thus, evokes a sense of political disillusionment and the loss of political innocence. The play acquires new urgency with each succession in history.

History-making is in many ways akin to myth-making. Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, also examines and explores the way in which history is made. Moreover, history is not just created by the people in power; the people in the margins of such power can also contribute to the perpetuation of history.

**Stop to Consider:**

History can be a kind of discourse. Hayden White, in *Metahistory*, extended the use of literary tropes to discourse that underlies every historian's writing of history. For White, metaphor appeared to be the most useful trope. He believed that histories were determined by tropes. According to Hayden White, historical explanations can be judged solely on the richness of the metaphors. These metaphors govern the sequence of articulation. White considers plot to be crucial to the historical representation of events. He supported the idea of narrative as an essential constituent of historical method.

#### **1.5.4 A PLAY OF CONTRADICTIONS**

Muhammad Tughlaq embodies both the idealistic and the demonic self within himself; he embodies both power and powerlessness. There is also a contradiction and duality between Tughlaq, the clever and ruthless administrator and Tughlaq, the sensitive philosopher-poet. He is at once a dreamer and a man of action (impulsive), both devout and godless. On the one hand Tughlaq is an idealist, who is interested in philosophy and poetry; on the other hand, he is a scheming despot who despatches his opposition with terrifying calculation. In order to keep his faith in his mission, he adhered to "not words but the sword" (*Tughlaq*, p-66).

When his subjects were in need of food, Tughlaq offered them prayers, an ironic contradiction. The voices of the people utter in dismay: "We starve and they want us to pray" (*Tughlaq*, p-70). The character of Tughlaq remains incomprehensible because it appears to be a bundle of contradictions. The whole play is structured on oppositions.

*Tughlaq* offers an ironic stance in its engagement with the idea of secularism. The Sultan's idealistic policy of abolishing the jiziya (a discriminatory poll tax on the Hindus prescribed in the Quran for non-believers), and instituting a judicial process in which he can be sued by his subjects, yielded suspicion and condemnation from his subjects. We find here a contradiction between the ideal and the real.

The murders and the attempt to murder during prayer time (a time which is considered to be holy and sacred) in the play, are ironic. The question of loyalty and disloyalty is also ironic in the play. For instance, Shihab-ud-din, who was an idealist like Tughlaq, had put great trust in Tughlaq's rule, but later he goes against the king. Ironically, Shihab-ud-din was also betrayed by Ratansingh, his associate.

The success of Aziz is ironic, and his story runs parallel to that of Tughlaq. The character of Aziz exhibits the greatest irony in the play. Aziz has used all the schemes of Tughlaq for his own benefit. His character is an ironic reflection of the ideals of Tughlaq himself. The comedy in the play (initiated by Aziz and Aazam) takes a darker shade as the play proceeds, and we find a tragic air hovering around. The interplay of the tragic and the comic also marks an ironic contradiction.

Tughlaq meets a man with his own reflection in Aziz; at the same time, Tughlaq loses his own self, as he falls exhausted upon his chair towards the end of the play. Tughlaq has been looking for someone who would understand his ideas, and ironically, he finds that 'someone' in the deceitful Aziz, who "spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought" (*Tughlaq*, p-82) to the Sultan's words. Tughlaq ironically finds a genius in Aziz and ironically, too, rewards him for his crimes.

**SAQ:**

Do you think, Aziz, in emulating Tughlaq, also mocks the Sultan? Give reasons. (60 words)

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Do you think the Sultan is conscious of that mockery? (30 words)

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### 1.5.5 SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY

The character of Tughlaq has been realised by Karnad in psychological depth which poses the philosophical and existential questions of the human psyche and nature. Tughlaq talks about his visions and revelations and seems conscious of his role as the maker of history. Tughlaq is an intelligent and far-sighted king. However, in Tughlaq we find delusions of grandeur. Tughlaq's ideals alienate him from his people, from society and even from himself. This leads to the frustration, disintegration and disillusionment of the character of Tughlaq. The character Aazam, in his stay in the Palace, gets frightened to see the Sultan dig his fists into the heap of dumped copper coins and letting the coins trickle out. The Sultan does that every night, and it appears like witchcraft to Aazam. Tughlaq becomes obsessed with his visions and he gets frustrated at people's incomprehension of his ideals:

You know what my beloved subjects call me? Mad Muhammad! Mad Muhammad! (*Tughlaq*, p-56)

Tughlaq senses complete isolation as the few people around him depart. The angst and misery of Tughlaq is evident in his appeal to God to have pity on him. Tughlaq teeters on the brink of madness and he seems conscious of it (Scene Ten, p-68). However, towards the end of the play this madness becomes his place of refuge.

“...all I need now is myself and my madness...For once I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now – the Omnipotent God!” (Scene Thirteen, p-85)

The ideals and visions of the Sultan that were awake and alive all the time suddenly come to a halt in the form of a long-awaited sleep. Tughlaq fails to admit that he has done anything wrong. His sense of guilt evades us. He remains disillusioned by the vision of a mission, his role in history. This makes Tughlaq act ruthlessly without any consideration of the will and wishes of the people, and entices him to commit murderous acts with a clear head,

where there is no bickering of the conscience. The kingdom of Tughlaq is also what he is – torn into pieces by his visions.

Tughlaq turns a deaf ear to Barani's plea:

“Your majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? . . . Why this bloodshed? Please stop it...” (*Tughlaq*, p-56)

**Stop to Consider:**

Freud considers that the central reality for any individual is the internal one and that social, cultural and political systems have no independent existence but is collective response to or defence against the turbulence of the inner worlds. (*The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.21, p-113) The inner world of Tughlaq becomes the central reality for him and he acts accordingly.

The characters in Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, exist in their own right yet they can be seen as dramatized aspects of Tughlaq's own personality. The two close associates of Tughlaq – Barani, the scholarly historian, and Najib, the politician, seem to represent the two opposing selves of Tughlaq:

“Barani is a historian – he's only interested in playing chess with the shadows of the dead. And Najib's a politician – he wants pawns of flesh and blood. He doesn't have the patience to breathe life into these bones.” (*Tughlaq*, p-12)

The theme of disguise runs throughout the play. The character, Barani, the historian, occupies a symbolic position as the bearer of the record of the Sultan's reign, his deeds and actions, for the future generation.

The game of chess in the play is symbolic in the play. It is likely to symbolise Tughlaq's “game” approach to life. Tughlaq's confidence after solving the most famous problem in chess is checked by Ain-ul-Mulk, who highlights to Tughlaq the flaws in his vision. This may symbolise the faulty vision of Tughlaq in the play.

The rose garden of the Sultan which was symbolic of the visionary hopes of Tughlaq to create a utopia becomes a rubbish dump where copper coins are dumped. This also symbolises the duality and conflict between the real and the ideal.

The use of prayer by Shamas-ud-din and other Muslim chieftains for the murder of the Sultan is reminiscent of what Tughlaq himself did to kill his father and brother. The tainted and vitiated prayer stands as a symbol for corruption and treachery. The intrigues in the play stand as a symbol for Tughlaq's divided self. The external drama, in a way, symbolises the inner drama of Tughlaq.

Aziz's ironic comment on virtue is symbolic and allegorical, as it makes an indirect comment on the Sultan himself:

If you remain virtuous throughout your life no one will say a good thing about you because they won't need to. But start stealing – and they will say: “What a nice boy he was. But he's ruined now...” (*Tughlaq*, p-57)

Aziz indulges in role-playing in the play. This can also be seen as symbolic of the role-playing instinct of the sultan himself. The Step-Mother notices it of Tughlaq as she says:

“I can't ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance.” (*Tughlaq*, p-10-11)

Even in politics Tughlaq engages in role-playing. He uses people as pawns, murders them unscrupulously, and then engages in role-playing. The episode with Sheikh Imam-ud-din can be seen as an example of this. Even after knowing Aziz's disguise as Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, Tughlaq engages in role-playing along with the master role-player, Aziz. Aziz makes the Sultan realise that every villainous and treacherous act of his is guided by an ideal of his own. This appears to be a symbolic mock-image of the Sultan himself. Aziz refers to himself as the disciple of the Sultan. He flatters the king with words like:

“...I have watched Your Majesty try to explain your ideas and acts to the people. And I have seen with regret how few have understood them.” (*Tughlaq*, p-80)

Tughlaq, ironically, finds his inheritor in Aziz. The ironic checkmate that Tughlaq finds in Aziz's wit is symbolic of the defeat of the Sultan. Aziz's speech “one day suddenly I had a revelation...” moves the Sultan (Scene Thirteen, p-83). Tughlaq finds a reflection of his own self in Aziz as the 'revelation' of Aziz vainly symbolizes Tughlaq's own revelations.

**SAQ:**

Comment on the use of political disillusionment as a theme in the play that undercuts the characterisation of Tughlaq. (70 words)

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**Check Your Progress**

1. Discuss the deployment of ‘history’ as a site for the staging of Tughlaq’s inner struggles.
2. To what extent can Tughlaq be seen in terms of conventional tragedy? Illustrate your answer with textual support.
3. Explain the structure of *Tughlaq* in terms of Karnad’s search for a ‘theatre of roots’. Does the structure enable spectacle more than the psychological development of characters in the play? Give textual reasons for your answer.

**1.6 A CRITICAL HISTORY**

*Tughlaq* is known as the most popular play of Girish Karnad. It was first staged in 1965, and it became an immediate success on the stage. It was produced in different Indian languages like Kannada, Hindi, Bengali and Marathi. This accounts for the huge success of the play. In 1970, there was an English production of the play in Bombay, which drew a lot of audience and was a major success. The play has got scope for spectacle, and this justifies the immediate response of the audience. One can enjoy the play even without paying much attention to the different layers of meaning and symbolism in the play. It is the play of the sixties and hence the play, in many ways, reflects the political mood of disillusionment that followed the Nehru era of idealism in India. In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Girish Karnad himself comments:



The play certainly reflects the disillusionment that my generation felt with the new politics of independent India, the realpolitik, the cynicism, the gradual erosion of ethical norms. (*Girish Karnad's Plays*, p-36)

With each succession in history the play has taken a new meaning, and has continued to appeal to the audience and the readers. Critics and readers have come up with new interpretations of the play repeatedly. Some associate the secular ideas of Mahatma Gandhi with that of Tughlaq, while some associate the intelligent and opportunistic political style of Indira Gandhi with Tughlaq, while others read *Tughlaq* as a reflection of the general disillusionment in the present political scenario. The religious issue in *Tughlaq* is suggestive of different societies experimenting with democratic structures. The dense layer of meanings and implications of the play are impossible to exhaust, and opens up scope for more research and analysis. Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, can be studied from different critical and theoretical perspectives – postcolonial, psychoanalytical, new historicist, to name a few.

**SAQ:**

How do readings and interpretations of the play take new shade with the pace of time? Analyse. (60 words)

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Do you think Karnad's use of 'history' is the reason behind the huge success of the play? (50 words)

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Karnad's choice of indigenous theatrical traditions, instead of choosing a Western model, marks him out as a distinctive playwright. This evolution of

post-independence India's own theatrical idiom, succeeded in receiving critical acclaim across the globe.

Aparna Dharwadker, in *Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation*, asserts that Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, is also about postcolonial national identity and political modernity. Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, in *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theatre*, analyses the synthesis of national identity in postcolonial writings, through a return to roots; and Karnad's plays beautifully exemplify this. Tutun Mukherjee, in *Girish Karnad's Plays*, talks about Karnad's contribution towards the universality of human knowledge through his plays.

## 1.7 SUMMING UP

Girish Karnad's contribution to modern Indian theatre is thus immense. His plays bring together apparently separated worlds, the traditional and the modern. Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*, can be situated in the postcolonial context, and it appeals to the postcolonial audience.

His treatment of the historical, social or psychological horizons in the play also relates to the experiential world of the readers and the spectators. The playwright creates poetry in his play, through the synthesis of reality and illusion.

Through the study of the historical subject, *Tughlaq*, Karnad analyses the notions of history and historiography, and the idea of 'discourse' associated with them. The duality of fact and fiction is vividly explored in the play through narratives and discourses. Karnad's adaptation of myth and history to suit the modern sensibility is noteworthy. *Tughlaq* invokes significant elements in modern Indian political and cultural experience.

Karnad's use of myth and history in his plays makes him one of the exponents of the 'theatre of roots' movement. The movement initiated a decolonizing process in its embracing of tradition. It's a liberation and departure from the Western realistic theatre. Girish Karnad's play, *Hayavadana*, for instance, was inspired by the Yakshagana of Karnataka.

The psychological domain of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* and the symbolism in the play has captured the imagination of many readers and critics. They

give new insight to the play and make the play dense with many layers of meaning. The psychological and symbolic contents of the play also link the sub-plot with the main plot of the play, and pave the way for varied interpretations.

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. *Tughlaq* is built around a play of ironies. Identify and comment.
2. To what degree does *Tughlaq* dispense with the constrictions of the well-made play and instead explore a loose structure which allows the exploration of a wide set of interrelated events? Give a textual analysis.
3. Rather than a psychologically plausible character, Muhammad Tughlaq is projected as a historical curiosity. Do you agree? Give textual support for your answer.
4. Comment on the notions of role-playing, disguise, and deception in the play, *Tughlaq*.

## **1.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING**

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## Unit 2

### Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 The Playwright
- 2.4 Stage History
- 2.5 Reading the Play
- 2.6 Critical Responses to the Play
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Reading

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit provides you with a reading of Mahesh Dattani's first play *Where There's a Will*. This unit is designed in such a way that after reading this unit you will be able to –

- *place* Mahesh Dattani as an influential and innovative voice in contemporary Indian theatre
- *describe* the play's rich technicalities and performativity, and
- *explore* the play's major themes.

#### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the second unit of Block 1 of the paper called "Contemporary Indian writing in English - II". It brings to you Mahesh Dattani's play *Where There's a Will*. Perhaps you know that Mahesh Dattani is one of the most celebrated and influential theatre activists in contemporary India. He writes and produces his plays in English before allowing them to be translated into other vernacular languages. Like Girish Karnad, Dattani is regarded as a major voice in Indian English theatre.

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will* is the story of an aristocratic family of modern India. Based on an industrialist Gujarati family, this play is one among most of his plays where he has sought to chronicle the prejudices, tensions and follies of middle-class Indian lives. His major area of concern is the microcosm of the family unit as reflective of the ever-changing realities of the larger society. Through this play, Dattani reveals the inner fabric of power structures, interpersonal relationships, affections and pretensions, hopes and predicaments that work within the family.

Dattani's plays are always marked by their rich technical innovations. Dattani tries newer and newer experimentations on the stage space with the use of props and lights and transforms the stage into a site for complex meanings. That is why, one can never have a comprehensive understanding of his plays by simply reading the plays as books. However, it is not only with Dattani but with all playwrights that a play is best experienced when it is watched being performed. In case of Dattani, the claim for its performativity becomes more powerful as the theatrical directions of Dattani constantly intervene in the literary reading of the play. So as you go through the play, always be attentive to the stage directions by the playwright.

This unit provides you with some important insights for studying Dattani's *Where There's a Will* with reference to certain major themes. At the same time you will come across Dattani as a playwright of the contemporary India. Try to treat this unit as an entry point into the world of Dattani's theatrical works and gradually enhance your understanding with more and more readings on him. The section called 'References and Suggested Reading' towards the end of this unit will help you with names of resources that you can use for your studies.

### **2.3 THE PLAYWRIGHT**

Mahesh Dattani is regarded as one of the most prolific and celebrated theatre activists of India at the present times. He is the first Indian writer in English to win the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award. A graduate in History, Political Science and Economics and a post-graduate in Marketing and Advertising Management, Dattani is a man of immense artistic and creative genius. Besides his ventures in the world of theatre, he is also known as a Bharatnatyam and Western ballet dancer, a film director, script writer, radio activist, literary and performance art critic as well as a teacher.

Dattani was born on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1958 in Bangalore, Karnataka. His parents were originally from Porbandar, Gujarat; they migrated to Bombay for business and later settled in Bangalore. Dattani went to Baldwin High School in his childhood where he learnt to communicate in an English-speaking environment where the vernaculars were strictly discouraged. He started his higher education at St. Joseph College of Arts and Science, Bangalore. He worked as a copy-writer in an advertising firm and later on helped his father in their family business.

In his childhood, Dattani used to visit the theatre with his parents to watch Gujarati and Kannad plays. This habit cultivated his interest in this genre of performance art and during his college days he started engaging himself in different theatre activities. He joined Bangalore Little Theatre in the early 1980s and started participating in play- productions, workshops and different directorial activities. He took training in Western ballet under Molly Andre at Alliance Française de Bangalore and learned Bharatnatyam from Chandrabhage Devi and Krishna Rao in Bangalore.

In the year of 1984, he started his theatre company PLAYPEN. This company has staged various plays starting from classical Greek to contemporary plays. Playpen tried to facilitate the popularity of Indian plays in English in a way that would construct a distinctive identity of this trend in contrast to the English canonical plays that were performed generally. All of Dattani's plays were first performed and tried out by this group before he finally released them for public performances.

**Stop to consider:**

**Dattani and the English language**

While composing his plays in English, Dattani had to confront a major problem of representation. How can one represent an Indian experience in a language not native to the Indian soil? Dattani had to sort out a safe path for himself. By the very choice of his language, his play lost the potentialities of reaching out to the wide, expansive, grassroots audience in India. He never attempted to cater to the taste of that audience; his language made him selective of the urban audience. To make the audience identify with the situations presented on the stage, he based almost all his plays in the urban Indian context where English is never deemed a foreign tongue. "... You've got to be true to your expression also. English is for me a sort of given. It's my language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad."

(Menon and Prakash, 2003) On the other hand, Dattani tried to adjust the English language to Indian speakers. It is a kind of 'hybrid' English that most of the English-speaking Indians use in their day-to-day lives. Notice what Dattani observes about his choice of English language, "Like many urban people in India, you're in this situation where the language you speak at home is not the language of your environment, especially if you move from your hometown. And you use English to communicate, so you find that you're more and more comfortable expressing yourself in English..." (Mee, 2002) It would be an interesting exercise for you to relate Dattani's use of English with that of other writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh that you have to study in this course.

In the year of 1988, Dattani completed writing his first play, *Where There's a Will* and saw it performed at the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. After that, he continued writing plays touching various themes and exploring diverse possibilities of stagecraft and presentation. *Dance Like a Man*, published in 1989 and *Tara*, published in 1990 raise the question of gender roles and the construction of one's gendered identity. *Do the Needful*, which is originally a radio play, portrays a humorous tale of alternative sexual choices. While *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) tries to unmask the pretensions of the upper middle-class joint family in urban India, *Final Solutions* (1993) tells an engaging and sensitive story of Hindu-Muslim conflict. The other plays like *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (1998) (originally written for BBC), *Thirty Days in September* (2001) take up the issues of love and marriage, incest, child abuse and sexual violence.

**SAQ:**

1. How does the articulation of language in the representation of social reality affect theatre performance? Consider Dattani's usage of Indianised English in his plays as a factor of prime importance. (80 + 80 words)

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Besides writing for the stage, Dattani took to scriptwriting for films and television as well. You must know that though theatre and cinema share many things in common between them, they are two different modes of performance arts utterly distinct in various key elements like script, screenplay, acting, visuals as well as the mode of reception from the audience. As such, it is not very easy for an individual to excel in both mediums. However, Dattani's artistic genius flourishes in both mediums. He has written screenplays for a number of films like *Ek Alag Mausam*. Through his film *Mango Souffle*, which is the film adaptation of his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Dattani tested his artistic skills as a director. As a theatre persona turning towards film direction, he faced the challenge to translate his vision of presenting action, emotional situations and experiences into a different media of performance arts. As such, the film version of the play embodies an utterly different construction of screenplay, script and language. Dattani later translated another play *Dance Like a Man* into the celluloid. *Morning Raga*, based on the life of a classical music singer, is another of Dattani's works in the celluloid medium which has brought him wide applause from audiences both inside and outside India.

As a student of literature, while studying a play, you should also keep an eye on the reception of a play by the audience. A play is a form of performance text primarily aimed at commercial benefit. The commercial success of a play influences the productivity and performance of a playwright in his/her next ventures. Dattani's success as a theatre persona mostly lies in the fact that his plays are not only intellectually and technically intriguing but also makes tremendous commercial sense. Throughout his career, Dattani has claimed supportive applause from his audience. It will not be more than enough to comment that Dattani's works cultivated a specific type of theatre sensibility and a specific mass of audience in India. However his works have transcended national boundaries and found huge appreciation from an international audience that mostly consists of the Indian diasporas, the urban audience from the other parts of the subcontinent, as well as some of the culturally and sexually marginalized groups across the world who find a space in which to realize their voices.

**SAQ:**

Do you think that one can make a comprehensive analysis of a play by simply reading it? Why? Give reasons for your answer. (70 words)

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**2.4 STAGE HISTORY**

Dattani’s first play *Where There’s a Will* was first staged at Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore on 23 September, 1988. This performance was a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival of that year. Besides directing the play, Dattani played the role of Ajit Mehta, Hasmukh Mehta’s son, in the play.

The play was later translated into Hindi by Rajendra Mohan and first staged at Tanzil Theatre in Mumbai on 25 December, 1992. This production was directed by Jaspal Sendhu. In the year of 1998, the play was translated and performed in Gujarati. Suresh Rajda directed this Gujarati version of the play.

**2.5 READING THE PLAY**

Dattani’s *Where There’s a Will* is based on an upper-middle class industrialist Gujarati family. This play is one among most of his plays where he has sought to chronicle the prejudices, tensions and follies of the middle class Indian lives. His major area of concern, as we find in this play too, is the microcosm of the family unit as reflective of the most palpable and ever-changing realities of the larger society. As you go on reading the play, you will find how tactfully Dattani reveals the inner fabric of power structure, interpersonal relationships, affections and pretensions, hopes and predicaments working within the family.

The action of the play takes place at “the lavish house of Hasmukh Mehta”. Hasmukh Mehta, a businessman in his mid-forties, is the protagonist of the play. The other members of the Mehta family include Hasmukh Mehta’s wife Sonal, their son Ajit and daughter-in-law, Preeti. Preeti is pregnant. The only character who does not belong to the Mehta family is Kiran, “a very attractive, well-preserved woman, who looks anywhere between thirty and forty years,” who works as a high-ranking official in Mehta’s company. Dattani, with his innovative directions on stage-setting, makes it sure that the audience see three spaces of Mehta’s house: the fancy dining-cum-living room, the bedroom of Hasmukh and Sonal Mehta and the trendy bedroom that belongs to Ajit and Preeti.

### **Stop To Consider:**

#### **Dattani’s Use of the Stage Space:**

Dattani is one of the pioneers of modern Indian theatre to make innovative use of the stage-space. He makes multiple divisions of the stage with the help of props and effective use of lights. This division of the stage allows clearly demarcated space for certain characters, or time periods, as well as for different locales. The distribution of action among different levels of the stage-space not only makes his plays visually exciting but also makes them move at a snappy pace. When the play is performed, with its physical divisions farther intensified by the use of light and shades, the stage becomes a site for meanings that refer to the complex domain of social, psychological, intellectual differences as well as interconnections among the characters. Dattani’s stage techniques are aimed at making the audience intimate with the life of a family, its internal conflicts, intrigues and debilitating secrets. Besides, Dattani uses this technique to present more than one story of the play getting enacted at the same time, which helps him in getting the effect of simultaneity.

The action starts with Hasmukh having come home from office. He overhears his twenty-three years old son and Joint Managing Director of his firm complaining about his father’s refusal to invest in new business ventures thought up by him, Hasmukh does not seem to be pleased at all. Argumentations soon begin between the father and the son over spending money in new business projects. Hasmukh dismisses his son’s business

proposal without paying any attention to it. In a series of straight addresses to the audience, Hasmukh clarifies that he had thrown away his son Ajit's project proposals unread because "If I let him have his way, we would all be paupers. Twenty-three years old and he is on his way to bankruptcy. ... He was bankrupt up here (points to his head) the day he was born. God just forgot to open an account for him." His next few addresses to the audience show that Hasmukh does not have any love to spare for his wife Sonal. His daughter-in-law Preeti, whom he succinctly describes as "pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake", is also not free from his wariness, as he conceives her as a girl who "has an eye on my money." In course of the scene, we learn that Hasmukh is a diabetic and cardiac patient with a history of "high blood pressure, high cholesterol – (and) an enlarged heart."

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Hasmukh's conversation with the audience:**

In this play the chief character, Hasmukh Mehta, makes direct addresses to the audience. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom, the narrator of the play directly addresses the spectators taking them into confidence. This innovative technique of character construction and narration takes the theatrical text to a metatextual level where the audience is continuously aware of its fictionality and constructedness. This technique where Hasmukh, in *Where There's a Will*, directly speaks more to the audience than any of the other characters of the play provides the text with extreme self-reflectivity. The audience is continuously intimated about the motifs and thoughts of Hasmukh Mehta. As such, the play penetrates into a deeper level of intensity and makes possible a psychological probing into the minds of the character.

Hasmukh, the self-made businessman, is always concerned about his son's supposed inefficiency in handling his business. The play never shows any occasion where Ajit is allowed any space by his father to explore and exercise his views. Instead, the father is apt to be bullying his son for everything on earth. Hasmukh is always keen to compare his son's ways to the achievements that he has made, "Today, I, Hasmukh Mehta, am one of the richest men in this city. All by my own efforts. Forty-five years and I am a success in capital letters. Twenty-three years old and he (Ajit) is on the

road to failure, in bold capital letters! At his age, I was a mature responsible man, not eating my father’s head and nibbling at papads!” (Act 1(i)) He wants his son to do exactly what he used to do to his father at the beginning of their business career. And in this attempt to discover himself within his son, he often forgets to respect and provide the least space to the individual that is within his son called Ajit. “Who is Ajit? Isn’t he my son? No. He is just a boy who spends my money and lives in my house. He does not behave like my son. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father . . . happy. I listened to him. I did what made him . . . happy. That is what I wanted my son to make me. But he failed! Miserably!” (Act 1(i)) However, Hasmukh does not provide any example of his son’s unworthiness in his handling of the office that can justify his agony. It is his excessive obsession with his achievements as a businessman that makes him doubt his son’s ability. “He has made my entire life worthless! He is going to destroy me! It won’t be long before everything I worked for and achieved will be destroyed! Finished because of him!” (Act 1(i))

**SAQ:**

How does Dattani split the stage into various spaces? What are the different advantages that Dattani, as a playwright, avails from this division of the stage space? (80 words)

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How does Hasmukh Mehta’s direct conversation with the audience affect the development of his character? (60 words)

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The audience is soon introduced to Sonal, Hasmukh Mehta's wife. Most of her time is spent in the kitchen cooking various rich dishes for the family. They have got a cook, Maharaj, who has left for his village home for a couple of days; and in his absence Sonal dutifully takes up the responsibility of the kitchen despite her high blood pressure. It is even amusing that she displays an obsession with food. Preeti complains, "... as a matter of fact, she is making parathas now. ... I told her that I had made enough food for everyone. She insisted that navratan pulao, malai kofta, baongan barta, patties, not to forget the halwa and salad, are not enough for a proper meal." (Act 1(i)) Everyone in the family is irritated by this habit of excessive cooking. As you go on reading the play, you will find that Sonal Mehta is the most timid character of the play. She does not have a strong voice to make herself heard within her family. She is a devoted follower of her sister Minal and seeks her advice in every matter of life. However, at the end of the play, you will find her enlightened and courageous enough to refuse listening to her sister.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Food, dining and the psychological space:**

It will be interesting for you to note how Dattani uses the dining-room as a significant space on the stage where all the diverse and conflicting tensions within the family come into play. A major portion of the first scene of the play centers round food.

The kitchen and food is the space where the women of the family can exercise their power to the fullest. It is the specific cultural space in the family, where even Hasmukh Mehta cannot exercise his all-encompassing patriarchal power. What he can do, at best, is not more than disagree with Sonal and Preeti over the rich food being cooked in the house. He cannot force them to stop preparing them; and more pathetically he cannot help consuming the food like the salad that is especially prepared for him though he never likes them.

The dining-room is the space where all members of the family meet and interact in the play. In this process, the audience gets illuminated regarding the interpersonal relationships within the family. The mother seems to be almost blind in her love and care for the son, which irritates Hasmukh, the father. The bitter relationship between the father and the son continues throughout the meals as they are always arguing over the various foods they want to have. At no point are they

seen compromising on their personal choices for the greater interest of the family. On some occasions, Ajit becomes aggressive enough to demand some food which he never wanted to have but insists on having only for the sole purpose of contradicting his father – “No! I don’t want them! Yes, I lied! Because I would rather lie than agree with you!” Thus, on the stage, the dining-room appears to be an important space that constantly refers to the psychological differences among the members of the family. The family never remains a unit but rather a shattered group consisting of different individuals living under one roof.

In two long addresses made directly to the audience, Hasmukh gradually sheds light over his loveless relationship with his wife. He does not enjoy his sexual companionship with his wife; he considers her ‘a good-for-nothing’, “As good as mud.” It is with his mistress, the marketing executive of his firm Kiran Jhaveri, with whom he maintains a satisfying, sexual relationship. His sexual infidelity does not bother him much, though he knows that Sonal has always remained faithful to him. He reveals his patriarchal utilitarianism in the following sentences, “. . . I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. . . . Because the son will carry the family name? Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grow old, I can live life again through my son. Why did my father marry? To get me. Why did I marry? To get Ajit. . .” (Act 1(i))

Towards the end of the first part of Act I, while puffing his cigarette, in the midst of his solo speech to the audience, Hasmukh starts coughing uncontrollably. Soon he runs out of breath, tries to lie down on the bed clutching his heart and ultimately dies. The play takes an interesting turn, at this point, as we find that death does not end everything for Hasmukh. Look at Dattani’s stage-direction – “After a while Hasmukh rises slowly, gets up and looks at his ‘body’ on the bed.” After the demise of the corporal body, now it is his ghost that will continue his run for mastering the power equations and controlling the lives within his family. Soon the audience is going to learn how this shrewd businessman has planned out everything before his death so that he can retain his position in his family intact. From now onwards, Hasmukh will play an onlooker to every activity within his household occasionally communicating with the audience as he has been doing till now. Hasmukh, or rather his ghost, seems to be really excited about the prospect of enjoying the predicament that he has already planned

out for his family members before his death. With this prospect, ‘for the first time in the play, he grins from ear to ear’. In the next scene, you will find him lingering on in the house, wandering through its walls, occasionally sitting cross-legged on the dining table, passing comments on the actions and attitudes of the other characters on the stage. He will not be heard and seen by the other characters. Comically enough, even an audience will not be spared from his critical scrutiny, as the ghost will sprawl on the dining table and dangle its head and arms over its edge in imitation of swinging upside down from a tamarind tree, and point to a spectator in the auditorium and tell him sternly “your shoes need polishing.”

**Dattani’s irony with names:**

Dattani has given ironical names to his characters in this play. The chief character Hasmukh (the smiling face) never smiles in his lifetime. It is only after his death that he, or more precisely his ghost, ‘grins from ear to ear’. Sonal, whose name refers to gold, is described as ‘good-for-nothing’ and ‘mud’ by her husband. Ajit is never held as victorious and successful by his father. And Preeti, who is always fighting with her husband and always keeping an eye on Hasmukh’s money, is never deemed as a loving woman. This ironical usage of names comically refers to the pretensions within the lives of the characters.

The second part of Act I starts with Hasmukh (the ghost), after a week of his death, marvelling at his popularity and importance in his society that he has discovered from the number of visitors swarming to his house soon after his death. He has not stopped worrying about his property. He does not want his son and daughter-in-law and even his wife to enjoy his money as they have not worked for it. He confides to the audience, “You see, I have made a special will! (laughs.) They are going to hate me for doing this to them!” (Act 1(i)) Soon the audience will come to know that Hasmukh Mehta has made prior arrangements of distributing his property through a will.

As per Hasmukh’s instruction, the lawyer summons the members of the family exactly one week after his death to read out the will. Soon it gets revealed that none of his expectant family members have inherited his money. As per the will, none of the three Mehta family members has any legal right



over the property of Hasmukh Mehta including their present living-room. Hasmukh has formed a charitable Trust named Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust to be administered by his former mistress Kiran Jhaveri as the Trustee. He has donated all his property including finances, shares, etc., to the Trust. As per the will, they get a regular allowance from the Trust. The Trust will be dissolved when Ajit Mehta turns forty five. Everything remains with the Trust till he is forty-five. He can use and utilize property and money after that period. In fact, according to the terms of Mehta's will, not only will his son not inherit his father's money and property until he is forty-five but he will also have to compulsorily attend office everyday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and remain under the official tutelage of Mrs. Jhaveri. Ajit will have no power to sanction any new business project. If Ajit and the other members fail to abide by the terms and conditions, the Trust will donate its funds to various charities as approved by Hasmukh. And finally, the most insulting news to all the members of the family is that according to Mehta's will his former mistress Mrs. Kiran Jhaveri will move in and live within his family till the Trust be dissolved twenty-two years thence.

**SAQ:**

Do you think that Ajit is incapable of running his business, as thought by his father? Why? (80 words)

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Do you find any similarity between the characters of Preeti and Kiran in their attitude towards life and relationships? (50 words)

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After some time, Mrs. Kiran Jhaveri comes to their house. Dattani describes Kiran as 'a very attractive, well-preserved woman who looks anywhere between thirty and forty years'. She explains the terms and conditions of the will in detail to the Mehtas and then, much to the bewilderment of the Mehta family, she informs everyone that she is going to stay with them in the same house. They are reluctant to let her stay with them. However, Hasmukh made such arrangements through his will that they cannot help welcoming Kiran to their lives. Kiran tells Preeti, "As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder. Which will mean that you won't ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?" (Act II (i)) Thus Kiran strongly asserts her power and position within the Mehta family and carries on dominating the lives of the three Mehtas.

The second part of Act II begins with Hasmukh sitting cross-legged on the dining table, demonstrating the audience how to swing on a tamarind tree, and describing how the world looks when he swings upside down. It is the same thing that has happened to the lives of his family members at the entry of Kiran into their lives – 'their lives have been turned upside down'. He is taking pleasure in the way Kiran has compelled the family to change his wife 'from stupid incapable housewife to clever incapable housewife'. More sadistically he confesses, "The more she will learn about me, the more she will regret having been such a good-for-nothing wife. That will keep her from being a happy widow ever after. One thing I can't stand is a happy widow." (Act II (ii)) However, you will soon see that Hasmukh's happy recluse will not last long as soon Kiran will subvert this power structure within the house and get assimilated with the Mehtas in a way where Hasmukh's sadistic designs will have no effect at all.

Kiran, at first, with the aim of winning faith within the family, tries to clarify to the Mehtas that she is only an employee of the Trust whose job is to look after the Mehta group of industries on behalf of Ajit Mehta. She does not own any property of the Mehta family. What she will get from her works is just the monthly salary from the Trust. Her duties will extend to training Ajit

Mehta and eventually delegating most of her responsibilities to him in phases. This step to clarify her position and role within the Mehta household without any attempt to exploit her power helps her to win some tolerance from the Mehtas. Now in sharp contrast to Hasmukh Mehta's tactics, Kiran tries to develop her relationship with the family members on the basis of mutual understanding.

### **Dattani's use of the ghost as a character:**

In this play, you have noticed that Dattani has made a bold and innovative use of the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta as a character. Despite its comic effects, the ghost plays a major role in exposing the tensions and pretensions within the man called Hasmukh Mehta. Notice the following dialogues taken from the second part of Act II:

Kiran: He was just like his father, wasn't he?

Hasmukh: No, I wasn't.

Sonal: Yes. He was.

Hasmukh: Don't contradict me, woman!

Kiran: The same bossy nature?

Sonal: No!

Hasmukh: Yes!

Kiran: Did he ever disgrace his father!

Sonal: No!

Hasmukh: Yes!

Kiran: Did he ever do anything at all without consulting his father first?

Sonal (together): No, never!

Hasmukh: Yes always! (Act II (ii))

Herein lies an instance of Dattani as one of the most innovative and original dramatists of his times. His use of the injected dialogues of Hasmukh which, though unheard by the other characters, has been an effective tool to deconstruct the image of Hasmukh constructed by Hasmukh himself in his life within the story as well as the audience watching the play. Superficially comic and evocative of laughter, these dialogues embody a kind of dialogic strategy in that the audience/reader is privileged to hear two contradictory statements about the same person. The device of an apparition's dialogues accomplishing the irony is in a way a radical extension of the older theatrical tradition of having a character say

something in an aside and then of showing him to do or say something contrary in the presence of other characters. Dattani's use of the visible/invisible, audible/inaudible ghost significantly pushes back the accepted borders of naturalistic drama.

With the passage of time, Kiran gradually exposes to the family many newer faces of Hasmukh that they had never been accustomed to. She opens up the stories of her own life – her disturbed childhood with a drunkard father, her miserable mother, her marriage to a drunkard and then her silent sufferings – and how she has learned the ways of the world facing her life closely. Finally the truth emerges that Hasmukh Mehta wanted his son to live in his own image, just as he had lived his own life as his father's shadow. Kiran criticizes Hasmukh Mehta's overt obsession with his power to be ridiculous, "Even his attempts at ruling over you after his death, through his will, are pathetic. The only reason he wanted to do that is because his father had ruled over his family. All his life he was merely being a good boy to his father." In front of Sonal, Kiran mocks at Hasmukh's pseudo-efficiency as a master of everything under his command, "He depended on me for everything. . . . He wanted me to run his life. . . . He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him!" With a tone full of disgust, Kiran exclaims, "Yes, Mrs Mehta. My father, your husband – they were weak men with false strength." (Act II (ii))

Kiran appreciates Ajit's invincible spirit for telling the truth on the face of his father; for not being a blind follower of his father. Kiran appreciates his revolutionary spirit, "He may not be the greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father's beliefs. He resists. In a small way, but at least it's a start. That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost."

**SAQ:**

What distinctions do you notice between Hasmukh Mehta and Kiran in their handling of power-positions? (60 words)

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Comment on Dattani’s use of the ghost as a theatrical device. (50 words)

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Do you think that the ghost has a more serious role in the play than simply being a device for comic effect? How? (70 words)

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At the same time Sonal makes an interesting realization about her life. She realizes that her entire life has been spent under the full influence of her sister Minal. It was Minal who decided what she should wear, what games she should play, and even precisely at what moment she should cry after her husband’s death! But with a new zeal for life fuelled by a sense of confidence, Sonal declares to Kiran, “Everything is going to be different now.”

These frank and sympathetic exchanges are enough to mend the rift between Kiran and the Mehta family. Kiran’s gradual development as a trustworthy member of the family results in the growing frustration of the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta. To the agony of the ghost, the four persons in the house fill the room with laughter, enjoying one another’s company and the Mehtas relishing the newly developed friendship with Kiran. The ghost realizes that his reign in this house is over, “I don’t think I can enter this house. It isn’t mine ... any more. I will rest permanently on the tamarind tree.” As he exits, comically enough, Sonal asks her son to get the tamarind tree trimmed as it has overgrown enough to disturb the electricity wires! Ultimately, at the end of the play, Hasmukh’s ghost will have to move far away from his house as the family gets revitalized for a future free from his dominance.

## 2.6 CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE PLAY

The play makes a sarcastic but penetrating portrayal of the Indian joint family in relation to the individual. The changing values of an urbanized India have disturbed some of the internal balances within the joint-family system of India. The growth of the individualistic consciousness works against the cohesiveness of the joint family.

The play tells stories of different women caught within the capitalist patriarchal structure of society struggling hard to become the master of their selves. Only a few succeed in this attempt by shrewdly acting within the patriarchal norms. Sita Raina, Delhi-based theatre activist and a director of *Where There's a Will* observes, "*Where There's a Will* has several interesting aspects. Mahesh described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. Women - be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress - are dependent on men and this play shows what happens when they are pushed to the edge. What interested me particularly was its philosophical twist. To be the watcher of one's self is to make intelligent changes in this life. In *Where There's a Will*, (Hasmukh) has control over his family through his money and forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationships. As do most of us. Consequently, when he became the watcher of his actions, he perceived that his desire for control has led him to be the victim of his own machinations unlike Kiran who uses power-play to essentially improve her relationships." (Dattani, 451)

### **Marriage, family, sexual transgression:**

The play sheds some interesting light on the shifting terrains within the fabric of marriage, love and sexuality in the urban Indian family. Notice Has Mukh Mehta's observation on Preeti, "But she is an interesting girl, I can tell you. She has her eye on my money. Why else would she agree to marry a dead loss like my son?" (Scene 1) On the other hand, think about Kiran's situations. She has got the appointment as a high-ranking officer at Has Mukh Mehta's farm by virtue of her intimacy with him. She has a husband who knew about her affair with Has Mukh Mehta. But he 'didn't mind' it because, "Every evening he needs a full bottle of whisky. Johnnie Walker." which he cannot afford himself and his wife with her high salary satiated his 'basic necessity'. After all, it was the equations of money which worked out everything for this trio, as Kiran tells Ajit, "Anyway, it all worked out to be quite convenient. I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got... well, you know." (Scene 1)

At the same time, money is looked upon as something that can justify someone's sexual transgressions. Hasmukh has been married for twenty-five years; he is not satisfied with his sexual life with his wife. "So what does a man do? You tell me." confesses Hasmukh, "I started eating out. Well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places.... A man in my position has to be careful. I needed a safer relationship. ... A Mistress! ... All right, what's wrong with having a bit on the side? Especially since the main course is always without salt." (Scene 1) You can notice, while reading the play, how skillfully Hasmukh avoids questions of fidelity and loyalty within marriage on his attempt to justify his sexual transgression – 'eating out'. On the other hand, Hasmukh does not have any doubts over his wife's loyalty towards him, "I've got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be." Dattani, very skillfully, shows how, in the urban Indian context, sexuality within married life has ceased to be something shared between the spouses and become much more an individual experience which is loosely knit within the fabric of the family.

#### **Dattani's handling of gender issues:**

Dattani is, very often, considered as the spokesperson of different marginalized groups of people. Besides his handling of themes like homosexuality, the third gender, and alternative sexuality, his plays display a deep concern for the gendered subaltern, i.e., women. The play portrays two different kinds of women characters. Firstly, there is a woman like Sonal Mehta who has been victimized and exploited by the patriarchal social system and silently suffers throughout her life. Secondly, there are women characters like Kiran Jhaveri, and Preeti who are bold, assertive and defiant enough to contend with patriarchal authoritative norms to establish their right and equities. They don't let patriarchal authority rule over their lives without any protest. But to some extent, both Kiran and Preeti have to suffer from the hegemonic power structure but both are shrewd enough to manipulate their subjugation to their advantage.

Dattani reflects on the issue of gender roles and positions and their miserable plight even in modern times. The play shows women of two generations (Kiran and her mother) being treated as objects of sex and getting exploited both physically and mentally. Notice what Kiran explains to Sonal, "... My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with

bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their wives. And I - I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learnt to suffer silently.” However, Kiran has learnt to strike at the weakness of the patriarchs; she lets herself be exploited by the patriarchal order but in such a way that in course of time she can subvert the power structure. She acquires the skills to survive and flourish in the materialistic, money-oriented upper middle-class milieu. She enters Hasmukh Mehta’s life with her conscience always aware of the possibilities of benefits that she can derive from this relationship. So coming from the periphery of the Mehta family, from being merely a mistress, she becomes the master of the Mehta family – representative of Hasmukh Mehta’s power and control in the family. The smart, wise, shrewd and calculating Kiran is representative of the kind of women that Dattani always sought to glorify. Kiran’s utterance “Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?” marks the voice of the class of women who are keen to witness a transformation in their social position.

Dattani’s *Where There’s a Will* projects the subversion of patriarchy as one of its major concerns. Through this play, as Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes, the playwright “explores the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over.” (Chaudhuri, 57) With the gradual smoothening of the previously dysfunctional family under the leadership of a woman, Dattani subverts the power structures associated with gender roles.

#### **Father and son relationship and the question of authority:**

In the play *Where There’s a Will*, one of the major thematic concerns comes out as the conflicting relationship between father and son. It depicts the clash between two generations of people at pains to establish the norms of their own times. At the same time, the play reveals the intricate power structure that works between the father and the son in a family. Both the father and the son have their own viewpoints regarding life and business. The father strictly believes in his right over the important decisions and works of his son’s life. On the other hand, the son rejects the complete dominance of his father over the matters of his life. Hasmukh never allows Ajit the space to exercise his innovative techniques for the development of their plant as the father never thinks his son to be competent enough to excel in the world of



business. Hasmukh does not respect anybody's say in the decision-making process. This dislike goes to such an extent that the son often has to forcefully contradict his father and assert his points. Hasmukh Mehta wants unquestionable obedience and unchallengeable authority at home and at the office respectively. Therefore, he doesn't allow space for the 'self' of his son. Ajit defies the autocratic father, but fails to articulate his own space and identity. The excessive interference of Hasmukh in Ajit's life illustrates the horrors of patriarchy that aim to control freedom and the selfhood of all those who fall within its power structure.

Sita Raina, a well-known theatre activist appreciated the play for its 'philosophical twist' because Dattani efficiently manipulates the incidents for self-enlightenment to expose the illusion of false authority. He promotes the idea that the passion for power and domination signifies the insecurity of an individual. One can nourish the dream of dominating others for a short while but the fact is well-known that each individual frames his own dreams of life and this essential spirit can never be checked. So, as we see in the play, Hasmukh does have to leave space for the others whose lives he sought to control even after his death. Here a question that may arise in our mind is why a man aspires to have too much authority and power. does it embody any meaning for life? Apparently - it neither attaches any meaning to human existence nor helps in improving the quality of human life. Dattani is convinced that this craze for power and authority is an attempt to make one's life secured. So, man's drive for the domination arises out of his own apprehensions of insecurity. *Where There's a Will* treats such existential issues very effectively.

**SAQ:**

1. Write a note on the conflict between the family and the self of the characters from your reading of the play. (120 words)

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## 2.7 SUMMING UP

From the reading of this unit you must have developed a fair idea that Mahesh Dattani is a major dramatist in English in contemporary India. In his theatrical career, he has touched upon various new themes that have hitherto been alien to the Indian theatrical tradition. He also makes an interesting articulation of the English language to suit the native tongue and reflect the very Indian kind of reality.

His play *Where There's a Will* is the penetrating portrayal of the inherent tensions, interpersonal relations, and power structures working within an urban middle-class Gujarati family. This play is a kind of critical commentary on the changing values and relations in urban India. It is a drawing-room comedy that at last arrives at the central character's deep philosophical realization on some basic existential issues related to the importance of power and influence in one's life. At the same time, the play raises questions regarding gender roles and gender-based power equations working within contemporary society.

### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Analyse how Dattani's stagecraft, scenography and structure of the play contribute to his thematic concerns in *Where There's a Will*.
2. Write a note on Dattani's humour in *Where There's a Will* and show it as an exercise of grotesque laughter evoked through the use of black comedy.
3. Discuss Dattani's ironic projection of the changing contours of the urban Indian family system with reference to *Where There's a Will*. Would you call the play a satire? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Discuss *Where There's a Will* in the light of Dattani's concern for the gendered, political, social subalterns who are often left unseen and unheard. How does the subaltern voice play a role in the characterisation of the women in the play?
5. Comment on *Where There's a Will* as a critique of the latent hypocrisy of Indian middle-class society. Do you agree with the idea that Hasmukh represents this tendency towards hypocrisy more than the rest of the family? Analyse the play in this perspective.

## 2.8 REFERENCE AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Unit 3

### Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 The Playwright
- 3.4 Stage History
- 3.5 Reading the Play
- 3.6 Critical Responses to the Play
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 Reference and Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit provides you with a reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out* accompanied by some critical insights that will serve to help you look deeper into the play. In order to make you familiar with the writer, some basic information about the life and works of Padmanabhan has been provided. It is expected that after reading the unit you will be able to

- *explore* the playwright's use of theatre as a means of social commentary
- *describe* the play in terms of its stagecraft
- *contextualize* the play through its engagement with social realities
- *explain* the play in terms of its aesthetics as well as its ethical values

#### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit brings to you Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Lights Out*. Like the play you have studied in the previous unit, this play is also based on urban India; but you will experience an utterly different picture of life in the modern Indian metropolis.

You may wonder why most of the Indian playwrights in English choose urban India as a convenient setting for most of their works. To put it in other words, Indian theatre in English deliberately differs from the vernacular theatres in their selection of urban themes. To answer this question, you have to consider the differences between the two target audiences and their tastes in both vernacular and English theatres. English theatres find a more appreciative audience in the urban localities, and to cater to its tastes, the plays tend to get based in urban settings.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a Delhi-based playwright who has applied her creative genius in diverse artistic fields like painting and writing spanning various genres. Her *Lights Out*, first performed in 1984, presents a critique of the demoralized and inhuman mentality of a few middle-class city dwellers. Based on a real life incident, where a woman is gang-raped for weeks in an urban locality without any intrusion of the residents of the neighbourhood, the play exposes the civil apathy of a ‘civilized’ urban society. At the same time, the play raises issues like violence at various sexual, psychological, emotional levels, the marginalization of gendered as well as culturally, economically and politically minor groups in a civil society.

As you read a play, always keep in mind the fact that the text is meant for stage performance. Hence an exhaustive reading of the text can necessarily not be complete without the performance being watched. So, while reading the play, pay attention to the directorial notes from the playwright as the movements and the theatrical space of the characters tell much more than what the written words alone can signify.

**SAQ:**

To what extent does performativity affect a play’s meaning? What, do you think, is the difference between the role of the dramatist and that of a play’s director? (40 + 50 words)

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### 3.3 THE PLAYWRIGHT

Manjula Padmanabhan is an influential playwright in Indian English theatre. Apart from being a dramatist, she is also popularly known as an artist, illustrator, cartoonist, short story writer and a novelist.

She was born in Delhi in a diplomat's family in 1953. She grew up in Sweden, Pakistan and Thailand, and now lives in Delhi. She did her school education in boarding schools. After college she tried to explore her possibilities on her own and engaged herself in the work of publishing and in media-related activities.

Apart from contributing to newspapers as a column writer, she has also created comic strips. Before the staging of her celebrated play *Harvest* in the year of 1997 she was better known as a cartoonist and had a daily cartoon strip in *The Pioneer*. She created Suki, a long-running cartoon strip, representing an Indian female comic character, which was first serialized as a strip in the *Sunday Observer* and later in *The Pioneer*. Later the cartoon strip got published as a book in 2001. Her etchings are displayed in exhibitions in Delhi.

Manjula Padmanabhan is popularly known as the writer of the play, *Harvest*, which won the first prize in the first Onassis International Cultural Competition in the year 1997. Selected from 1470 entries in 76 countries, it was for the first time that an Indian English dramatist had won an honour abroad. It is a futuristic play that bears a frightening vision of the cannibalistic nature of mankind where the sale of human organs has become a commonplace. An organization called "Interplanta Services" carries on the sale and transplant of organs from poor Indians to rich Americans. It is the effect of such transactions on the lives and families of the people involved that remains the major focus the play.

Besides *Harvest*, she has also written plays like *Lights Out* (1984), *Hidden Fires*, *The Artist's Model* (1995) and *Sextet* (1996). Padmanabhan's *Getting There* is a semi-autobiographical novel. It is the story of a young woman illustrator in Bombay which, as the writer recalls, is "based loosely on events in the author's life between 1977 and '78. Almost none of it is entirely factual, but as a whole it is more true than false." Padmanabhan's *Kleptomania* is a versatile collection of stories where the writer deals with

a range of themes, from murder mystery to science fiction. Alienation and marginalization, at various social, political, sexual levels, play a large role in her books. *Hot Death, Cold Soup* is another story collection by Padmanabhan. Her recent novel is titled *Escape*. Published in 2008, the novel focuses on the imaginative story of the last surviving girl in a world where all women have been exterminated.

**SAQ:**

Would you agree that cosmopolitanism can be counted among the play's major themes? (70 words)

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**3.4 STAGE HISTORY**

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights out* was first performed in 1986 by Sol Theatre Company at Prithivi Theatre, Mumbai. This performance was directed by Gulan Kripalani. Since then the play has been staged at various theatre halls across the globe. On 9 March, 2010, the play was staged at Gyan Manch by a Kolkata-based theatre group called TreeHat in Kolkata. This performance was directed by Shubhayan Sengupta. Aman Agarwal, who had been an assistant director when the same play was staged at the University of Pennsylvania, acted as the director-mentor in this performance. The performance has been hailed by theatre critics as an eye-opening experience for city-dwellers of urban India.

On July 10 and 12, 2009, the play was staged by Players Enthusiastic Forum at Rabindra Bhawan, Guwahati. This performance was directed by noted theatre personality, Giyasuddin Ahmed. The play saw high applause and reception by the theatre lovers of Singapore when it was staged by Navras Sutra Production on September 17, and 18 in the year 2011 at the Civil Services Club, Singapore. This production was directed by Nishtha Kharb Shukla.



Besides its wide popularity in theatre halls both within and outside India, the play has found place in the curricula at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in many universities in India.

### 3.5 READING THE PLAY

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is based on a real incident, which took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, in 1982, of which an eye-witness account was brought out in a newspaper.

The play is set in the drawing-dining area of an apartment inhabited by an upper middle-class family living on the sixth floor of a building in Bombay. There is a large window to the rear, which is the focal point of the stage-space. Through this window some part of the sky and a suggestion of the roof-top of the neighbouring building can be seen. The director provides a detailed description of the stage settings so that the middle-class urban atmosphere prevails on the stage. There are a sofa and two armchairs in the foreground of the stage. A dining-table occupies the space between the drawing-room and the large window at the back. Dividing the drawing-room and the dining space is a modest bar area. The kitchen and the entrance to the apartment are towards the stage-left while towards the stage-right is the door to the master bed-room. During the first scene, the twilight sky, seen through the window, gradually wanes into darkness.

The building that is seen through the window is under construction and its walls are uncoloured and the windows are without glasses. There is a chowkidar in the building but the owner of the building does not live there. For almost a week, there have been taking place some suspicious activities which from a distance seem to be incidents of gang-rape. It is a topic of much discussion and debate among the inhabitants of the nearby building, but nobody is ready to do anything to find out what exactly it is and what can be done to deal with the problem.

**SAQ:**

Do you think that the loosely divided space on the stage has any influence on the interpersonal relationships and psychological space shared by the characters on the stage? (70 words)

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The discussion regarding the troublesome incident of the neighbourhood starts at the evening tea table between the husband and wife, Bhasker and Leela. Bhasker, having returned home from work, busies himself reading the 'Evening News' when Leela, with a noticeable touch of anxiety in her expression, asks him if he has called the police. Bhasker, engrossed in his reading, neither shows any interest nor seems to be least bothered about what Leela has been referring to. What she is referring to is something which causes her to "feel tense" and "frightened" all through the day. Bhasker shows no concern for the incident that she is referring to; he puts it very simply, "But there's nothing to be frightened of! They can't hurt you -" (Scene 1). But Leela is psychologically so disturbed that the experiences of these horrifying incidents haunt her throughout the day: "At first it was only at the time it was going on. Then, as soon as it got dark. Then around tea-time, when the children came home from school. Then in the middle of the day, whenever the door bell rang. Then on the morning, when I sent the children off to school. And now from the moment I wake up..." (Scene 1). Leela repeatedly exclaims that she is terribly frightened by the sounds coming from the next building and asks her husband to call the police to settle the matter. But he avoids the idea saying that they should do not bother about these little offences. She raises the question of their social responsibility: "That we're part of ... of what happens outside. That by watching it we're making ourselves responsible -" (Scene 1). Bhasker coldly dismisses all her ideas of responsibility as "Rubbish".

**The problematic of performing violence on the stage:**

The performance of violence on the stage has always been a matter of debate. As violence gets performed on a body on the stage, the voyeuristic role of the audience tends towards a sadistic outlook. In a way, being the observer of the violence performed on the stage, the audience also becomes a participant in the action. Questions are raised about the purpose of theatrical representations on stage.

Socially conscious playwrights like Padmanabhan use techniques that can represent what is not desirable to be performed on the stage. It is interesting to note how Padmanabhan exposes the incidents through the dialogues of the characters. The audience does not see any physical violence being performed on the stage. It is at first through Leela's exclamations that the audience gathers some idea that something frightening is taking place in the neighbourhood. The first two scenes show the characters in discussion about the screams of the woman; whatever the audience gathers about the nature of the incident is revealed only through the conversations of the characters. It is only in the third scene that the vigorous screams of the woman are made audible to the audience. This process of gradual exposure of the incident of violence creates an atmosphere of suspense surrounding it.

Leela's tension grows every minute as she goes on exclaiming to her husband, "When you were away on tour, I couldn't sleep at night! And with all the windows shut with all the curtains drawn, with cotton in my ears – the sound still came through! Even in the children's room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!" (Scene 1) Her request to inform the police is instantly turned down, 'police generally ignores the complaint'. Bhasker clarifies his stance: "I don't want to stick my neck out, that's all... who has the time for all this." (Scene 1) Being a woman, Leela finds it difficult to keep acting as the passive observer of a crime where a woman is being molested just outside her house. Bhasker's concern is not the violence being done at his neighbourhood but the mental turmoil that Leela is undergoing. He suggests to her, "Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist". She replies: "If it takes so much effort to ignore something, isn't that the same thing as not ignoring it?" (Scene 1)

### **Stop to Consider:**

At the very beginning of the play the playwright in her directorial notes mentions that Frieda, the housemaid, will remain constantly in sight, moving around the kitchen, performing her duty in a mute, mechanical and undemanding way. The other characters do not pay any attention to her except to give her orders. It is left to the audience to wonder what she thinks about the incidents that are going to take place.

The play is set between the complete and unnoticed silence of Frieda and the loud, horrifying screams of the woman being raped. Why is Frieda so silent? Can

there be any visible cause behind her silence? The playwright does not provide us with any clear explanation of her silence. What we can offer as explanation should be based on the other characters' attitude towards her. While reading the play, you will find no instance where Frieda is being treated softly; she is always being ordered, with loud voices. She does not have any say on any matter in the household. Her almost mechanical service may also hint at some violence inflicted on her in the near or the distant past. Her marginalization within the household speaks of the underlying psychological and theatrical spaces that the characters inhabit on the stage. The attitude of the characters towards the screams of the woman being raped also creates distinct psychological spaces around each character. As you read the play, it will be an interesting exercise for you to construct the identities of the characters based on the psychological spaces they occupy, share and contradict.

Bhaskar informs Leela about a guest coming that night for dinner. The second scene commences with the arrival of Bhasker's friend, Mohan Ram. The arrival of Mohan further heightens the already established social apathy amongst the so-called respectable and dignified members of the middle-class. Mohan is already informed, by Bhasker, about the screaming of a woman and he shows curiosity to know about the horrible incident. But keeping up with Bhaskar, he also does not show any intention to help the victim. Rather he prefers to play voyeur: "But—why not? What harm is there in watching?" (Scene 2) He is adamant on watching the crime being committed in front of him just to show that he is a true and practical observer of life. Bhasker tells Mohan about the brutal and naked appearance of the assailants and both start discussing the shamelessness of these assailants. They take interest in discussing the true nature of the crime without their least intention to help the woman or to prevent the crime. This attitude of Bhasker and Mohan indicates a typical urban middle-class mentality which prefers to criticize society and administration yet never comes forward to take up responsibility in the public domain; the middle-class prefers to discuss rather than to perform. Leela quotes her friend, Sushila's, remark regarding man's responsibility as a social being, "If you can stop a crime, you must – or else you're helping it to happen" (Scene 2). Mohan disapproves of Sushila as an insensitive intellectual: "These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues. After all, what's the harm in simply watching something?" (Scene 2). Mohan shows his unwillingness to act

practically in favour of the victim, “Personally, I’m against becoming entangled in other people’s private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who is right and who is wrong”. (Scene 2)

**SAQ:**

Do you think that the gendered identities of the characters on the stage condition the difference in their attitude to the act of violence? (60 words)

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How do you respond to Mohan’s attack against Sushila as an “insensitive intellectual” ? Do you think that the playwright aims at some irony in these words? (60 words)

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Leela gradually turns neurotic in her behaviour and she is not at all pleased at the presence of any guest at her home. Her tranquillity is so completely shattered by the horrifying sounds that she is even afraid of listening to music because “The sound will make me tense, I can’t bear any sound any more”. (Scene 2) She takes recourse to yoga to get back her calmness but for her, the impact of the horrifying cries of the woman is too compelling to ignore. Her mental disturbance becomes so great that she has to ask her husband, “Am I going mad?” (Scene 2).

Leela’s tension increases as she listens to Bhaskar and Mohan’s discussion. They notice that nobody, not even the police, have interfered in the crime being committed. The screaming, the naked disposition of the assailants, the entire exhibitionism of the incident provokes Mohan to consider the incident as, ‘a religious ceremony’. Bhaskar agrees with Mohan and takes

the incident as a ritual. The seriousness of the subject is gradually turned into triviality as they start discussing various weird rituals across different cultures. Both agree about the possibility of it being a new cult or faith. Mohan draws reference to the constitution of India, in his attempt to justify their unwillingness to interfere with the activities, saying that no one has any right to disturb another's religious sentiments.

Scene three opens on the dining room, the dining-table being foregrounded, with Bhaskar, Leela and Mohan eating at the table. All the electric lights are switched off and the room is illuminated by candles and lights coming from outside. From outside the window, the bizarre sounds of a woman screaming for help can be heard. The sound is ragged and unpleasant with distinct words – “Let me go!”, ‘Help me!’” But as the evening progresses, the screamer gets exhausted, hiccups to a halt, and then starts again with renewed vigour. Gradually the screaming degenerates into a general screaming and sobbing. At the dining-table Leela looks hollow-eyed with tension, but it makes no difference to Bhaskar and Mohan.

### **Check Your Progress**

1. Comment on Leela's role in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. Would you regard her reaction to the events outside as being typical of city-dwellers? Or does the playwright confine her to simply voicing a desired need?
2. Analyse the focus of the play on the characters' reactions to a crime. How does the playwright succeed in expanding the guilt to its urban audience?
3. Would you apply the phrase “feminist realism” to *Lights Out*? Or would you call the play a damning critique of the ruthlessness characteristic of urbanisation? Give reasons for your answer.

Meanwhile, Naina, Leela's school-friend and her husband Surinder unexpectedly arrive at their home. They too take part in the discussion and begin to interpret the activities on account of the available proofs. Leela is so frustrated that she cannot eat anything; on the other hand her husband

and his friends are apathetic towards the cries of the woman and they engross themselves in enjoying the food and postpone the matter to be discussed later on. In spite of being competent and respectable citizens, they show their helplessness in front of Leela, saying, “There’s nothing we can do about it. We just have to ignore it.” (Scene 3) Their line of thinking turns towards finding out possibilities of this act being a case of “exorcism” where the body of a woman is possessed by some evil spirit and violence is inflicted on her to push out that spirit from her body. Thus the men show their negligence and carelessness as social beings through this far-fetched explanation of the simple act of rape. Leela and Naina stand in stark contrast to these men and they agree about the incident as being the case of rape of, may be, more than one woman. They are desirous of doing something to prevent the crime while the men present there continue to discuss the incident from different angles. Now they begin to analyze the character of the woman. They try to find out if the woman is a whore or a decent woman because they believe: “Whatever right a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore”. (Scene 3)

**SAQ:**

How does the playwright explore the scope of reading the female body as a cultural performative space? (80 words)

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Being women, Leela and Naina can easily understand the condition of the helpless woman and protest the men’s categorization of the woman as a whore. They demand that whatever she is, the victim is a woman first, and so she should be treated as a woman and provided the necessary help due to a member of civil society. They persistently plead with the men in the house that the police should be informed. When Leela’s pleas remain unheard, she gradually turns hysterical but the men present remain unmoved. They think of some impractical solutions to the problem like having a face-

to-face fight with the persons involved in the act. They don't want to inform the police because it will involve them in cumbersome official formalities which they want to avoid getting entangled with. Besides, they have their doubts about desirable and timely action on the part of the police. Rather, in their excessive enthusiasm, they want to take matter into their own hands.

Surinder, Naina's husband, appears to be a man of violent passion. He exasperatedly plans to kill all the criminal offenders: "let's go and wipe them out!" However, this compassion for the victimized woman is in vain. Though he reacts differently from Bhaskar and Mohan, he fails to instigate any decisive action. He embarks on giving vent to passionate expressions only. The men now begin to discuss the weapons they would like to use in their fight with the criminals, like knives, towels, homemade little acid bombs, steel rods, etc., killing time with merely indulging in these discussions. Ultimately the discussion comes to a state when they decide to take photographs of this scene of gang rape, which would not only give them fame but also assist them to earn money – "All right – first the pictures, then the beating up." As soon as they get ready to go out to take photographs and to beat up the culprits, the screams cease and when they try to look out of the window, nothing can be seen in the neighbouring building. Leela declares disappointedly, "Oh! Then it must be over for tonight!" This is where the action of the play ends.

The play ends with brief messages conveyed to the audience through the use of a slide projector or a voice-over as follows:

"This play is based on an eyewitness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Mumbai, 1982.

The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact.

In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalised in a neighbouring compound.

In real life, as in the play, the incident took place over a period of weeks.

And in real life, as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victim."

Here, at this ending, theatre meets reality; theatricality gets mixed up with reality. The performance leaves the audience to ponder over the resemblance of the uncanny happenings of the stage to their lives in reality.



**SAQ:**

Discuss from your reading of the play how the ending of the play blurs the distinction between theatricality and reality? (70 words)

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**3.6 CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE PLAY**

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* makes a damning critique of a demoralized and inhuman urban Indian society. As an artist, Padmanabhan avidly maintains her social commitment in the play. Though it is not mandatory, a sense of social commitment is always expected from theatre and other art forms. It is true that only social commitment, without any acute display of literary and artistic skills, cannot make a piece of literature or art outstanding. It is expected that an artist should make efforts to wed the aesthetics art to its humanistic creed because the aesthetic appeal of any art lies its human concerns. For a socially committed artist, the nature of art is not exclusive but inclusive of society. Padmanabhan's play successfully unmasks different pretensions and prejudices in the so called civilized societies of her time. She lays bare the hidden truths regarding man's existence as a civilized social being in such a manner that the audience or the reader is compelled to understand, address and respond to the demands that society makes on him.

It exposes the undercurrents of urban society and tries to uncover its deepest dilemmas where the fear of consequences generally determines our choice of conduct. In the chaotic modern cities, various types of criminal activities remain unnoticed and unchecked as people become increasingly self-centered and engrossed in themselves. They intentionally want to forget their social responsibility.

What the play constructs is a self-centered world of the city where man is no more a socially responsible being. It is a postmodern world where, with the cumulative force of science and technology and the knowledge of modern social sciences, man has learnt to pose questions over social structures like tradition, culture and values. It is the growth of individualism which posits

serious threats to man's role as a socially responsible being. To quote David Lyon, "Individualism, though it can emancipate us from given social orders, proceeds to confine us to 'the solitude of our own hearts' and removes the heroic dimensions of life, the purpose worth dying for." (Lyon 40) Individualism restricts man to his self-made cocoon; he does not want to come out of it. Incidents taking place around him do not bother him if they are not directly related to his personal life. As such, social apathy has become a common characteristic of urban life. Even if some people do think of society at large, they do not want to interfere with the activities taking place around them. In the rush of modern urban existence, man's life has become artificial having no place for natural sympathies.

In this story, it is because of the unwillingness to get involved in the formalities with police that Bhasker and Mohan do not want to inform the police about the matter. Manjula Padmanabhan's purpose in the play is mainly to expose this social apathy, especially amongst the members of middle-class urban societies. Such societies fail to realise and perform their duties as social beings and blame others for not fulfilling their duties well. The play appears to be in the nature of a discussion play where through the prolonged discussion and inaction of the characters, the playwright succeeds in creating a feeling of irritation amongst the audience. They are made to think about the surprising inactivity of these characters who have the potential to do something for the woman. At the same time, this inaction and self-centeredness can also be reflective of their own behaviour as city-dwellers. The audience is instantly compelled to ruminate over the gradually increasing social apathy within itself.

The concept of the 'outside' is one of the important features of modern urban experience. Man's self-imposed social effacement leads him to construct various and often confusingly overlapping invisible boundaries that remove him from others. It is interesting to note that the outsiders are, in a peculiar sense of anonymity, connected to those who construct them thus. In the Indian metropolis, the slum dwellers, who constitute a massive part of the urban population, are always deemed to be 'outsiders'. This can also be the case of other economically, politically or sexually marginalized groups in the modern cities, who are denied any civic attention and deemed as second-class citizens. The play raises questions over the lack of civic attention that deserves to be paid to marginalized groups like prostitutes. In the play, Bhaskar and Mohan seem to be fascinated and morbidly curious

about the violence being done to the woman. They hold that the women who are molested night after night in front of them may be some prostitutes who voluntarily subject themselves to physical violation. They clearly believe that “a whore is not decent, so a whore cannot be raped”. And hence, there is no point in rescuing the woman from the assailants. Here the playwright raises a series of questions – is a prostitute not a woman? Can a prostitute not demand attention from society as other women can? Can a whore not seek justice against sexual and physical violation? Leela’s disturbed state of mind on hearing the screams of the woman indicates that she has gradually started to identify herself with the victimised woman. Being a woman, Leela sympathises with the victim, regardless of her social identity, and wishes to do something for her. But, on the other hand, Bhaskar and Mohan remain unable to understand her plight and consider her merely “over-sensitive”. Here Padmanabhan not merely exposes the construction of boundaries in society but also problematises the process.

**The possibility of spreading civic education through theatre:**

Theatre is always held out as one of the most powerful media of social communication. Different socio-political issues like communal violence and conflicts arising out of caste, religious, economic, cultural and gender differences have found various critical responses and representation in post-Independence Indian theatre. There is tremendous scope for spreading civic education in India through theatre. Though the rural/urban dichotomy still remains an influencing factor in the education system in India, rapid urbanization, large-scale migration to the big cities, easy access to the urban experiences through electronic media has made education in the cities an important concern of the State as well as socially responsible citizens. It is important to note here that the cities have become important sites for different forms of violence in India over the last few decades. At the same time, urban India has become a vigorous battleground for assertion of regional, religious, caste and gender self-identities. On the other hand, the tendency towards self-centeredness and the gradually increasing indifference towards society have added to the increasing crime rate in these societies. In such a situation, the construction of urban self-identities and the representation of social conditions through the theatrical media can be held as a useful tool spreading awareness and making people understand their desired role in the public domain. Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* can be taken as a successful eye-opener for urban society.

The self-centeredness of the characters extends to the process of constructing and questioning boundaries between the private and the public, the domestic and the social. There are instances where the characters are annoyed at the intrusion of the public into the private lives. Bhaskar is always conscious of maintaining and respecting others' privacy. However, this constant obsession with privacy confuses him about his social commitment: "unless they actually call for help, is it our business to go? That's the question. . . . After all, it may be something private, a domestic fight. How can we intervene? . . . Personally, I'm against becoming entangled in other people's private lives" (Scene 2). Here, the dramatist raises an important moral question - can crime be categorized as private and public? Is it acceptable to discard domestic violence as mere 'family matter'? Notice what Mohan says: "unless it is murder, I don't think anyone should come between the members of a family" (Scene 2). To what form and extent can domestic violence be left unnoticed? Mohan's comments make a crude and sarcastic portrayal of the individualism and self-centredness where even domestic violence is allowed to assume such horrendous proportions in front of the civil onlooker.

**Frieda's silence and the anonymity of individual existence:**

Frieda's character can be seen as a representative of the anonymity of individual existence in the city. Through her muteness in the play and the directorial note of 'allowing the audience to wonder what she thinks', the playwright makes an interesting use of theatrical media to construct, apprehend, and delineate the anonymity of the city. The anonymity of Frieda is brought out by her silence and her lack of a voice. She stands for the urban self's self-imposed effacement of voice, especially in situations where there is the possibility of getting victimised. It is interesting to note that her character moves between the poles of presence and absence. She is a constant presence who doesn't "speak" in this play; her presence as an individual is completely denied by the other characters. Though she is a character of the theatrical text, she remains outside the main action of the text. In a way, she can be compared with the audience of the play, who, like her, functions outside the theatrical text. Like the audience, and like the modern city-dwellers, Frieda is just a passive spectator of the incidents taking place around her. Through the character of Frieda, Padmanabhan exercises the ability of theatre to demonstrate how certain voices are silenced within the civic community.

The play portrays a group of women who, regardless of their social position, are marginalized and victimized at various levels. Their voices have been either silenced or ignored in the male-dominated world order of the play.

Frieda is a voiceless, mechanical being in the family; the sentiments of Leela and Naina are left unattended and unrealized by their husbands and no man in the house cares to help the woman being brutally raped in front of them. All these women characters are subject to violence at different physical and psychological levels. Padmanabhan here problematises the idea of violence and torture which are constantly redefined by every woman in the play. It is difficult to narrativise torture as Leela observes, “What shall we describe as torture? It is too vague a term, I’ve always felt” (Scene 2). Whereas the woman being raped is subject to both physical and mental violence, what Leela and Naina have to undergo is tremendous psychological torture. It is the mental torture or the emotional violence to which the men are not attentive; rather, they add to it by their casual and irresponsible attitude.

**SAQ:**

Do you trace any attempt on the part of the playwright to make the audience identify with the socially inactive characters on the stage? (70 words)

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Do you find any distinction maintained by the playwright in her portrayal of the visible and the invisible woman characters? (70 words)

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**3.7 SUMMING UP**

From your reading of this unit, you must have developed a fair idea about the play *Lights Out* and its themes. Based on a real-life incident of a woman being brutally molested in a suburban locality, the play exposes the growing

social apathy among middle-class urban citizens in India. At the same time, the play shows how social commentary on contemporary society adds a significant dimension to theatre as an art form. The play uses a reference to a familiar reality in trying to make the audience aware of their roles as social beings and critique themselves for being deaf to the demands of their social lives. Besides the play explores how, under the mask of a shallow civility, differently gendered people and even communities which are politically, culturally, and economically minor groups, are constantly marginalized in the modern India.

As you have finished reading this unit, it would be advisable for you to continue your explorations with more detailed readings of the related issues discussed here. You can treat this unit as a point of entry to your study of *Lights Out* and continue your studies from here.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Discuss how Padmanabhan deals with the issue of performativity of violence in the play *Lights Out*.
2. Discuss how Padmanabhan highlights the issue of growing social empathy in urban India. How does the ending of the play enhance the theme?

**3.8 REFERENCE AND SUGGESTED READINGS**

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## **Block II**

### **Indian Prose**

#### **Block Introduction**

This block consists of six units focusing on Raja Rammohun Roy, Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, and Nirad C. Chaudhuri. The assortment consists of prose used for a letter of appeal (Roy), essays (Aurobindo Ghosh and Tagore), oratory (Gandhi), and autobiographical writing (Nehru and Chaudhuri). Each of these articles shows the mastery of language in the use of English to present or argue an issue of public concern. We can see this even in the cases of Nehru and N.C. Chaudhuri. The excerpts prescribed for your study are small pieces of personal chronicles but what they have to say belongs to the public domain. Nehru writes of his own experiences of the national struggle but that does not confine him to an enclosed, private world of informal colloquialism. His personal experiences, he clearly knew, would be of great value to the Indian public. So he is not only unafraid in his expression but also lucid and clear. The same should be said of Nirad C. Chaudhuri. Both these writers present their intensely personal accounts in language that is marvellously handled for its expressive potential.

It seems almost astonishing that figures like Aurobindo Ghosh, Rammohun Roy, Tagore and Gandhi did not live in the absolutely English-dominated world that we live in today. What they had to say was both difficult for their times and yet compellingly true. Rammohun Roy put the Indian cause in forceful words that helped the British administration to take action. The circumstances were such that Western education could only be a tool for subverting the British Raj. Roy shows acute political perspicacity in his appeal to Lord Amherst. We have to remember that his engagement with a public discourse had already prepared him for this role but what issues forth is a piece of writing that displays a strong Indian cosmopolitanism striding ahead with its grasp of the Western method of argumentation. Much of this would apply to the other figures forwarded for your study. In Tagore the vision is wide, and civilizational. He sees the world in terms of its archaeological expanse. This does not dilute his presentation but sets out the terms in transparent detail. He provides us with a standpoint on human history that shows where the choices, often wrong, were made. He brings to the word, “internationalism”, a historical dimension which draws us out

of a mechanical acceptance of concepts that we use mistakenly to denote what they need not. So we frequently uphold nationalism to ascribe to our limited ideas an undeserved value but as Tagore works over the thought it appears to consist of matter that must be regarded afresh.

Aurobindo Ghosh presents his idea of the system of national education with unadorned finesse. When we read the essay we are taken masterfully and yet smoothly over a scheme of ideas of education that is not gross or roughshod. Each step is logically laid out and understandable even where it is subtle. We are left to infer that here English can freely be used to transmit an idea alien to its cultural origins without any loss. While referring to the presence of logical thinking in public discourse we can turn to Gandhi's speeches. You will find that Gandhi moved from one argument to the next in precise language which is free of ambiguity. You would not be wrong in thinking that he was more of a lawyer who is keen to contest the prosecution! Given our familiarity with political figures who unscrupulously twist facts and ideas to their advantage, Gandhi's speeches seem more of a political philosopher's who greatly desires freedom for his country.

Much value lies in reading these passages and extracts. They are sites of anti-colonial struggle in the sense that the colonizer's language is used against him or her. They show how the Indian public discourse took its shape: not with mere passionate resentment but with the organic skill emerging from an intimate struggle with an alien culture finally forged into a powerful weapon of counter-argument.

As you read these prescribed texts you could try a little exercise: can you fruitfully substitute the words used by the author? The answer perhaps is, no. That alone will bring home to you the strength of the linguistic proficiency and clarity of thought.

This block contains the following units:

Unit 1: Raja Rammohan Roy: Letter to Lord Amherst, 11 Dec., 1823

Unit 2: Aurobindo Ghosh: "A System of National Education" Objectives

Unit 3: Rabindranath Tagore: "Nationalism in India"

Unit 4: MK Gandhi: Speeches

Unit 5: Nehru's *Autobiography*

Unit 6: Nirad C. Chaudhuri: *A Passage to England*



## Unit 1

### Raja Rammohan Roy: Letter to Lord Amherst, 11 Dec., 1823

#### Contents:

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Raja Rammohan Roy and Indian Education
- 1.4 The Text in its Context
- 1.5 Indian Prose – A Brief Survey
- 1.6 Summing up
- 1.7 References & Suggested Reading

#### 1.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit is designed to help you to

- *summarise* the contributions of Raja Rammohan Roy
- *explain* the motivations behind his famous appeal to Lord Amherst
- *place* in its context the appeal, and
- *narrate* the history of Rammohan Roy's role in the struggle against colonial policies.

#### 1.2 INTRODUCTION

For the literary student the perspective upon the freedom struggle for national independence must relate to the literary history that formed part of it. As you will read below, the intellectual engagement with the fact of colonialism is a part of this literary history. Below, we try to capture this linguistic and intellectual movement through the figure of Raja Rammohan Roy who found it rewarding to learn more than a half dozen languages and who persisted in achieving mastery over the coloniser's language. Ideas spread through

language as you must be aware and Rammohan Roy was keenly conscious of this.

The Great Uprising or the “First War of Independence” of 1857 stands out as a chronological marker in the history of Indian nationalism. Yet we need to remember that it had been preceded by revolts earlier—the Bareilly Revolt of 1816, the revolts in Chhota Nagpur, the uprisings on the Malabar Coast from 1849 to 1855, and the Santal tribal rebellion in 1857-1859. A possible immediate cause for the Great uprising may have been the actions of Governor-General Dalhousie who had tried to ‘modernize’ India. The nineteenth century is marked in Indian history by the growth of nationalism. The causes of this growth may be found not only in the innovations in British administrative policies but also in British policies of modernization such as the expansion of the railway network. We may recall here Raja Rammohan Roy’s work of social reform especially in the practice of ‘sati’ which resulted in its being outlawed by Lord Bentinck in 1829. Lord Bentinck and Thomas Babington Macaulay, member of the Governor-General’s Council for law, introduced reforms especially in the field of education. In other words, with administrators like Bentinck and Dalhousie, India was thrust under a wave of changes aimed at Westernization. Unity among Indians too was made possible by the railways which, for the British, served as a means of easy transportation of troops and goods between military cantonments and so on. This process of modernization which made for better communication and the British policies which hastened to secularize in the educational and legal systems and the civil services and the armed forces also helped Indian nationalist leaders to strengthen their networks and contacts.

**SAQ:**

Attempt a brief analysis of the role of ‘modernization’ in the colonial situation. (80 words)

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British policies, however, could not be free of the elements of racism and anti-Indian discrimination. Inevitably these would foment anti-colonial feelings of resentment against the colonial rulers. There were unjust restrictions on Indians gaining entry into the Indian civil Service just as there was the Vernacular Press Act which tried to suppress anti-British criticism in the vernacular newspapers. Perhaps what gave to Indian nationalism its strongest thrust was the knowledge of the West received through education. This was especially so in the case of the Brahmo Samaj, established by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1828. Its leaders viewed many traditional Hindu practices as evil in the light of the knowledge now in their hands. Similarly, too, reforms were sought by the members of the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. The Christian missionary challenge in the British Raj thus sparked off Indian responses at different levels and in different ways. Rammohan Roy's book *Precepts of Jesus*, subtitled "Being a Vindication of the Hindoo Religion against the Attacks of Christian Missionaries" caused an uproar among the missionaries. He thus became involved in a theological debate with the scholar Joshua Marshman. Roy published in his defence *Three Appeals to the Christian Public* filled with Greek and Hebrew citations. Roy's efforts were directed towards the reform of the Hindu religion. Much later, Rabindranath Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, strengthened the Brahmo Samaj. After him, Keshab Chunder Sen led the Samaj.

The Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra, on the other hand, did not seek to leave behind the Hindu fold. Its aim was the adoption of the 'bhakti' approach in the tradition of the Maratha saints and the taking up of social reforms to help the disadvantaged. The work of the Samaj was led by Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade who was already known for his social reform organisations. In Bombay, Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. Yet another reform movement was the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission, by Narendranath Datta (1863-1902) who later took the name of Swami Vivekananda, in the name of Ramakrishna (1836-1886) a saintly priest. This movement was oriented towards devotion to God without the garb of external rituals, as in the manner of the 'Bhakti marg'. Around the same time as the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, directed towards the rejection of Western civilization's ideals and based on syncretism, was founded in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky

and Col. H.S.Olcott in New York. This movement turned to Indian thought and culture for inspiration. In 1889 Annie Besant joined the Society and went on to found a school in Benares which later became the Benares Hindu University.

The greatest fillip came to Indian nationalism in the form of the Indian National Congress established in 1885 by a British bureaucrat, Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912). He was helped initially by another Britisher, William Wedderburn. The Congress was led in its early decades by moderates who appeared to be more loyal to the British than otherwise. Dadabhai Naoroji, who in 1892 became the first Indian in the British House of Commons, published nine years later his *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* which has become a classic indictment of the British Raj. Naoroji correctly made the connection between British policies in India and Indian impoverishment. The INC became militant with the partitioning of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

##### **Rammohan Roy and the Vedanta – 1816**

“The whole body of the Hindu Theology, Law and Literature, is contained in the Vedas, which are affirmed to be coeval with creation! These works are extremely voluminous, and being written in the most elevated and metaphorical style, are, as may be well supposed, in many passages seemingly confused and contradictory. Upwards of two thousand years ago, the great Vyasa, reflecting on the perpetual difficulty arising from these sources, composed with great discrimination a complete and compendious abstract of the whole, and also reconciled those texts which appeared to stand at variance. This work he termed *The Vedanta*, which, compounded of two Sanskrit words, signifies “*The Resolution of All the Vedas*”. It has continued to be most highly revered by all Hindus, and in place of the more diffuse arguments of the *Vedas*, is always referred to as equal authority. But from its being concealed within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language, and the Brahmins permitting themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind, the *Vedanta*, although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public; and the practice of few Hindus indeed bears the least accordance with its precepts!

In pursuance of my vindication, I have to the best of my abilities translated this hitherto unknown work, as well as an abridgment thereof, into Hindustani and Bengali languages, and distributed them, free of cost, among my own countrymen,

as widely as circumstances have possibly allowed. The present is an endeavour to render an abridgment of the same into English, by which I expect to prove to my European friends, that the superstitious practices which deform the Hindu religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!" -"The Vedanta", 1816

"I ...confine my attention at present to the task of laying before my fellow-creatures the words of Christ with a translation from the English into Sanskrit, and the language of Bengal. I feel persuaded that by separating from the other matters contained in the New Testament, the moral precepts found in that book, these will be more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and minds of men of different persuasions and degrees of understanding. ... moral doctrines tending evidently to the maintenance of the peace and harmony of mankind at large, are beyond the reach of metaphysical perversion, and intelligible alike to the learned and the unlearned."

-'The Precepts of Jesus', 1820

## 1.2 RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY AND INDIAN EDUCATION

Raja Rammohan Roy was firmly rooted in Indian nationalism. He was born in 1772 in Radhanagar, in Bengal. His great-grandfather, Krishnachandra Bandyopadhyay, received the title, 'Raya Rayan' for his services to the Nawab of Bengal while Aurangzeb reigned as emperor. This title was later contracted to 'Ray'. Rammohan's parents were Ramakanta Ray and Tarini Devi. Under the influence of his father, Rammohan received education in Arabic and Persian. M.K.Naik compares him in stature with the humanists of the European Renaissance: "A pioneer in religious, educational, social and political reform, he was a man cast in the mould of the Humanists of the European Renaissance."

In the early nineteenth century in India, already there had grown among the people the feeling that European learning was essential partly because this was a requirement for getting a job in the British-run administration. Moreover, with the rise of the Evangelical movement in Britain, Mission schools came to be established in southern India, Bombay and Bengal. The mission underlying these schools was to break the hold of Hindu beliefs on the natives. The spread of Western culture by these means would lend stability to the Empire and assimilate the conquered people to the conquerors. Among the Orientalists like H.H.Wilson this was to raise a

controversy. But by the 1820s the insistence on the need to reform Indian education was being clearly voiced. The Governors of the Presidencies – Bombay, Bengal, and Madras – were also inclined towards the sponsorship of English education. Many Indians were most enthusiastic in their advocacy of European learning. As M.K.Naik tells us, “The cause of English education found its ablest champion in Raja Rammohun Roy.” In 1822 Rammohan Roy founded his Anglo-Hindu School imparting a Western curriculum in the medium of English. In 1824 he openly protested against the colonial government’s decision to make Sanskrit the medium of instruction in public schools. Rammohan Roy based his protest on the argument that Sanskrit had always been confined to the elite in society and had never been in use among the masses. Moreover, Sanskrit could not be counted among the languages of the modern international world. In 1826, however, he established a Vedanta College for the teaching of the Vedanta in Sanskrit.

**SAQ:**

How would you compare the status of English as a modern language today with the situation in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India? (75 words)

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Roy’s literary or intellectual activism did not stop here. He helped to establish the Hindu College, came to be known as an exponent of the Vedanta school by the publication of Bengali-language subcommentaries on Shankaracharya’s commentaries on the Upanishads. In 1823, through his various publications – *Sambad Kaumudi* (Bengali), *Mir’at’l-Akhbar* (in Persian), *Bengal Herald* (in English) in this case — he helped to shape the public protest over the censorship of the press by the Governor-General. Rammohan Roy had already been a controversial figure due to his religious polemics in which he had attacked Brahminism and rejected the Doctrine

of the Trinity. Such polemics had even led to his being recognised internationally among the British, the French and the Americans.

Rammohan Roy used *Sambad Kaumudi* to conduct his controversial campaign against *sati*. He argued, in his *Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindu Law of Inheritance*, that the practice went against ancient Hindu law. Partly owing to such an outcry against *sati*, Governor-General Bentinck outlawed *sati* in 1829. He also founded the Brahma Samaj shortly before his departure for England in 1829 as the special envoy of the Mughal Emperor who had bestowed upon him the title of 'Raja'.

**Stop to Consider:**

**The Hindu College & Policy behind education :**

Perhaps two different kinds of motives may be discerned behind the British administration's thoughts on education in India. This took the form of the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy: reasons for treading either the anglicist path or the orientalist one had their own merit. To teach the Indian natives the English language would be to reinforce and consolidate British domination in the sub-continent. But an Orientalist argument reminded the British that it would help the colonisers to gain knowledge of the country which would be of great help to the colonial administration. This was the thrust behind even the setting up of a Muslim madrassa in Calcutta in 1781 as well as the Sanskrit College in Banaras in 1791 during an Orientalist phase.

Though the concept of the Hindu College sprang from an Orientalist argument – it later became the Presidency College – it was set up in 1817 and Rammohan Ray would have been on its committee but for the fact that his views on Hinduism, as his close association with the Muslims, were both objectionable to the group of elite, orthodox Hindus who sponsored the institution. In fact, the “founders were reluctant even to accept a donation from Rammohan Roy, because they felt ‘he has chosen to separate himself from us and to attack our religion’.” In the Hindu College, the founders sought to bring in Western thought and its science and language into the curriculum although they also kept the local culture free of alien influences. To this extent it was clear that the local Hindu elite was clearly separated from the coloniser.

Rammohan Roy's English writings may be viewed as having matured through the three phases that it underwent in terms of style, vocabulary and grammar . Bruce Carlisle Robertson tells us that Rammohan Roy's "focus changed from petition to polemic and finally exclusively to public instruction. English was for him not only the language of command but also that of documentation, of histories, of narrative, of theological disputation, and personal reflection." The essay of 1817, "A Defence of Hindu Theism" can be considered to be "the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English literature."(M.K.Naik) Translations made up his earliest writings on religion.

The second stage of Rammohan's writings is characterised by the many controversies that he was involved in. This period covered the years 1816 to 1823. The famous *Letter to Lord Amherst on Western Education* was written in the same period.

The third stage of Rammohan's writings most clearly reflects his deep concern with public instruction. To this period belongs *A Letter to Rev. Henry Ware on the Prospects of Christianity in India* (1824), *Universal Religion: Religious Instruction Founded on Sacred Authorities* (1829), *Exposition of the Practical Operation of the Judicial and Revenue Systems of India* (1832), *Answers of Rammohun Roy to the Queries on the Salt Monopoly* (1832), *Settlement of India by Europeans* (1832), and also his famous autobiographical letter published in the *Athenaeum* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1832.

**SAQ:**

Attempt to show that both scholarly pursuit and nationalist feelings were important to Rammohan Roy's work. (90 words)

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#### 1.4 THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT

Raja Rammohan begins by presenting himself as the spokesman of a current of opinion prevailing in society. The stance adopted by him is of humility and modesty reflecting the feudal distance that the British government maintained from its native subjects. The writer accurately touches upon the cultural distance that separates the coloniser from the colonised and how this limits the breadth of information essential to governance. This was in no small way a statement of the truth because there was no proper mechanism by which the colonial ruler could learn of popular opinion among its subjects. Rammohan Roy adroitly pinpoints the ever-present pain of the coloniser who must always guard his weakness in being dependent on the native subject for knowledge about the environment and the society it sustains. This preamble to the main subject of the letter thus chalks out the larger context within which the issue has cropped up.

##### **Check Your Progress:**

1. Write briefly on Raja Rammohan Roy's contributions as a social reformer.
2. Raja Rammohan Roy has been regarded as helping to usher India into the modern age. Give reasons for this view.
3. To what extent would you agree with the idea that Rammohan Roy's nationalism was not aggressive, merely reformist? Give reasons for your answer.

Over the next three paragraphs Rammohan Roy alludes to the educational policy of the British government. The history of education in India under British rule was directed by the Charter Act passed in 1813. This paternalistic approach of the government was a contrast to the one pursued in England where no such official policy prevailed with regard to public instruction. Rammohan Roy's appeal proceeds with the Orientalist-Anglicist debate in the background.

He begins by praising the evident paternalism of the British administration in setting up a Sanskrit school but goes on to express disappointment that this

would not help to transmit the “Arts and Sciences of modern Europe”. He proceeds with the Anglicist argument that European learning should be promoted. (We should not equate this feeling with our own contemporary globalised world in which we face a host of other factors like the internet and communications technology which have posed problems of language, culture and identity.) Rammohan Roy belonged to a period of Indian history when the country was ruled by a foreign power thus confronting the natives with issues of economic exploitation, social and political organisation, and cultural turbulence.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **British administration and the role of education**

However, in India, the situation being shaped by the fact of imperialism, colonial considerations came to be uppermost. The British desired to impress upon its colony that good governance justified its colonial domination. For good governance it was essential that British administrators gain knowledge of the local religion and customs, Indian culture in other words. Thus came about an “Orientalism” sponsored more specifically by the governor-general of 1774 – 1785, Lord Warren Hastings. The “Anglicist” phase of British colonial administration came with the succeeding governor-general, Lord Cornwallis (1786 -1793). Yet another ‘Orientalist’ phase came with Lord Wellesley (1798 – 1805). In all three phases the motivation behind the rulers’ policy was consolidation of colonial administration in diverse political situations. As Gauri Viswanathan points out, Hastings’ policy strove to “train British administrators and civil servants to fit into the culture of the ruled and to assimilate them thoroughly into the native way of life.” As is further pointed out by Viswanathan, administrative concerns rather than scholarly ones lay uppermost behind Orientalism. Hastings’ successor, Lord Cornwallis, advocated Anglicism due to the various scandals involving his government and his resulting belief that only knowledge of European morals and principles of government would help to root out such corruption.

The basic contentions behind the Orientalist – Anglicist controversy had to do with the monetary support to be given to either Oriental learning or to European knowledge. By the time Rammohan Roy appealed to Lord Amherst in 1823, Orientalism had given way to Anglicism. This meant that English studies could not be entrusted with non-English institutions such as the Sanskrit College and the Madrassa.

We should also note that “As early as 1775 Philip Francis, better known as the antagonist of Warren Hastings, had written in a letter to Lord North: “If the English language could be introduced into the transaction of business . . . it would be attended with convenience and advantage to Government and no distress or disadvantage to the natives. To qualify themselves for employment, they would be obliged to study English instead of Persian. If schools were established in the districts . . . a few years would produce a set of young men qualified for business, whose example and success would spread, and graft the institution gradually into the manners of the people.”

“We now find that the Government are establishing a Sanscrit school under Hindu Pundits . . .”. The writer is keenly aware of the cultural implications of this move on the part of the government and thus fears that the “pupils will there acquire what was known two thousand years ago, with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since produced by speculative men, such as is already commonly taught in all parts of India.” We should remember here that while such an opinion may seem to foreshadow Macaulay’s famous Minute of 1835 in setting European learning above Indian traditions of knowledge, the Orientalism of a Hastings or a Wellesley was part of larger British imperial desires to consolidate the empire. The Anglicist appeal of Rammohan Roy here however stems from his desire to inform Lord Amherst as to the state of affairs then prevailing as also from his conviction that Indians needed to acquire knowledge of the Western arts and sciences. We can also see that Rammohan Roy deeply understood the need for social reforms in the face of British colonial rule which could not be simply superimposed upon a different society without causing it great hardships of various kinds. The question of knowledge impinged upon related questions of social identities. While we can discern political enlightenment here in the writer who understood such a need, Rammohan Roy was also a participant in the discourse of his times. Bengal is of special interest because it was the earliest seat of the vernacular press as well as of the earliest printing and publishing industry in colonial India. Thus, as we can see clearly from the letter under study Rammohan Roy expresses not only the social divisions of his time but also a nascent nationalism that envisaged a specifically ‘Indian’ need for education against a specifically ‘British’ approach in keeping with the expediency of colonialism.

We can set beside our writer the description given by Gauri Viswanathan [pp. 37-41] of the period from around 1813 to 1835 during which the Oriental tradition was found to be severely wanting.

**SAQ:**

What can we infer from the criticism that Roy lays at the door of Oriental learning? Does he refer to a pedagogic, or administrative, or an intellectual, deficiency? (90 words)

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Rammohan Roy had the *maulvis* and the *pundits* in mind when he mentioned the “speculative men”. A little later he pleads for the advancement of such teachers of Sanskrit and Arabic as were already in service and not to a new generation of teachers: “for there have been always and are now numerous professors of Sanscrit in the different parts of the country engaged in teaching this language as well as the other branches of literature, which are to be the object of the new seminary. Therefore their more diligent cultivation, if desirable, would be effectually promoted by holding out premiums and granting certain allowances to those most eminent Professors, who have already undertaken on their own account to teach them and would by such rewards be stimulated to still greater exertions.”

Rammohan Roy goes into an exact detail regarding the teaching of Sanskrit grammar: how the word *khaduti* is to be interpreted and the unwonted hair-splitting that imbues such teaching of grammar making the subject difficult. A little later he questions whether the teaching of the Vedantic doctrines constitutes a proper course of study. As he observes, education has as one of its goals the making of “better members of society”. The

teaching of the *Meemangsa* too is seen to be lost in worthless speculation. By giving us these examples Rammohan Roy gives to his appeal a solid basis. What is not clear is that the 'eminent Professors' who are already in service and carrying on with such dismal teaching are likely to improve upon receiving more rewards. Their pedagogies, or teaching methods, emerge from a social prejudice as Rammohan Roy fully realizes. Education is evidently part of a larger social mechanism which is instrumental in the forward march of society. It cannot be seen in isolation from the totality of social needs and even as the immediate need of the hour is a system of education this has much larger implications for colonial relations in Rammohan Roy's times.

From Pandit Sivanath Sastri we learn of the abysmal state of the Indian system of education in which, as Prof. Mohan Ramanan summarizes, the *gurumashais* in the *pathshalas* were far from being enlightened men. Rather, they were men who had taken to teaching for lack of other employment and meted out barbaric corporal punishment to their pupils quite out of proportion to the offence committed. As Prof. Ramanan reminds us: "It is conditions like these which probably compelled the urgent pleas of the Bengali *Bhadralok* for a proper educational system for their children. The pleas of the gentlemen of Bengal were heard by Christian missionaries at first, not the Government. Missionaries like Carey, Marshman and Ward started English schools as a response to public demand. But people like Carey were proficient in Bengali as well. . . . . Both Bengali and English teaching was done and the English schools established by Eurasians like Sherbourne, Martin Bowles and Arathoon Petras were thought of. Some very distinguished Indians like Dwarka Nath Tagore, Mati Lal Seal, Nitya Sen and Adaitya Sen studied in these schools. But the Government still hesitated to take concrete steps for fear of incurring public disfavour because English and modern studies meant criticism, even rejection, of orthodoxy. Finally, Lord Minto in 1811 recommended colleges at Nadia and Bhowi in the district of Tirhoot in addition to the one in Benares." Following upon the debates between the Orientalists and the Anglicists, "Initial funds went to the study of Arabic and Sanskrit but slowly the Calcutta elite began to press for English education. The immediate result of this was the establishment of Hindu College under the joint efforts of David Hare, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Baidyanath Mukerjee, and the Chief Justice Sir Hyde East. Public opinion favoured the idea and a committee comprising ten Englishmen and twenty Hindus set up the College on 20 January 1817. . . . The Serampur College was founded by the Baptist Missionaries in 1815

and they with help from Roy and Dwarka Nath Tagore opened other schools elsewhere in Bengal. In the midst of all this activity Government was still inactive about English, preferring only the revival of classical learning. The Calcutta Sanskrit College was accordingly founded.” Roy reacted to this step with his famous appeal.

The examples given by Roy above as well as what he says about the advancement of knowledge in England with the contributions of Lord Bacon show us the extent of Rammohan Roy’s knowledge of the two cultures. Behind such cultural awareness lay Rammohan Roy’s erudition as a scholar. Let us recall that he knew and studied “about half a dozen oriental languages and an equal number of occidental languages”. He “wrote extensively in Bengali, Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit and English”. His appeal gains its power from the example of Baconian philosophy that he marshals. Before the advent of Bacon’s ideas of the reformulation of the foundations of knowledge in which he revised the older system of learning in England and Europe, putting empirical observation before intellectual tradition, medieval scholars had emphasised faith and belief in revelation. Roy is thus pointing to a stagnant phase in Indian education. In a deft turn of argument Roy probes the British government’s policies that it professed for Indians: “In the same manner the Sanscrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness if such had been the policy of the British Legislature.” Nonetheless he eloquently avers that the British government aimed at “the improvement of the native population” and that he spoke on behalf of his countrymen.

It was in response to such an argument that Lord Amherst undertook to build the Hindu College contiguous with the Sanskrit College. Foundations for both the buildings were laid on 25 February 1824.

**Check your Progress:**

1. Would you agree with the view that Rammohan Roy sought a better relationship with the colonial rulers through a process of educational reform, rather than an adjournment of the colonial equation? Give textual support for your views.
2. Discuss Raja Rammohan Roy’s analysis of the prevailing system of Indian education in the light of what he says of the teaching of Sanskrit grammar.

## 1.5 INDIAN PROSE – A BRIEF SURVEY

Indians had turned to the English language to write about their concerns at least two decades before Macaulay's 'Minute' of 1835. According to M.K. Naik, there was a significant amount of prose written during the mid and later nineteenth century in the metropolises of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras mostly on topics of public concern, sometimes as journalistic writing and pamphleteering, such as political, religious, historical and political subjects. Written around 1803, Cavally Venkata Boriah's 'Account of the Jains' is considered to be "perhaps the first published composition in English of some length by an Indian." Although it is not an original composition "it remains of historical importance as probably the first considerable attempt by an Indian to write in English."

The Indian renaissance is regarded to have begun with the works of Raja Rammohan Roy. In Tagore's words he may be called "the inaugurator of the modern age in India." In Bengal articles were written by Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-85) and Ram Gopal Ghose (1815-68). Ghose was a gifted orator earning him unstinted praise from the British for his speeches on the Charter Act and the Queen's Proclamation. Other writers who gave of their literary vigour include Rajendra Lal Mitra, Harish Chunder Mukerji, Girish Chunder Ghosh and Raja Ram.

The renascence of the Bombay presidency involves the names of such figures as Bal Shastri Jambhekar who was perhaps "the first Sanskrit pundit of note to study English" and who taught men like Dadabhai Naoraji. He is remembered most of all as the founder of the bilingual (English and Marathi) journal, *The Durpan* (1832), whose Prospectus declared its aim as being "to encourage among their countrymen the pursuit of English literature and to open a field for free and public discussion". Dadoba Pandurang (Tarkhadkar) was Jambhekar's contemporary, a scholar, and social reformer who made a comparative study of religious thought in 'A Hindu Gentleman's Reflections respecting the works of Emanuel Swedenborg' (1878). The first sheriff of Bombay, Bhau Daji also wrote on issues in the public discourse, in other words, social and political problems. In 1847 was brought out his 'Essay on Infanticide'.

With regard to the Madras presidency, besides Boriah's 'Account of the Jains', was the report on 'State of Education in 1820' by Vannelakanti

Soobrow. From this significant piece of writing dated 22 November, 1820, we learn of many things related to this issue such as that *The Arabian Nights* was prescribed as a text for study in the schools and that English grammar was not known to many native school-teachers. A newspaper, *The Crescent*, avowing its support to the cause of “the amelioration of the condition of the Hindoos”, was begun by Gazulu Lakshmi Narsu Chetty in 1844. The first literary biography in Indian English literature came to be written in Madras by Cavelly Venkata Ramaswami entitled *Biographical Sketches of the Dekkan Poets* (1829). Ramaswami was the elder brother of C.V.Boriah and in his work gives the lives of more than a hundred ancient and modern Indian poets of Telugu, Tamil, Sanskrit and Marathi.

According to M.K.Naik, apart from the three presidencies of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras there was no writing of note in Indian English in northern India. Beside this, however, we have to set down the fact that Lutufullah, the son of a Muslim priest who served in Baroda and Gwalior and then tutored British officers in Persian, Arabic and Hindustani, wrote “the first extensive Indian English autobiography, *Autobiography of Lutufullah: A Mohamedan Gentleman and His Transactions with his fellow creatures: Interspersed with remarks on the habits, customs and character of the people with whom he had to deal* (1857). As Naik informs us, “Part travel diary and part autobiography, Lutufullah’s book is the expression of man who was well read . . .”

**Stop to Consider:**

**Rammohan Roy on ‘India – Its Boundary and History’**

“With regards to the circumstances under which a body of respectable English merchants (commonly known by the name of the Honourable East India Company) first obtained their Charter of Privileges in 1600, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, to carry on trade with the East Indies; and with respect to the particulars of their success in procuring from the Emperor of Hindustan (Jahangir), and from several of his successors permission to establish commercial factories, as well as the enjoyment of protection, and various privileges in the country; with relation further to their conquests, which commencing about the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century have extended over the greater part of India—conquests principally owing to the dissensions pusillanimous conduct of the native princes and chiefs, as well as to



the ignorance existing in the East, of the modern improvements in the art of war, combined with the powerful assistance afforded to the Company by the naval and military forces of the crown of England—I refer the reader to the modern histories of India, such particulars and details being quite foreign to the object which I have for the present in view.

The government of England, in the meantime, received frequent intimations of the questionable character of the means by which their acquisitions had been obtained and conquests achieved, and of the abuse of power committed by the Company's servants, who were sent out to India from time to time to rule the territory thus acquired; and the impression in consequence was that the immense, or rather incalculable, distance between India and England, impeding intercourse between the natives of the two countries, and the absence of efficient local check on the exercise of power by the Company's executive officers, as well as the hope of support from their influential employers in England, might lead many of them to neglect or violate their duties and bring reproach on the national character."

The rise of a public discourse involving the use of English as a medium of expression should be noted in our brief survey. As Joshua Marshman wrote in his *Bharatvarsher Itihas* (1831), the Battle of Plassey (1757) (and the battle of Buxar in 1764) were to affect "the destinies of sixty million people in a vast kingdom". A.K.Mehrotra mentions the name of Dean Mahomed (1759 – 1851) as one of those affected who went on to write *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) based on his many years of service in the East India Company's Bengal Army with which he travelled much. "His book, in the form of a series of letters to a fictive friend, is in large measure based on his experiences in the colonial army." Dean Mahomed later emigrated to Ireland in 1784 and settled there. There are links between "English and Indian nationalism and there is no doubt that the process of modernization, the process of forming ourselves into a nation, was facilitated by English. In the prose of our nineteenth century we see the dramatisation of these elements of our culture. . . in nineteenth century Indian prose in English we see both mastery of that language and a creative tension in discursive expressiveness, because even then the *Bhasha*, in most cases Bengali, was an ever-present challenge to English." This explains how the public discourse was essential to the rise and reinforcement of Indian nationalistic feelings.

## **Stop to Consider:**

### **Aspiring Indians**

A.K. Mehrotra tells us: “One consequence of the changes taking place in Indian society under colonialism was that Indians had mastered the coloniser’s language (as the colonisers had mastered theirs) and, going one step further, had by the 1820s begun to adopt it as their chosen medium of expression. These pioneering works of poetry, fiction, drama, travel, and belles-lettres are little read today except by specialists, but when they were published they were, by the mere fact of being in English, audacious acts of mimicry and self-assertion. More than this, the themes they touched on and the kinds of social issues they engaged with would only be explored by other Indian literatures several decades later.”

Taking the examples of both Krishna Mohan Banerjea, who wrote *The Persecuted* (1831) on the subject of Hindu orthodoxies and who later converted to Christianity, and Kylas Chunder Dutt who wrote ‘A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year’ (1835), Mehrotra points to the beginnings of Indian English prose in all of such works. Dutt comes in for special mention by Mehrotra due to the fact that the latter’s ‘Journal’ narrates a middle-class insurrection against the colonisers set on a date just short of actual Indian independence. It was published in the same year as Macaulay’s ‘Minute’ was delivered. Mehrotra comments, “A fable like ‘A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours’, where the ‘language of command’ is stood on its head and turned into the language of subversion, suggests itself as the imaginative beginnings of a nation.”

Yet another consequence of colonialism was the transformation it helped to bring about in the literatures of Indian languages. Prose was still a medium relatively unknown to the Indians. Mehrotra quotes from Sisir Kumar Das: “A majority of the writers associated with the journals either knew English or were exposed to the English language, and this conditioned their world-view and literary style to a great extent. Most of them . . . Did not write with literary pretensions: but all of them, consciously or unconsciously, took part in the great experiment which brought about a real breakthrough in Indian literature. An awareness of social problems, a rational view as opposed to a theocentric universe, a spirit of enquiry, a desire to examine one’s past heritage – all these appeared in prose rather than in poetry. Here is the historic importance of prose in Indian literature”.

## 1.6 SUMMING UP

By now you have surely gained a good perspective on Raja Rammohan Roy's appeal to Lord Amherst. This remains a great document for historians and literary scholars to learn at first hand the circumstances in which Indians lived in the early nineteenth century. As you read the appeal you can feel its great commanding power in language that is both modern and unfettered by irrelevant adornment. We have tried to show you just how much lies behind the appeal—the anglicist-orientalist debates, the problem of education, the colonial situation, Rammohan Roy's erudition, and his sheer felicity of expression. You have also seen just how a new public discourse was coming to life with the help of the medium of English. In terms of a literary history, Rammohan Roy helped to set a standard in the use of the coloniser's language. We can see this in the way that he is able to present the case for Western education. This is not an appeal to the ruler for a favour but for a cause that would help both the ruler and the ruled. Sanskrit was being taught in the *pathshalas* not just as an elite language but as a means of oppression. Roy was right in establishing the point that Western education was thought by many Indians to be a need, a necessity, not just an added social grace. We can also grasp that Indians were not subjugated to the extent of being a speechless nation but one with the right to expressing its innermost thoughts through its leaders like Rammohan Roy. To a most complex issue like education, therefore, Rammohan Roy brings clarity, erudition and mastery over the language of public debate.

## 1.7 REFERENCES & SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Unit 2

### Aurobindo Ghosh : “A System of National Education” Objectives

#### Contents:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Sri Aurobindo Ghosh
- 2.4 The Text in its Context
- 2.5 The Indian Public Discourse – A Brief Survey
- 2.6 Summing up
- 2.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 OBJECTIVES

As you work through this unit you will encounter many ideas that sound radical even today. This is because Aurobindo Ghosh was a remarkable thinker. By the end of the unit you will be able to

- *obtain* a sound perspective on this thinker’s ideas
- *narrate* his contributions to Indian nationalism
- *explain* his nationalistic concerns, and
- *relate* his concerns to his total philosophy.

#### 2.2 INTRODUCTION

For Aurobindo Ghosh self-development was intimately linked to national development. The question of knowledge and education was of crucial importance to the educated Indian in the nineteenth century. That should not come as a surprise to us because with access to Western learning, and being rooted in native Indian traditions, the erudite, learned Indian well understood just how the Indian nation could move forward. From the many debates and discussions among such learned Indians and other British scholars we can see just how the question of learning animated the people.

Let us also appreciate the fact that knowledge and learning form important links to a nationalistic spirit.

As we see below, Sri Aurobindo clearly understood the need to reform the Indian system of education, even while he wanted such a national system not to take on the deficiencies of the European ones. The essay you will read here is clear in its logic and its conception of the human psyche. Sri Aurobindo does not extol one system above the other but applies the concepts as and when required. From his point of view, a system of education does not merely mean the transmission of texts and committing them to memory. When we read his essay we begin to understand just how complex and subtle the process of teaching needs to be. The child is not to be taken as a mere receptacle of knowledge, with no prior understanding like a *tabula rasa*. The teacher cannot be merely a policeman standing guard over errant pupils! These conceptions, which are so endemic in our own contemporary systems, find no place in Sri Aurobindo's conception of a national system of education. A human being is a complex and multi-dimensional creature and Sri Aurobindo keeps that clearly in front of us. Education must reach down not only to passive memory but also touch the sense-faculties, the imagination, the faculty of observation, the moral nature in the child, and so on. How the teaching itself must be carried on is given clearly outlined by Sri Aurobindo.

**SAQ:**

Attempt to outline the methods of teaching and learning in modern schools today. (60 words)

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We should also note that Sri Aurobindo's conceptions are written in clear language and every statement follows almost effortlessly and logically from the preceding one. The division into sections focuses on the several aspects

of education. An interesting portion relates to the manner in which diverse subjects are taught to the learner. This contrasts most tellingly with the curriculum followed in modern schools although some educationists have realised the importance of allowing students to learn freely according to their inclinations.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Aurobindo on Nationalism:**

“..Nationalism was not born of persecution and cannot be killed by the cessation of persecution. Long before the advent of Curzonism and Fullerism, while the Congress was beslaving the present absolutist bureaucracy with fulsome praise as a good and beneficent government marred by a few serious defects, while it was singing hymns of loyalty and descanting on the blessings of British rule, Nationalism was already born and a slowly-growing force. It was not born and did not grow in the Congress Pandal, nor in the Bombay Presidency Association, nor in the councils of the wise economists and learned reformers, nor in the brains of the Mehtas and Gokhales, nor in the tongues of the Surendranaths and Lalmohuns, nor under the hat and coat of the denationalised ape of English speech and manners. It was born like Krishna in the prison-house, in the hearts of men to whom India under the good and beneficent government of absolutism seemed an intolerable dungeon, to whom the blessings of an alien despotic rule were hardly more acceptable than the plagues of Egypt, who regarded the comfort, safety and ease of the Pax Britannica – an ease and safety not earned by our own efforts and vigilance but purchased by the slow loss of every element of manhood and every field of independent activity among us, — as more fatal to the life of the people than the *poosta* of the Moguls, with whom a few seats in the Council or on the Bench and right of entry into the Civil Service and a free press and platform could not weigh against the starvation of the rack-rented millions, the drain of our life-blood, the atrophy of our energies and the disintegration of our national character and ideals; who looked beyond the temporary ease and opportunities of a few merchants, clerks and successful professional men to the lasting pauperism and degradation of a great and ancient people. And Nationalism grew as Krishna grew who ripened to strength and knowledge, not in the courts of princes and the schools of the Brahmins but in the obscure and despised homes of the poor and the ignorant.”

### 2.3 SRI AUROBINDO GHOSH

Born as Aurobindo Ghose on 15 August, in 1872, Sri Aurobindo had an anglicised education beginning with a missionary school in Darjeeling, in St. Paul's School in London, and King's College at Cambridge. Though he learnt English as a first language, he became proficient in Latin, Greek and French while at school, and went on to study Bengali and Sanskrit only when he became a probationer for the Indian Civil Services at Cambridge. His anglophile father did not allow him to learn Bengali in his early years. Even though Sri Aurobindo went on to write some verse and prose in Bengali besides Sanskrit verse, he thought of English as his 'natural' language'. As a schoolboy he wrote poetry in English emulating his older brother, Manmohan Ghose, a friend of Oscar Wilde and Laurence Binyon, and a minor writer himself.

Sri Aurobindo found employment with the Maharaja of Baroda and left England in 1893. He remained in this job for the next fourteen years. His radical criticism of Indian politics in newspapers after his return from England led to his being jailed for a year (from where he escaped to Pondicherry) and thus being silenced, for the next decade he did not write on political subjects. He gained mastery meanwhile in Bengali and Sanskrit and wrote criticism – *Bankim Chandra Chatterjee*, in 1893-94, and 'The Age of Kalidasa' in 1902. Turning to Sanskrit sources, he wrote *Urvashi*, published in 1898, and *Love and Death*, written in 1899 and published later in 1921. While in Alipore Jail, Aurobindo's mystical calling led to his experience of what he termed as 'Narayana Darshan'. In Pondicherry, which was now his permanent home, Aurobindo was joined by a Frenchwoman, Madame Mirra Richard (Mira Alfassa) but later known as the 'Mother', who took him as her 'guru'. Another spiritual experience led him, from 24 November 1926, to complete seclusion for a while. Aurobindo's spiritual quest continued till his death as did his literary work in the form of poetry, drama, religious, cultural, philosophical, and critical writings.

Aurobindo's literary contributions can be seen in the large volume of poetry, including philosophical, narrative, epic and the lyrical. In the 'romantic twilight' of the 1890s, he produced the volume of mostly minor verse, *Short Poems* (1890-1900). These poems showed influences of both romanticism in its themes and references to a classical Hellenic background springing from



Aurobindo's own classical scholarship. Also, the mystical influence of India can be seen in these poems. *The Short Poems 1895-1908* contains poems such as 'Invitation' and 'Revelation', about Aurobindo's mystic awareness. 'The Rakshasas' and 'The Meditations of Mandavya' in *Short Poems, 1902-30* and *1930-1950* are examples of symbolic verse. 'Transformation' is an example of some remarkable sonnets written by him, as also 'A Dream of Surreal Science'. Some of his best-known mystical lyrics like 'The Bird of Fire' (1933), 'Thought the Paraclete' (1934), and 'Rose of God' (1934) are contained in *Poems in New Metres*.

### **Stop to Consider:**

Brahmo culture was the context for Sri Aurobindo's career. We can see it in his father's decision to educate his children in English which explains why Sri Aurobindo was sent to England. Till 1950, Sri Aurobindo, along with the Mother, "evolved a theory of Supramental Consciousness. According to this view Man could rise to the highest levels of excellence, and while he strove upwards Divinity had a way of descending on the ripe soul and enlightening it. Sri Aurobindo's varied and brilliant writings all point to the way a native Indian mind sought connections with the West in order to evolve a theory of integral *Yoga*. For Sri Aurobindo, self-development was never a singular or isolated activity. It was intimately related to national development. Truly he can be called the patriot *Yogi* of India and his thought represents a great synthesis of tradition and modernity, of East and West." (Prof. Mohan Ramanan)

## **2.4 THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT**

Sri Aurobindo begins with laying out what he believes to be the basis of good teaching. His humanist conceptions come to the fore as he first of all reminds us that the human being is "an infinitely subtle and sensitive organism". While he admits the advances made in the West in their system of learning he also questions its soundness of approach because as he says it does not take into account the subtleties of the human mind, its psychology being unaddressed in the way a student is asked to submit to its deficiencies. Sri Aurobindo pinpoints the reason for the success of the European system of education: not because students submit to it but because they resist its weaknesses and "his habit of studying only so much as he must to avoid

punishment or to pass an immediate test, his resort to active habits and vigorous physical exercise.” This is scathing criticism that shows Sri Aurobindo to be a radical thinker. He turns to the Indian system of education to show its lack of adequate understanding of the student’s psychology which led to its “disastrous effects” on students’ overall development. The “instruments of knowledge” or the “muscles of the mind” require to be properly understood before they can be made to do the intellectual work required of them.

Sri Aurobindo goes on to expound what sounds radical even today: that the teacher must not try to impose on the student, not to instruct, but to help the student sharpen the “instruments of knowledge” so that learning becomes possible. “He does not impart knowledge to him, he shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself. He does not call forth the knowledge that is within; he only shows him where it lies and how it can be habituated to rise to the surface.” That is to say that the teacher only indicates the source of the knowledge and the student exercises his faculties to get to that knowledge. The human being, being gifted with these faculties, makes use of them regardless of age. So the teacher should not exclude even small children from the principles of good teaching.

**SAQ:**

Clarify what Sri Aurobindo meant by “He does not impart knowledge to him, he shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself.” Does the teacher here have an active or a passive role? (70 + 60 words)

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Sri Aurobindo is clear that the student cannot be *forced* into doing what amount to the abandonment of his own nature—his own nature. Forcing the child or the student to do what the teacher or the parent thinks must be achieved by the child leads to deformities of mind and character that are harmful for society at large and finally for the nation. The mind “has to be consulted in its own growth”, to follow its own *dharma*. “Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse.” Aurobindo’s deep humanism sees an element of the divine in every human being and judges perfection to result from nurturing it.

Sri Aurobindo understands the subtle ways in which our culture and our native soil works on us to create within us our native modes of understanding the world. “We must not take up the nature by the roots from the earth in which it must grow or surround the mind with images and ideas of a life which is alien to that in which it must physically move. If anything has to be brought in from outside, it must be offered, not forced on the mind. A free and natural growth is the condition of genuine development.” Educational processes being processes of acculturation by which students are introduced to newer ideas there is likely to be some sense of alienation of the student from his or her natural environment. Here Sri Aurobindo calls for extra care to ensure that it does not conflict with the natural bent of mind of the student. Otherwise there can be no genuine growth of the student’s mind. Sri Aurobindo takes up the case of those who do not conform to the forces of their surroundings—they should be left free to follow the bent of their mind. The majority should not be wrenched from their given environment since they are made by God to belong to their soil, their clime and their community. Their ability to progress towards the future depends on their being connected to the past and the present. Without these primal connections people cannot derive the best of education. In a sense then education has to be national, founded on better knowledge of the self and one’s native society. It has to inculcate knowledge of time past, present and the future.

Sri Aurobindo next takes up the mind, one of the instruments of knowledge. The ‘*antahkarana*’ is the abstract part of the mind which links the higher mind and consciousness. It has four layers and its ‘*citta*’ or long-term memory constitutes its most important part because it is a storehouse of innumerable experiences. “All experience lies within us as passive or potential memory;

active memory selects and takes what it requires from that storehouse.” Aurobindo had doubtless been trained in Hindu philosophy besides being familiar with Freudian ideas and thus places great importance on the function of memory when viewed from an educationist’s angle. He distinguishes between the experiences that lie dormant within us but come to life in various ways when touched by what he calls the ‘active’ memory which, again, is highly fallible and often relates present experience in unexpected ways with older experiences. As an ‘instrument of knowledge’ memory is the means by which education takes place. “The passive memory or *citta* needs no training, it is automatic and naturally sufficient to its task; there is not the slightest object of knowledge coming within its field which is not secured, placed and faultlessly preserved in that admirable receptacle. It is the active memory, a higher but less perfectly developed function, which is in need of improvement.”

The second layer of the mind –the mind ‘proper—receives images through the five senses and translates them into “thought-sensations”. This is the ‘*manas*’ recognised as the ‘sixth sense’ in Indian psychology. But the mind also receives images on its own and translates them into impressions. “These sensations and impressions are the material of thought, not thought itself”. The job of the educationist here is “to develop in the child the right use of the six senses; to see that they are not stunted or injured by disuse, but trained by the child himself under the teacher’s direction to that perfect accuracy and keen subtle sensitiveness of which he is capable”. Do note here that the child is simply guided by the teacher to train the senses, not controlled by the teacher.

‘*Buddhi*’ is the faculty of selection. For the educationist this is the most important part of the mind since it is this ‘intellect’ which has to be fully developed in the educative process. It is comprised of the two sets of functions divisible into the right-handed ones and the left-handed ones. The right-handed faculties have a larger role than the left-handed ones: “To the right-hand belong judgment, imagination, memory, observation; to the left-hand comparison and reasoning.” The right-handed faculties have mastery of knowledge, while the left-handed merely “touches....the body of knowledge.”

**SAQ:**

Does Sri Aurobindo’s proposed system of education reject the colonial method or does he try to incorporate some of its features? (70 words)

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Sri Aurobindo then comes to those human qualities which occur more infrequently in human character and whose occurrence confers upon the bearer the name of ‘genius’. These are “sovereign discernment, intuitive perception of truth, plenary inspiration of speech, direct vision of knowledge to an extent often amounting to revelation, making a man a prophet of truth.”

The difficulty for the educationist is to recognise it as such: “a question with which educationists have not yet grappled, what is to be done with this mighty and baffling element, the element of genius in the pupil. The mere instructor does his best to discourage and stifle genius, the more liberal teacher welcomes it.” These special faculties have been crucial to the advancement of the human race yet they are distrusted by the critical faculties because “of the admixture of error, caprice and a biased imagination which obstructs and distorts their perfect workings.”

In the next section, “The Moral Nature”, Sri Aurobindo could have been speaking directly to our age! This has been one of the most difficult aspects of education which has led to many social problems in our country. Indeed, in our own twenty-first century we have been looking for ways to impart value-based education and have not been successful in formulating a proper method by which it can be done. Yet the need for a moral education is keenly felt by many at the present time. “In the economy of man the mental nature rests upon the moral, and the education of the intellect divorced from the perfection of the moral and emotional nature is injurious to human progress.” No system of education can be regarded as complete without attention to this vital aspect of human growth. Sri Aurobindo rejects a

mechanical teaching of morals and points to the failings of the European system to remind us of the dangers of ignoring moral education. He compares the English school-master in the boarding school with the ancient 'guru' of the Indian system. The Indian guru taught by example so that the student emulated the guru with admiration. Nevertheless, he also admits that circumstances have changed and the same system cannot be recovered. However, the "benevolent policeman" of the European system can be a possible substitute in the present situation for the wise friend, guide and helper.

Moral education is best achieved by personal example without sermonising. Lessons can be taken from history and the lives of others so that the highest virtues of each caste are achieved. What is important is the opportunity that the child must be given to exercise these ideals of moral behaviour. Bad qualities should be treated like "symptoms of a curable disease". Aurobindo Ghosh lays great stress on the fact that virtue in a child be recognised as such and not treated as faults.

Sri Aurobindo turns to the matter of religious teaching and refers to the mistakes in both the European system and the system being followed in Bengal. "No religious teaching is of any value unless it is lived, and the use of various kind of *sadhana*, spiritual self-training and exercise is the only effective preparation for religious living." Religious teaching should be part of education but as a spiritual discipline and not the mere learning of religious beliefs.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. In 'A National System of Education', Aurobindo Ghosh attempts to universalise the 'yogic' method of teaching and learning. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Sri Aurobindo sees the development of society and nation as intimately linked with the development of the individual. Show how this vision is the basis for his essay, 'A National System of Education'.

In the section, 'Simultaneous and Successive Teaching' is a most interesting discussion of the methodology of teaching children to master a subject.

Much of what Sri Aurobindo has relevance to our own technology-ridden world in which children are expected to learn little snatches of diverse subjects. Aurobindo's ideas are far-sighted in pointing out just how the modern system of education itself is deficient and even disallows the mastery of knowledge. "A child, like a man, if he is interested, much prefers to get to the end of his subject rather than leave it unfinished. To lead him on step by step, interesting and absorbing him in each as it comes, until he has mastered his subject is the true art of teaching." Sri Aurobindo sees teaching to be the art of nurturing the virtues within a human being. "It is by allowing Nature to work that we get the benefit of the gifts she has bestowed on us. Humanity in its education of children has chosen to thwart and hamper her processes and, by so doing, has done much to thwart and hamper the rapidity of its onward march." It is of the greatest importance that the child's mind be first satisfied in discovering knowledge of a subject according to its desire. Once the process of learning begins the delay in learning a wider range of subjects will be made up.

The next two sections, 'The Training of the Senses' and 'Sense-Improvement by Practice' should be read together. This is an aspect of education that our own systems of modern education barely glance at. And yet it is an important part of education. Aurobindo deals with the possible imperfections in sense-impressions and their causes. The mind is itself seen, like the nerves, as a channel which conveys information: "Now the *manas* or sixth sense is in itself a channel like the nerves, a channel for communication with the *buddhi* or brain-force. Disturbance may happen either from above or from below. The information outside is first photographed on the end organ, then reproduced at the other end of the nerve system in the *citta* or passive memory. All the images of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are deposited there and the *manas* reports them to the *buddhi*. The *manas* is both a sense organ and a channel. As a sense organ it is as automatically perfect as the others, as a channel it is subject to disturbance resulting either in obstruction or distortion." Interestingly, he discusses the mechanisms by which wrong impressions prevail, and how we are often unable to shed old associations to interpret new experiences. The role of 'Yoga' becomes important in this regard and Sri Aurobindo opines with reference to purification of the nervous system and the disciplining of the emotions, that "unless we revert to our old Indian system in some of its principles, we must

be content to allow this source of disturbance to remain. A really national system of education would not allow itself to be controlled by European ideas in this all-important matter. And there is a process so simple and momentous that it can easily be made a part of our system.” There is a further reference to teaching or perfecting attention or concentration in the student. Sri Aurobindo gives importance to the child’s learning by doing—something that is well accepted in contemporary principles of teaching.

Observation, memory, judgement, and finally, Imagination—on all of these we are given a method by which the learner gets to perfect these faculties. Lastly, the training of the logical faculties is brought into the discussion.

**SAQ:**

Does Sri Aurobindo advocate a ‘modern’ system of education suited to the age? (75 words)

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**2.5 THE INDIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE – A BRIEF SURVEY**

Indian nationalism, which formed the mainstay of the Indian public discourse in the nineteenth century, was fed by the three strands of the Brahmos, the Prarthana Samajists, and the Arya Samajists. The Brahmos had their roots in Bengal but their influence spread beyond the confines of Bengal or its culture. We have only to recall how Rammohan Roy’s writings had been found appealing by the Unitarians of England and America. Vedanta had its Unitarian dimensions which gave to it a large audience. Many leaders in society sympathised with Brahmoism, as did many leaders of the Indian National Congress. Brahmoism made dissent possible not merely within the Brahmo fold itself but also in the discourse outside it as we see in the case of Swami Vivekananda who went on from Brahmoism to a wider public discourse. Swami Vivekananda helped to divest Brahmoism of its



occasional “heart-withering” rationalism. As Prof. Ramanan tells us, “Swami Vivekananda’s own mission owes not a little to the structures of thought and the organisational genius of Brahmoism, but to explain its wider and more popular appeal we must go beyond Brahmoism, the Renaissance and Western intellectual tradition to the great native tradition of *Sanatana* Hinduism”.

The Indian intelligentsia too played not a small role in the changes in Indian society that helped to spur on nationalism. The changes in education that reformers like Rammohan Roy sought were an outcome based on the great decline in educational institutions that was apparent. The context in which this public discourse of reform took place becomes clearer if we look at what Lord Minto reported to the authorities in England:

“It is a common remark that science and literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India. From every inquiry I have been enabled to make on this interesting subject, that remark appears to me but too well-founded. The number of the learned is not only diminished, but the circle of learning, even among those who still devote themselves to it, appears to be considerably constricted. The abstract sciences are abandoned, polite literature neglected, and no branch of learning cultivated but what is connected with the peculiar religious doctrines of the people. The immediate consequence of this state of things is the disuse, and even actual loss, of many books, and it is to be apprehended that, unless Government takes action in the matter, the revival of letters may shortly become hopeless, from the want of books or of persons capable of explaining them.”

The debates on Indian education thus began between the Orientalists, the Anglicists and the Vernacularists. While the Orientalists advocated the patronage of the classical languages, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, the Vernacularists held out the *bhashas* as the proper focus of study. Ultimately it was the Anglicists with Macaulay’s minute of 1835 who held the day. The outcome of such a debate subsequently led to the establishment of English education in India. The connection between English as a medium of learning and knowledge of the Western sciences is well explained in Rammohan Roy’s letter to Lord Amherst. The educated Indian elite looked to the West for inspiration and had knowledge of the Western intellectual tradition. English served as the medium by which this knowledge of the West became

accessible. English also became the language of intellectual discourse. English was also the vehicle by which Indians began to modernize and to come together as a nation.

The Western influence on Indians was mediated through the English Conservative ideas of Edmund Burke and the Utilitarianism of Mill and Bentham. The Burkeans gave to the Orientalists a fillip in translation activity and believed in not interfering with local culture. It viewed India's past as irrevocably dead, and without vitality. On the other hand, the Utilitarians took an interventionist stand and saw India as "an economic proposition, the laws and institutes of the people an obstacle." (M.Ramanan) Their aggressive Anglicism led to the establishment of schools, colleges and universities in India. They also adopted a policy of allowing the missionaries to carry out their diverse experiments in India. Thus beside these two strands of thought—Conservative and Utilitarian—it was also the movement towards reform that made up the public discourse in this period.

Thus English came to be seen as enabling modernization and the institutions set up in the nineteenth century became centres of radical thought. One such institution was the Hindu College in Calcutta. Henry Derozio's career in the college can be considered for us to understand the intellectual climate of the times. Derozio's radicalism in overthrowing orthodoxy led to his losing his job in Hindu College in 1831. He was revolutionary in his thinking and believed in rationalism. Thus he came to be perceived as a threat in all quarters: among the missionaries, among the orthodox Hindu College founders, and among the colonial rulers. He made his students read Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, and other texts beginning Homer's *Iliad*. Students, influenced by him, ridiculed orthodox Hindu customs by eating beef and pork and drinking beer. However shocking that might have been for society then, "he initiated, a discourse of progress, ...important as the enabling factor behind the rooting out of evils like Sati, Thuggee, widow-burning, child marriages and other such obnoxious practices." Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar helped to bring down the evils of orthodoxy which gave scope to modernisation. In such a climate it thus became possible to favour the emancipation of women. The discourse of gender thus found scope in the nineteenth century. Scholars have shown the close connections between nationalism and English, between Brahmoism

and nationalist discourse, and between the social and religious reform movements of the nineteenth century and the creation of India as a modern nation.

It is in this context that we have to consider the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Samaj. If these three movements played a key role in the formation of India's nationalist discourse, they culminated in the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. In its early days Congressmen claimed equal rights for Indians as British subjects. They were liberal constitutionalists who sought political advantages purely through constitutional means. Into such a category falls those who headed the organisation at the time: W.C. Bannerjee, Ferozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoraji, and Badruddin Tyabji. "In their eloquent speeches and writings we see loyalty to Britain, unease at the tyrannical tendencies of British rule, incisive analysis of various aspects of national life and a constructive desire to achieve political gains solely through constitutional means." Dadabhai Naoraji turned to the tradition of Victorian oratory when he gave his impassioned appeal for the Indian cause as the first Indian MP elected to the British Parliament. In this appeal we see Victorian flourishes and expressions in upholding loyalty to the British but increasingly a new note crept in which gave vent to the gradual Indian view of the British as being tyrannical and exploitative. This came partly from the facts of the Bengal Partition in 1905, the Rowlatt Act, and then, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In his book, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, Naoraji pointed to a rising set of despotic Englishmen who demonstrated that the "English in India, instead of raising India, are hitherto themselves descending and degenerating to the lower level of Asiatic despotism." He accused such Englishmen of "dissimulation of Constitutionalism".

We can see thus how the different shades of opinion that coloured the thoughts of Congressmen. Our account must include the names of other Congressmen like Bal Gangadhar Tilak who, together with Lala Lajpat Rai, and Bepin Pal represented extreme opposition to British rule. Among the group whose nationalist fervour was more moderate were those like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Badruddin Tyabji Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

### Check Your Progress

1. Sri Aurobindo is concerned to contest ideas of teaching as merely the transmission of textual knowledge. How does he demonstrate this idea?
2. Sri Aurobindo considers teaching to be transformative, not academic. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
3. An integrated personality is the vision that Aurobindo Ghosh sees to be the aim of teaching. Explain with reference to the text.

## 2.6 SUMMING UP

Aurobindo Ghosh's essay, 'A System of National Education' was published in *Karmayogin*, an English weekly newspaper he founded around 1909. This carried essays on various topics including some on political journalism and on art and education, on yogic philosophy, translations from the Upanishads and from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, and poems. As you can see Sri Aurobindo was a visionary whose mind reached out to different aspects of reality. What seems to be remarkable about the essay, 'A System of National Education', is that even while it is deeply philosophical it is also a handy guide to the practising teacher. There is crystal-clear clarity in what Sri Aurobindo means and yet the topic is not diluted. There is also great learning behind the essay which connects it with the knowledge of yoga, psychology, philosophy, amongst others. The nationalistic spirit it upholds is reasonable and properly argued as Sri Aurobindo turns to glorious Indian traditions.

## 1.7 REFERENCES & SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Unit 3

### Rabindranath Tagore: “Nationalism in India”

#### Contents:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Rabindranath Tagore
- 3.4 The Text in its Context
- 3.5 The Debate on Nationalism
- 3.6 Summing up
- 3.7 References & Suggested Readings

#### 3.1 OBJECTIVES

Once you have worked through the unit below, you will be able to

- *read* Tagore’s works with a better understanding of his social vision
- *relate* the themes of his work to his wider artistic and social concerns
- *place* the text in its proper context
- *explain* the ideas in the text at hand

#### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

Below we shall see the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore, at work in his vision of a better society. When we read *Nationalism* we are taken to the broad outlines of this vision. One consequence of colonisation was the loss of sympathy – Tagore points to both moral and intellectual sympathy which are so important as the bases of an understanding of races not our own. Colonialism had brought to the forefront this question of inter-racial, cross-cultural harmony. It raised for discussion and for the deepest consideration the issue of just how different nations could come together without seeking to exploit each other, or to struggle with one another for power and domination. At a time of intense debate surrounding this crucial social

problem it was almost inevitable that Tagore should give it such fullness of thought and expression.

In the 1920s, when his novel *Gora*, came out in English, Leonard Woolf (husband of Virginia Woolf, the novelist) commented that “The subject of *Gora* is intensely interesting to me, and Mr. Tagore’s handling of it kept me absorbed throughout the book. His thesis is the social, political, and psychological problems which confront the educated Bengali in Calcutta today.” Despite the error here –the novel is actually set in an earlier period – *Gora* is indeed about the issue so critical for the thoughtful Indian at the time: whether India must imitate the West or not. This was also the question which had been central to the thinking of the Brahmo Samaj, the organisation which cast its influence on the Tagores. “The Brahmo Samaj from its inception in the 1840s to its fading away a century later was riven in all directions on the question of western influence.” (Dutta & Robinson). In an early letter written in English, Tagore remarked that, “It has ever been India’s lot to accept alien races as factors in her civilization. You know very well how the caste that proceeds from colour takes elsewhere a most virulent form.....The great problem which from time immemorial India has undertaken to solve is what in the absence of a better name may be called the Race Problem.” (Letter to Myron Phelps)

**SAQ:**

Attempt to explain Tagore’s preoccupation with the East-West encounter in his work. (80 words)

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Tagore was also sensitive to the issue of child marriage: his own marriage had caused him much inner conflict. In 1887 he gave a lecture on ‘Hindu

marriage' in which he made a cautious appeal for a change in the practice. Tagore's management of his own extensive family estates brought him knowledge of social problems. Dutta and Robinson remark that Tagore realised two things in such work: "that Indians must help themselves, not wait for the government to help them; and that India could not regenerate itself without regenerating its villages. The first led him to found various small businesses in the 1890s, which all failed . . .but nevertheless became the seed for India's first modern patriotic movement, the Swadeshi Movement of 1905, which Tagore helped to lead. The second conviction underlay his experiments in rural development in the first decade of this century and later the founding of his 'institute for rural reconstruction' near Shantiniketan in 1921."

We also see Tagore challenging many Bengali conventions of the 1890s in person. Many of Tagore's writings at this time expressed revolutionary thinking. In 1897, at the Bengal Provincial Congress "as the political leaders orated in polished English imitating Gladstone, Rabindra Babu gave a running translation in Bengali." (Dutta & Robinson) The satirical short story attacking Bengali politicians was written at this time. In mid-1898, "the government of India brought in an Act to suppress 'seditious' speeches and writing in the newspapers, Tagore delivered an impassioned, hurt lecture at the Calcutta Town Hall, 'Kanthrodh' (The Throttled)." He also helped in the defence of Bal Gangadhar Tilak who had been charged with sedition. However, more than politics, it was his deepest conviction that the faulty Indian system of education was at the root of many of its evils. With this conviction he chose to take his family to settle in Shelidah in 1898 where he undertook to educate his own children.

### **3.3 RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

Rabindranath Tagore was born at Jorasanko on 7 May, 1861, a thoroughly Bengali section of Kolkata, youngest of thirteen children born to Sharada Devi (whom he lost in 1875) and Debendranath Tagore. Rabindranath's early life was centred on the Tagore house at Jorasanko. However, it could not be said that the Tagores lived an isolated life because "the Tagores of that time were never far removed from the harsher realities of Bengali life, physically and mentally. The Tagore women mostly hailed from villages in

East Bengal; the men had seen the hard life on the family estates at first hand; and the Jorasanko house stood cheek-by-jowl with the poverty and low life of north Calcutta.” We should also surmise wrongly if we regarded the Jorasanko life as shunning the physical life in preference for the purely intellectual—”The Tagores were never typical of the Calcutta *bhadralok* – a term much used by historians which translates more or less as ‘gentlefolk’, and connotes . . . .the class of Bengalis who revere intellectual work of any kind, even clerking, and despise practical and manual activities, no matter how mentally demanding. One would not know it from such as works as *Gitanjali* or even *My Reminiscences*, but Rabindranath Tagore cultivated his physique as well as his mind.” Rabindranath received a significant education at home from its atmosphere of mental, artistic and cultural freedom. Yet on the whole he did not occupy himself with formal learning in the early years; he was mostly tutored at home specially in literature in Sanskrit, English and Bengali.

**SAQ:**

Explore the significance of Jorasanko, Shelidah, and Shantiniketan in Tagore’s life. Which major works of his would you relate to these three locations? (75 + 50 words)

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Rabindranath was sent to England in 1878 to prepare for a career in law. It was a fairly short stay in England being only sixteen months or so in length ending in 1880 when his father recalled him home. In 1883, Rabindranath was married to Bhabatarini (renamed Mrinalini). In 1884, he lost an adored



sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi. In 1890, Rabindranath took over the management of the family estates but it would be in 1891 that this would become full-time.

*Manashi* (The Lady of the Mind, published 1890) may be considered to compose his first mature poetry. He translated from English into Bengali and had begun to edit a children's magazine, *Balak* (The Boy) in which his second novel, on the rulers of Tripura, had been published serially. More editing of various magazines followed from the 1890s. His involvement with the Brahma Samaj deepened at this time when he became secretary of one of its wings which was headed by his father, Debendranath. About the same time Rabindranath entered into a debate with the Hindu revivalist movement of the 1880s and, inspired by the ideas of Rammohan Roy (founder of the Brahma Samaj), became alienated from the orthodox Hindus. However, Rabindranath was not successful within the Brahma fold as he attempted to bring in non-Brahmins as ministers, a move disagreeable to them. But his devotional hymns found universal Brahma favour leading to his singing in January 1886 at the Brahma festival before three thousand Brahmos—something that so pleased his father that he gifted his son a magnificent cheque. Rabindranath's songs are known to render almost every mood, even bordering on the erotic. In this sense, *Kari o Kamal* (Sharps and Flats) shocked many in 1886. It also included translations into Bengali from Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Shelley, Swinburne, Victor Hugo, Hood, Moore, and an unnamed Japanese poet.

Tagore's first child, a daughter named Madhurilata, was born in 1886, while his son, Rathindranath came in 1888. From 1891, when he began to fully manage the family estates, Rabindranath found a retreat from Calcutta without being completely cut off, in Shelidah, where his family would join him in 1898 to make it their home. During these years Tagore undertook to educate his children. The Shelidah years brought forth from Rabindranath many plays, songs and musical dramas, poems, essays and lastly, the short story—a form that he added to the ones already existing. Fifty-nine short stories were written between 1891-1901 dealing with characters from all levels of society and set in Bengal and Calcutta. These stories have been highly admired by Satyajit Ray and Nirad Chaudhuri. *The Postmaster*, one of his earliest stories was written in 1891 and later filmed by Ray in

1960-61. Rabindranath wrote and published his controversial novella, *Nashtanirh* (The Broken Nest), in 1901.

Based on a trust deed drawn up by his father, Maharshi Debendranath, in 1888 a house was built on the plot of land in Shantiniketan with the ultimate aim of establishing an ashram, with provisions for a school, a library and an annual *mela* (a country fair). On 21 December, 1901, the school was inaugurated with five pupils. There were five teachers of whom three were Christians. In January 1905, Maharshi Debendranath, whose his wife had died in 1902, died. Tagore's daughter, Renuka, died in 1903, while his son, Samindranath, died in 1907. These few years hit Tagore hard with the series of deaths in the family. It was while nursing Renuka through her tuberculosis in Almora, near Naini Tal, that he wrote the poem, *Shishu* (The Child, later renamed *The Crescent Moon*).

During the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, in mid-1905, which flared up partly because of the "long-awaited announcement of the government, under Lord Curzon, that it intended to partition Bengal into two states", Tagore reflected critically on the movement in his best-known novel in English translation, *The Home and the World*. But, he had already expressed "his patriotism as far back as 1877, when he read his poem attacking the Delhi Durbar." Further, his "letters from London in 1878-80 extended his range. During the 1880s and especially in the 1890s he gave vent to some sharp criticisms of the British—his comments on the opium traffic with China and the Sedition Act, for example." (Dutta & Robinson) Rabindranath revived Bankim Chatterji's journal *Bangadarshan* (Mirror of Bengal) and edited it from 1901 for five years. In 1905, Lord Curzon, who brought about the partition of Bengal resigned as viceroy. Around that time Rabindranath wrote twenty-three patriotic songs which became popular in Bengal. He published many essays but no major works of poetry or fiction. Nonetheless, it was a few years later prior to his visit to the West that some of most famous fictional works came to be written: *Gitanjali* (poetry), *Gora* (a novel), and the play, *Dak Ghar* (The Post Office). *Achalayatan* (The Institution of Fixed Beliefs) was a "pointed satirical play" showing orthodox Hinduism as the inmates of a vast lunatic asylum, following upon *My Reminiscences*. At the same time was published his memoirs *Jibansmriti* (My Reminiscences) and the wonderful letters to his niece written in the 1890s, *Chhinnapatra* (Glimpses of Bengal) and some of his best essays.

### **The Swadeshi Movement:**

To some extent the Swadeshi Movement of 1905 in Bengal can be seen as the precursor of Gandhi's movement. However, "it failed to develop, partly because in Bengal there was no one capable of wearing the mantle of leadership. Tagore was the only one who might have done; but when it lay within his grasp, he felt unable to take it up and escaped to Shantiniketan". (Dutta & Robinson) Tagore gave a lecture in 1904, 'Swadeshi Samaj' (Society and state), at a time when everyone was already aware of the imminent partition of Bengal into an eastern and a western portion. The partition came into effect on 16 October, 1905. Tagore wrote many patriotic songs at this time—about twenty-three of them. Tagore realised then the great importance of education as 'swadeshi' activity. He wanted to set up schools independently of the government and went on to help set up a National Council of Education. The later Jadavpur University found its birth in the activities of a group of people including Tagore at this time. However, Tagore dissociated himself from this as he began to realise that the others were not interested in seeing something original but in seeing a rival to Calcutta University, under their control. Eventually Tagore turned to working for the villages.

Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913. His reaction to the honour has been recorded by his biographer, Edward Thompson, who was on his first visit to Shantiniketan. Among the stream of visitors were the British missionaries, Charles Freer Andrews and William Winstanley Pearson, paid their homage as did Ramsay Macdonald, MP and future prime minister, and Will Lawrence (brother of T.E. Lawrence). Tagore's prodigious literary output remained undimmed; the publication of his slender volume, *Nationalism*, made him embark on a debate on the issue. He expressed the conviction that "With the growth of nationalism, man has become the greatest menace to man" in his essay, 'The Nation' included in *Creative Unity*, a volume of essays brought out in London in 1922.

At the time that *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) was written, so was his best volume of poetry, *Balaka* (Wild Geese). *Balaka* contains a poem about Kadambari Devi. *Ghare Baire* was published serially in 1915-16.

Tagore's dream university, Visva-Bharati, conceived in "the fragrant orange groves of southern California in 1916", found shape in 1918 with the laying of the foundation stone at a special meeting of staff, students, ex-students

and well-wishers of the ashram, at Shantiniketan. It was formally inaugurated in 1921 with its chancellor present, Sir Brajendranath Seal, who was then India's foremost living scholar, along with its first western visiting scholar, Sylvain Lévi. In 1921, an editorial commentary in a London newspaper said: "While the whole world is at war, it is some comfort to hear even one voice, however still and small, persistently murmuring of peace. Amid the turmoil and shouting one may still catch the quiet words of an Indian pleading the cause of understanding, friendliness, and forbearance, as though they, and not devastating conflicts, were the most natural things in the world. In such a spirit it is that Rabindranath Tagore has been moving, almost silently, from country to country, and from hemisphere to hemisphere, insinuating his conception of an International University . . . . Suspected as a seditious agitator, dogged by Government spies, impugned by official detraction, or, at the best, scornfully tolerated as an impracticable dreamer, he has trodden the well-worn and dolorous path of the spirit." Since the 1890s Tagore had analysed the failings of the Indian higher education system. The university's Sanskrit motto said, "Where the whole world meets in one nest". Tagore asserted: "Visv-Bharati represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all. Visva-Bharati acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best." Tagore carried the burden of his university till the end, raising funds, for instance, from 1919-21 in India, in Europe and in the USA. Tagore regretted that the idea of a university only brought "the idea of Oxford, Cambridge, and a host of other European universities" to the minds of people. He said, in his speech 'The centre of Indian Culture', "Let me state clearly that I have no distrust of any culture because of its foreign character. On the contrary, I believe that the shock of outside forces is necessary for maintaining the vitality of our intellect . . . What I object to is the artificial arrangement by which this foreign education tends to occupy all the space of our national mind and thus kills, or hampers, the great opportunity for the creation of new thought by a new combination of truths. It is this which makes me urge that all the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened; not resist the culture of the West, but to accept and assimilate it. It must become for us nourishment and not a burden."

## **Stop to Consider:**

### **Tagore and the West:**

(Sir) Jagadishchandra Bose, the scientist, was a regular visitor at Shelidah. At his prodding Rabindranath wrote some of his short stories. Bose attempted to get one short story published in the West in 1900. Tagore went on to raise funds when Bose despaired around 1900 to carry on his work in physics. We learn that “Around the turn of the century he became dissatisfied with his life as a zamindar, disenchanted with the West (despite his respect for science) and determined to start up ‘national’ institutions in parallel with the government’s. In Shelidah, on 31 December 1900, he wrote a poem whose Bengali title translates as ‘The Sunset of the Century’. It began: “The sun of the century is setting today in clouds of blood – at the festival of hate today, in clashing weapons sounds the maddened, dreadful chant of death.” And it concluded: “Awakening fear, the poet-mobs howl round,/ A chant of quarrelling curs on the burning-ground.” “ (Dutta and Robinson).

Rabindranath Tagore’s internationalism springs partly from the influence of the Brahmo Samaj which had revolted against Hindu orthodoxy. The founder of the Brahmo Samaj, Rammohan Roy, had been a friend and associate of Dwarkanath, the poet’s grandfather. In January 1885 Tagore wrote in a letter to a friend of the tensions in his mind between the persuasions of both East and West in opposing directions: “I sometimes detect in myself.... a background where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning me to peace and cessation of all strife, the other egging me on to battle. It is as though the restless energy and the will to action of the West were perpetually assaulting the citadel of my Indian placidity. Hence this swing of the pendulum between passionate pain and calm detachment, between lyrical abandon and philosophizing between love of my country and mockery of patriotism, between an itch to enter the lists and a longing to remain wrapt in thought.” In November 1908, Tagore declared in a letter to a friend while referring to the intensely nationalist swadeshi movement over the partitioning of Bengal, “I took a few steps down that road and stopped: for when I cannot retain my faith in universal man standing over and above my country, when patriotic prejudices overshadow my god, I feel inwardly starved.”

However, Tagore was fully aware of the depredations of colonial rule: he also admitted that “in no capacity, be it as magistrate, merchant, merchant, or policeman, does the Englishman present to us the highest that his racial culture has attained, and so is India deprived of the greatest gain that might have been hers by reason of his arrival; on the contrary, her self-respect is wounded and her powers deprived on every side of their natural development.”

### 3.4 THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT

Tagore's volume, *Nationalism*, is based on lectures given in Japan and the United States in 1916 and 1917. It seems almost incredible now that he resisted intellectually the whole concept at a time when the world was ablaze with the conflagration of extreme nationalism. But even in 1912, before the first world war, Rabindranath had already sounded his aversion to nationalism. We can see in 'Nationalism in Japan' that Tagore recognized Japan's rise as a foremost power in the East – "she has come in contact with the living time and has accepted with eagerness and aptitude the responsibilities of modern civilisation". But as Tagore reminded the Japanese this ability to 'modernize' would have been impossible without higher achievements in the past: "I, for myself, cannot believe that Japan has become what she is by imitating the West. . . . You can borrow knowledge from others, but you cannot borrow temperament." More specifically, Tagore asserts that "Japan has imported her food from the West, but not her vital nature. Japan cannot altogether lose and merge herself in the scientific paraphernalia she has acquired from the West and be turned into a mere borrowed machine." What Tagore warns against is the loss of this 'vital nature' shaped by past achievements: "For generations you have felt and thought and worked, have enjoyed and worshipped in your own special manner; and this cannot be cast off like old clothes. . . . Once you did solve the problems of man to your own satisfaction, you had your philosophy of life and evolved your own art of living. All this you must apply to the present situation, and out of it will arise a new creation and not a mere repetition, a creation which the soul of your people will own for itself and proudly offer to the world as its tribute to the welfare of man. Of all countries in Asia, here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and your need." Tagore's insistence is on both cultural difference and cultural harmony. No nation should copy another in order to compete, or to dominate. Its native genius should be preserved even while it accommodates the cultural influence of another. In other words, not exclusiveness but inclusiveness is Tagore's watchword. He looks to the past here when "the whole of eastern Asia from Burma to Japan was united with India in the closest tie of friendship, the only natural tie which can exist between nations." This is in contrast to the present when "The political civilisation which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning

the whole world”. He likens it to “some prolific weed” being based upon exclusiveness. Its characteristic stance is to be “watchful to keep the aliens at bay or to exterminate them. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving eminence, naming it as a peril, and tries to thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries, forcing down races of men who are weaker”. Tagore gives here an exact account of the diverse forms of exploitation that become possible through the exercise of nationalism. That exploitation is based on the notion of difference; always directed at those who are held to be different from a nation’s perspective. Boundaries become important for this tendency to operate. This form of exploitation is nationalistic and thus political. It weakens and thrusts down whoever it finds weak and suppliant. It is parasitic, also extensive, and subsumes whole races.

**SAQ:**

How does Tagore sustain his distinction between a European political civilisation and an oriental non-political one? What does he see as the major critical differences between the two kinds of civilisation? (60 + 80 words)

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It is revealing to see Tagore’s distinction between the travails of past societies and those of the present. He understands clearly that colonial exploitation is made possible by nationalism and that historically this is a more recent occurrence. Thus he says with reference to Europe, “Before this political

civilisation came to its power and opened its hungry jaws wide enough to gulp down great continents of the earth, we had wars, pillages, changes of monarchy and consequent miseries, but never such a sight of fearful and hopeless voracity, such wholesale feeding of nation upon nation, such huge machines for turning great portions of the earth into mince-meat . . . . This political civilisation is scientific, not human.” Such a civilisation does not have place for human qualities and resembles a scientifically organised machine. Tagore compares such a civilisation to a millionaire with a singleness of purpose—to make money at the cost of social ideals. For that it weaves shameless lies and worships greed with expensive rituals that go by the name of patriotism. However, it also goes contrary to a moral law and this means ultimate doom for nationalism.

In the two accompanying essays, ‘Nationalism in the West’ and ‘Nationalism in India’ Tagore expands his understanding of nationalism with first-hand experience. In the first of these two essays he defines the abstraction: “A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a whole purpose.” This is not the same as coming together in society which has no ulterior purpose other than being together in cooperation. Society “is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being.” There is always the risk that this process gives way to the idea of the nation: when science and the improvement in organisation help the power of self-preservation to grow then “it goads all its neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other’s growth into powerfulness.” The nation, then, the “engine of organisation”, when it attains a vast size, and “those who are mechanics are made into parts of the machine, then the personal man is eliminated to a phantom,” and “everything becomes a revolution of policy carried out by the human parts of the machines, with no twinge of pity or moral responsibility.” India was currently being governed by the “abstract being, the Nation” not in the sense of being merely British but of government by the Nation. It is “an applied science” similar to “a hydraulic press, whose pressure is impersonal, and on that account completely effective.” The work of the West in India which is inhabited by a great diversity of races, led to the rule of law through which these races have been able to come together in the spirit of cooperation. Tagore points out, however, that “this desire for



a common bond of comradeship among the different races of India has been the work of the spirit of the West, not that of the Nation of the West.”

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Tagore sees the harmonious existence of the races in India as the work of the influence of the ‘spirit of the West’ and not ‘that of the Nation of the West’. Elaborate his argument.
2. Show how Tagore connects the idea of nationalism with the problem of historical choice. Does he reject the argument that the evolution of the nation was inevitable in human history?
3. Both Gandhi and Tagore are concerned to show that nationalism is not defined by race but by social organisation. How does Tagore view these social organisations of the Nations?

Tagore looks closely at the working of the West in India in ‘Nationalism in India’: “We must recognise that it is providential that the West has come to India. . . . Let us have a deep association. If Providence wants England to be the channel of that communication, of that deeper association, I am willing to accept it with all humility. I have great faith in human nature, and I think the West will find its true mission. I speak bitterly of western civilization when I am conscious that it is betraying its trust and thwarting its own purpose. The West must not make herself a curse to the world by using her power for her own selfish needs. . . .”.

Tagore distinguishes between the history and the experiences of Europe, America, and India.”Europe has her past. Europe’s strength therefore lies in her history.” This is starkly different from what obtains in India. “We in India must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people’s history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. . . . I believe that it does India no good to compete with western civilization in its own field.” The cooperation between the West and the East should be based on proper understanding: “There are lessons which impart information or train our minds for intellectual pursuits. These are simple and can be acquired and used with advantage. But there are others which affect our deeper nature and change our direction of life. Before we accept them and pay their value by selling our own inheritance, we must pause and think deeply.”

**SAQ:**

Do you see any ambivalence in Tagore’s view of inheritance? Does he see it as constricting or as enriching? (90 words)

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Tagore takes the case of Japan: “Japan, for example, thinks she is getting powerful through adopting western methods but, after she has exhausted her inheritance, only the borrowed weapons of civilisation will remain to her. She will not have developed herself from within.” He had already sounded an alarm in ‘Nationalism in Japan’: Japan has imported her food from the West, but not her vital nature. Japan cannot altogether lose and merge herself in the scientific paraphernalia she has acquired from the West and be turned into a mere borrowed machine. She has her own soul, which must assert itself over all her requirements. . . . . She must infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of modern civilisation. She must never allow it to get choked with noxious undergrowth, but lead it up towards light and freedom, . . . . . Japan must have a firm faith in the moral law of existence to be able to assert to herself that the western nations are following that path of suicide, where they are smothering their humanity. . . . . What is dangerous for Japan is not imitation of the outer features of the West, but the acceptance of the motive force of western nationalism as her own. Her social ideals are already showing signs of defeat at the hands of politics. I can see her motto, taken from science, ‘Survival of the fittest’, writ large at the entrance of her present day history—the motto whose meaning is, ‘Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others’ . . . . .”

**SAQ:**

How does Tagore conceive of Japan's role in the world? Does he see it as a fitting answer to the questions raised by the West? (60 + 80 words)

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With regard to America, Tagore expresses hope: “America is destined to justify western civilisation to the East.” She is different from Europe: “Europe has gradually grown hardened in her pride in all her outer and inner habits. She not only cannot forget that she is western, but she takes every opportunity to hurl this fact against others to humiliate them. That is why she is growing incapable of imparting to the East what is best in herself, and of accepting in a right spirit the wisdom that the East has stored for centuries.” On the other hand, America has the advantage of not being conscript to either history or tradition: “In America national habits and traditions have not had time to spread their clutching roots round your hearts.” A comparison between Europe's and America's civilisations is to the advantage of America: “You have constantly felt and complained of your disadvantages when you compared your nomadic restlessness with the settled traditions of Europe—the Europe which can show her picture of greatness to the best advantage because she can fix it against the background of the past. But in this present age of transition, when a new era of civilisation is sending its trumpet-call to all peoples of the world across an unlimited future, this very freedom of detachment will enable you to accept its invitation and to achieve the goal for which Europe began her journey but lost herself mid-way.” He addresses America with this hope: not being a colonising nation like England, her relationship with the East is disinterested. “All the great nations of Europe have their victims in other parts of the world. This not only deadens their

moral sympathy but also their intellectual sympathy, which is so necessary for the understanding of races which are different from one's own. Englishmen can never truly understand India, . . . . This attitude of apathy and contempt is natural where the relationship is abnormal and founded upon national selfishness and pride. But your history has been disinterested. . . . . In fact you are carrying all the responsibility of a great future because you are untrammelled by the grasping miserliness of a past." To that extent America has to conduct itself with responsibility. Tagore's meaning would appear to point to a respect for cultural differences with no sense of disparagement. That is why he goes on to say that a "parallelism exists between America and India—the parallelism of welding together into one body various races."

The important fact for Tagore is that political or commercial common ground can bring together the different nations of the world only in a limited way. He posits the idea of a "spiritual unity", a higher unity. He condemns the teaching that national pride, or worship of the nation is higher than the worship of human ideals. "India has never had a real sense of nationalism." He blames educated Indians for trying to depart from the lessons of Indian history. The East, in fact, is attempting to take unto itself a history, which is not the outcome of its own history." He cites the case of Japan. He gestures towards "ages of fireworks which dazzle us by their force and movement." Tagore asks the reader not to be dazzled by such 'fireworks' for the reason that these "have splendour but not permanence, because of the extreme explosiveness which is the cause of their power, and also of their exhaustion." In the case of Japan, she "thinks that she is getting powerful through adopting western methods but, after she has exhausted her inheritance, only the borrowed weapons of civilisation will remain to her."

**SAQ:**

Why does Tagore feel that India has never had a "real sense of nationalism"? How does he contrast this with the example of Europe or America? (80 + 80 words)

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Tagore underlines the point that in India “our ideals have been evolved through her own history”. Referring to this burden of history, he draws the attention of the reader to “the difficulties India has had to encounter and her struggle to overcome them. Her problem was the problem of the world in miniature.” In other words, “India is too vast in its area and too diverse in its races. It is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle.” He compares this with the racial homogeneity of Europe. He sees this as the reason for Europe’s strength: “Europe in its culture and growth has had the advantage of the strength of the many as well as the strength of the one.” India has had a special burden: it “has all along suffered from the looseness of its diversity and the feebleness of its unity. A true unity is like a round globe....diversity is a many-cornered thing which has to be dragged and pushed with all force.” Unlike Europe which solved its problems of unity by exterminating the native population—the same spirit of extermination and exclusion still prevalent—India has “tolerated difference of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted all through her history.”

Tagore condemns the over-reliance on the authority of traditions which has emerged from the dominance of the caste system: “The thing we in India have to think of is this: to remove those social customs and ideals which have generated a want of self-respect and a complete dependence on those above us—a state of affairs which has been brought about entirely by the domination in India of the caste system, and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are incongruous anachronisms in the present age.” Yet, Tagore clearly stresses the point that the caste system only subsequently led to social atrophy; it was not so in the beginning. The caste system began as a system of tolerance. “India had felt that diversity of races there must be and should be,.....” As Tagore sees it, this was an Indian experiment in a “social federation” and despite its inadequacies it

was carried out with belief that “you can never coerce nature into your narrow limits of convenience without paying one day very dearly for it.” However, the experiment left out the fact that “in human beings differences are not like the physical barriers of mountains, fixed for ever—they are fluid with life’s flow”. That is to say, human differences are not unchangeable or not to be overcome; human beings are adaptable and their differences do not remain static: “they are changing their courses and their shapes and volumes.” There was actually no need for the caste system to be fixed and rigid. There should have been scope for change. So “India recognised differences, but not the mutability which is the law of life.” Change is part of human nature but the caste system disallowed change. “In trying not to avoid collisions she set up boundaries of immovable walls, thus giving to her numerous races the negative benefit of peace and order but not the positive opportunity of expansion and movement.” The rigidity of the caste system expelled its life-sustaining quality. Tagore refers to the division of labour involved in the caste system: by making labour based on heredity, it removed the accompanying jealousy and hatred born of competition. But by “ignoring the law of mutation, . . . thus gradually reduced arts into crafts and genius into skill.” We should note the kind of reductions induced by such a hereditary caste system: art becomes merely a craft with utilitarian value while genius becomes a matter of skill.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Tagore views the Indian caste system as India’s answer to the problem of races. What does he give as reasons for its subsequent degeneration so that Indians were no longer capable of dealing with aliens?
2. Explain the significance of Tagore’s assertion: “I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations.”
3. Expatiate upon Tagore’s statement that “it is providential that the West has come to India.”

The Indian caste system has not been successful due to these deficiencies but the West, which did not face the problem of the diversity of races, ignored it outright. Tagore gives a description at this point of the Western

attitude towards the native population in its colonies. This “anti-Asiatic” attitude is without virtue: “Whatever may be its merits you will have admit that it does not spring from the higher impulses of civilisation. . . . . The degradation which we cast upon others in our pride or self-interest degrades our own humanity—and this is the punishment which is most terrible, because we do not detect it till it is too late.” Tagore addresses the American attitude whose basis is competition and the acquisition of wealth. Tagore sees the urge for wealth as unlimited greed with no prospect of finality. Like the geometric line, the individual is thus bound on a course through which “In its lengthening process of growth it can cross other lines and cause entanglements, but will ever go on missing the ideal of completeness in its thinness of isolation.” Physical appetites have their limits but when we look at man in his social setting we see a different picture: “Man in his social ideals naturally tries to regulate his appetites, subordinating them to the higher purpose of his nature. But in the economic world our appetites follow no other restrictions but those of supply and demand which can be artificially fostered, affording individuals opportunities for indulgence in an endless feast of grossness.” Where then are the limits?

Tagore finds these limits in the nature of human social institutions whose objects are two: “to regulate our passions and appetites for the harmonious development of man, and the other is to help him to cultivate disinterested love for his fellow-creatures.” Thus society gives expression to the higher nature of man. Our social ideals are not the same as political freedom. The latter only gives power to create “huge organisations of slavery in the disguise of freedom.” Those in search of money are enslaved by the rich or such “combinations that represent money.” Tagore offers his insight : “Those who are enamoured of their political power and gloat over their extension of dominion over foreign races gradually surrender their own freedom and humanity to the organisations necessary for holding other peoples in slavery.” What is freedom then? Not what it is commonly thought to be. In fact it is enslavement to a unknown goal to which a minority drives the majority. Thus by surrendering to power and wealth which are thought to be the bases of political freedom, people lose sight of moral and spiritual freedom and “create huge eddies with their passions, and they feel dizzily inebriated with the mere velocity of their whirling movement, taking that to be freedom.”

**SAQ:**

Explain the phrase, “slavery in the disguise of freedom”. Is Tagore being purely rhetorical here or is he making a subtle distinction? (40 + 60 words)

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Tagore sends out a call for national introspection: “We never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all time to come by our ancestors, . . . . for all our miseries and shortcomings, we hold responsible the historical surprises that burst upon us from outside. This is the reason why we think that our task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of social slavery. In fact, we want to dam up the true course of our own historical stream, and only borrow power from the sources of other peoples’ history.”

We are asked to look back on our own history and not turn away from it. As we try to move forward “We must remember that whatever weakness we cherish in our society will become the source of danger in politics. The same inertia which leads us to our idolatry of dead forms in social institutions will create in our politics prison-houses with immovable walls.” Tagore is dealing here with the choices to be made for the future warning the reader that a real danger lies in not understanding the course of past history. The social divisions have been brought about through a mental inertia, a reluctance to accept the deadening effect these have had upon us. We cannot achieve political ideals if we do not heed the lessons already there for us to see. “The social habit of mind which impels us to make the life of our fellow-beings a burden to them where they differ from us even in such a thing as their choice of food, is sure to persist in our political organisation and result in creating engines of coercion to crush every rational difference which is the sign of life. And tyranny will only add to the inevitable lies and hypocrisy in our political life.” Tagore draws his analogy from that of a living body which is unhindered in its movements by the dead weight of other parts of the body



in the vital organs because there is still youth. India too was like such a body gradually it “has produced a gradual paralysis of her living nature.”

Tagore rails against an industrial civilisation: “It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment’s hesitation to crush beauty and life out of them, moulding them into money. It is this ugly vulgarity of commerce which brought upon it the censure of contempt in our earlier days, when men had leisure to have an unclouded vision of perfection in humanity. . . . This commercialism with its barbarity of ugly decorations is a terrible menace to all humanity, because it is setting up the ideal of power over that of perfection. It is making the cult of self-seeking exult in its naked shamelessness.” Significantly, Tagore reminds us of the vulnerability and the weakness of the most precious qualities in us—”when the callous rudeness of power runs amuck in the broadway of humanity it scares away by its grossness the ideals which we have cherished with the martyrdom of centuries.” He ends the essay with the admission that economic demands lead us astray from our ideals: “Let our civilisation take its firm stand upon its basis of social cooperation and not upon that of economic exploitation and conflict. How to do it in the teeth of the drainage of our lifeblood by the economic dragons is the task set before the thinkers of all oriental nations who have faith in the human soul. . . . I am willing to acknowledge that there is a law of demand and supply and an infatuation of man for more things than are good for him. And yet I will persist in believing that there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, . . .”.

**SAQ:**

Speaking of the nation as an organisation, Tagore refers to it as a ‘machine’ created by human intellect not by the ‘moral personality’ of man. In what sense is this deleterious to human beings? Give Tagore’s explanation. (80 words)

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### 3.5 THE DEBATE ON NATIONALISM

Before leaving for England for the first time in 1878, Tagore wrote in an essay: “The European idea in which freedom predominates; the profound thought of the eastern countries and the active thought of the western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West—what a full character will be formed from a synthesis between the two.” This was to be his ideal till the end. What it shows is Rabindranath’s conception of cultural assimilation that he thought was lacking in nationalism. It also defined his characteristic thinking.

An essay by him was published in the Bengali journal, *Prabasi*, in 1908, during the swadeshi movement, entitled ‘East and West in Greater India. In it Rabindranath said: “If India had been deprived of touch with the West, she would have lacked an element essential for her attainment of perfection. Europe now has her lamp ablaze. We must light our torches at its wick and make a fresh start on the highway of time. That our forefathers, three thousand years ago, had finished extracting all that was of value from the universe, is not a worthy thought. We are not so unfortunate, nor the universe, so poor.” From these two extracts it becomes clear that Tagore preferred a policy of cultural enrichment on both sides rather than a restriction disallowing such a process. However, Tagore voiced these ideas at the height of wars and conflicts based on nationalism. In the very same essay, he also wrote, “Whether India is to be yours or mine, whether it is to belong more to the Hindu, or the Moslem, or whether some other race is to assert a greater supremacy than either—that is not the problem with which Providence is exercised. It is not as if, at the bar of the judgement seat of the Almighty, different advocates are engaged in pleading the rival causes of Hindu, Moslem or Westerner, and that the party that wins the decree shall finally plant the standard of permanent possession. It is our vanity which makes us think that it is a battle between contending rights—the only battle is the eternal one between Truth and untruth.”

Tagore’s travels abroad provided him with the intellectual exposure that he treasured in his quest for internationalism among the nations of the world. Ramachandra Guha quotes Humayun Kabir who considered Tagore to be “the first great Indian in recent times who went out on a cultural mission for restoring contacts and establishing friendships with peoples of other countries

without any immediate or specific educational, economic, political or religious aim. It is also remarkable that his cultural journeys were not confined to the western world.” Tagore travelled to Europe, North America, Latin America, Japan, China, Iran, and Indo-China.

In May 1912 he went to England where he met W.B. Yeats who helped him to refine some translations of his poems. As Guha tells us, “Published by the India Society under the title *Gitanjali*, these poems were an immediate sensation, going through ten printings in six months.” He then proceeded to the United States. The lectures he gave over the next three weeks, then in Harvard University in 1913 and again in London in the same year, were based on his discourses at Shantiniketan and published later as *Sadhana : The Realisation of Life*. The lectures he gave while in the USA were highly successful.

In November 1913, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.” With the award, Tagore’s audience and readership came to be greatly enhanced so much so that when he arrived in Tokyo for the first time in June 1916, en route to the United States on a lecture tour, about 20,000 people came to the railway station to view him as a figure of high international repute. His first speech in Japan was delivered in Osaka on 1 June 1916. The reception given to his lecture did not fire enthusiasm : “Most Japanese felt themselves to be part of a nation ascending in wealth, power and education; they had no desire to hear what seemed a backward-looking message from a representative of a defeated nation. The nationalism that Tagore forcefully decried as western in origin and inimical in spirit to Japan was serving well in Korea and China, they felt.” It was thus inevitable that “Official invitations to Tagore soon ceased.” (Dutta & Robinson)

### 3.6 SUMMING UP

By now we have seen Rabindranath Tagore as not merely a great poet but as a social reformer too. Let us remember that one great theme –nationalism and the East-West encounter—seems to weave his works together. We can see his profound aversion to the inhumanity of colonial rule in India. He wrote in 1941 when there was an appeal that the Congress should support the British during the war: “I am too painfully conscious of the extreme poverty, helplessness and misery of our people not to deplore the supineness of the Government that has tolerated this condition for so long. ....I had hoped that the leaders of the British nation, who had grown apathetic to our

suffering and forgetful of their own sacred trust in India during their days of prosperity and success, would at last, in the time of their own great trial, awake to the justice and humanity of our cause. It has been a most grievous disappointment to me to find that fondly cherished hope receding farther and farther from realization each day. Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance.”

We can see that Tagore’s anti-colonialism was tied to his deeper understanding of nationalism. He did not regard colonial rule as being the work of a single race. He saw it as the result of a misconception of the way that society should proceed. So colonialism was tantamount to highly efficient social organisation for the purpose of gaining wealth and power at the cost of those human ideals which should exist in society.

‘Nationalism in India’ should be read as one of the sections of *Nationalism*. In ‘Nationalism in Japan’ we see the endeavours of the Japanese to be the strongest power in Asia. Tagore delivers a warning here as to the possible outcome of such efforts. He is clear that the Japanese can strive towards a different set of goals. In ‘Nationalism in the West’ Tagore turns to the positive role that the USA can play in its dealings with Asian countries. In both these instances Tagore stirred up controversy and faced much criticism from several quarters. What he had said was not fondly welcomed. In these essays he gives in very broad outlines his understanding of how history works for a civilisation and how society fashions itself. In ‘Nationalism in India’ he puts his finger on a major feature of Indian society and shows the causes of its existence. He goes on to analyse why it degenerated into becoming one of the most oppressive features of Indian society. Both his scholarship and his visionary outlook are at work here. The terms he uses may often seem to be metaphysical but there is no doubt that the analysis is sharp and incisive. In this sense, *Nationalism* is a highly rewarding volume for reading.

### 3.7 REFERENCES & SUGGESTED READING

- Dutta, Krishna, & Robinson, Andrew : *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, London, 2009
- Naik, M.K.: *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, 1995
- Tagore, Rabindranath: *Nationalism*, Penguin Books, 2009

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## Unit 4

### MK Gandhi: Speeches

#### Contents:

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
- 4.4 The Quit India Movement
- 4.5 The Quit India speeches, August 8, 1942
- 4.6 Speech at the Round Table Conference, Nov.11, 1931
- 4.7 Summing up
- 4.8 References & Suggested Reading

#### 4.1 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit, you should be able to

- *link* Gandhi's concepts to his practices
- *narrate* the sequence of events that created the 'Quit India' movement
- *outline* the major movements led by Gandhi during the Indian nationalist movement, and
- *explain* major ideas related to the topic

#### 4.2 INTRODUCTION

As you read through this unit you will encounter a mass of political events important to the history of modern India. They are events that shaped Gandhi and in turn, were shaped by him in some ways. Gandhiji was undoubtedly a political thinker in the sense that he had to always keep in front of him the practical consequences of whatever political campaign he undertook to carry out. He could not afford to lose sight of what would befall the Congress, or the British Raj, or even those who did not support him. That makes the

reading of his speeches or his writings highly contextual. And yet, Gandhi wrote lucidly, at ease with the language he chose to write in. He was no mean reader who had read just a few exemplary texts. His reading was that of the scholar who hopes to find the inmost thesis or principle at work in a text.

When we go through Gandhi's speeches we are struck by his clarity. This quality is not simply a result of his logical sense which one would have expected of a seasoned lawyer. We may sometimes need to recall that Gandhi had trained to be a lawyer and that it was his legal profession in South Africa which embroiled him in the problems of justice and so on. Gandhi's thoughts went much beyond those he needed to pursue his career to encompass fundamental issues of personal and public morality. He was always keen to put to his political campaigns on firm moral ground which was clear and perfectly understandable. We need to only read some of his articles in journals and newspapers to gather how he would take care to make his reasoning clear. Perhaps we need also to note that Gandhi's reasoning was always the larger, abstract principle rather than the narrowly personal. In this line of thinking therefore we can see that he had no personal animosity towards his greatest opponent, the British, but only the larger issue of exploitation and racism and nationalism against them.

### **4.3 MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2 October, 1869, at Porbandar, a coastal town by the Arabian Sea. For more than five generations Mohandas' forebears had served in the Kathiawad region as administrators. Mohandas's grandfather was Uttamchand or Ota Gandhi, who succeeded in obtaining a Class One status from the British for his master, the ruler of Porbandar. Kaba, or Karamchand Gandhi, was Mohandas's father who, like his father and his younger brother, also became diwan of Porbandar. In 1882, even before he became fully thirteen years of age, Mohandas was married to Kastur Makanji Kapadia of Porbandar and was older than him by a few months. Mohandas was sent to England in 1888 to study for the bar.

Gandhi went to South Africa in 1893 at the behest of a law firm. It was on his way from Durban to Pretoria that he had the experience of being turned

out of a first-class coupe on the train simply on the grounds of his race. In 1901, Gandhi returned to Bombay with his family. In 1903 Gandhi began a successful legal practice in Johannesburg. The first issue of *Indian Opinion* was brought out by Gandhi with Mansukhlal Nazar as unpaid editor on 4 June 1903. It was the realization of a dream long held by the Indians in Transvaal. It was against the background of the Zulu rebellion in 1906 that Gandhi experienced the sense of a calling. In his Autobiography Gandhi recalls that satyagraha was born of his involvement with the events in Zululand.

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in November 1909 in Gujarati while returning to South Africa. As we are told, "Very little in the 30,000-word manuscript, divided into twenty short chapters, was scratched out or written over. When the right hand needed rest, Gandhi wrote with his left hand. . . ." (R.Gandhi) John Middleton Murry has said of the book: "The greatest Christian teacher in the modern world is Gandhi; and *Hind Swaraj* is (I believe) the greatest book that has been written in modern times."

Gandhi's began the Dandi March on 12 March 1930 from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, 241 miles away on the sea-shore. On 6 April, "Gandhi bathed in the ocean, stepped up to where the salt lay, scooped some of it up with his fingers, straightened himself, and showed what he had collected to the multitude around him. It was neither a large quantity nor very pure—the Raj's police had done its best to clear the spot of clean salt." The march inspired other expressions of non-violent over the rest of the country. Many satyagrahis were arrested. Gandhi said, "Salt in the hands of the satyagrahis represents the honour of the nation. . . . It cannot be yielded up except to force that will break the hand to pieces".

We can, too briefly, sketch Gandhi's career through the three campaigns of 1921-22 (Non-cooperation movement), of 1930-33 (Civil Disobedience movement) and 1942-43 (Quit India movement). However, the lengthy periods between these campaigns were not those of inactivity because Gandhi's quest for his ideals continued throughout.

As we read Gandhi's speeches before the All-India Congress Committee, we see the intermingling of complex questions that confronted him. As the one leader entrusted with the responsibility of continuing the struggle against colonial rule, Gandhi was deeply sensitive to the range of problems involved,

in the words of the Working Committee, in “the starting of a mass struggle on nonviolent lines on the widest possible scale, so that the country might utilize all the nonviolent strength it has gathered during the last twenty-two years of peaceful struggle.”

Gandhi’s source of inspiration for non-violence and ‘satyagraha’ had been the *Bhagvad Gita* as well as the New Testament, Tolstoy, as well as others. This was the principle of Ahimsa which he had contemplated while at Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg in South Africa. It was his experience with the Zulu rebellion in 1906 that launched him on his calling, as he later recalled in 1942: “A mission . . . . came to me in 1906, namely, to spread truth and nonviolence among mankind in the place of violence and falsehood in all walks of life”. Gandhi said that he was deeply inspired by the American philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, in the idea of civil disobedience. Gandhi’s experiences and work in South Africa had greatly enriched his vision. By the time he wrote *Hind Swaraj* in November 1909, Gandhi was clear about his goals. Between 1903 and 1908 Gandhi wrote of “the tinsel splendour of modern civilization”, describing Western civilization as a recent phenomenon knowing that “modern civilization and its weaponry had made colonialism possible”. *Hind Swaraj* spoke to Indians and argued for the rejection of Western or modern civilization “and its inseparable component, brute force”. He laid out his conviction in this book that “Only nonviolence suits the genius of India; violence is futile, Western and destructive of India’s future” (R. Gandhi). But as explained to us by Rajmohan Gandhi, “While attacking modern or Western civilization, *Hind Swaraj* values contact with it and praises individual Westerners; it steers clear of isolationism and rejects hate.” Prof. G.D.H. Cole – according to Bhabani Bhattacharya – “noted that Gandhi in 1908 had repudiated Western civilization not for India alone but also for all humanity. Yet, at the time the book was written, the civilization of the West showed no signs of decay, no symptoms that the fast-growing scientific genius of man might one day get perilously perverted.”

In the preface to the English edition, Gandhi shows his indebtedness to Western and Indian thinkers whom he has humbly endeavoured to follow – Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson among others, and also great Indian philosophers. Towards the end he writes: “I bear no enmity towards the English, but I do towards their civilisation . . . I have endeavoured to explain



[swaraj] as I understand it, and my conscience testifies that my life henceforth is dedicated to its attainment.”

**Stop to Consider:**

**Gandhi in South Africa:**

Gandhi’s career in South Africa is important in having provided him with an opportunity to forge his political methods. As B.R.Nanda tells us: when he founded the Natal Indian Congress “at the age of twenty-five he was writing on a *tabula rasa*”. That is to say, Gandhi found the opportunity to build upon his principles the methods by which he would later go on to fight the dark forces of racism, colonial domination, and exploitation. His experiences in South Africa were also important in shaping Gandhi’s personality. He was able to delve deep into his studies of religion. Gandhi imbibed many of the ideas of Tolstoy. He was also impressed by John Ruskin’s *Unto this Last*. *Hind Swaraj* was written during these years when Gandhi was returning to South Africa from London. As Nanda further adds: “The Gandhi who left South Africa in 1914 was a very different person from the callow diffident youth who had arrived in Durban in 1893. South Africa had not treated him kindly; it had drawn into the vortex of the racial problem created by the domination of the Dark Continent by the white races. The tug of war which followed had matured Gandhi, given him his own original political philosophy and also helped him forge a new technique of social and political agitation, which was destined to play a great part in Indian politics in the next thirty years.”

When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa at the age of forty-five, he was clear about achieving his goals through satyagraha. We should note that, in the words of Thomas Weber, “Gandhi’s talk of Swaraj, that is independence or freedom, is generally interpreted merely as independence for the Indian nation from British rule. However, for Gandhi political activism had a more fundamental role. It was to a large degree educative, helping to train the soul and develop character so as to aid the quest for individual perfection. Swaraj means self-rule and to limit this to political self-rule is to largely miss the point.” “At one level, swaraj or self-rule must mean an individual’s rule over himself or herself. At the political level, it means home rule or self-government. But if it is to satisfy, self-government must be grounded on the control that leaders and citizens exercise over themselves.” (R.Gandhi)

Gandhi's vision of an ideal society was caught up in the word, "Ramrajya", in which social inequality was absent. Although political independence could take India a step forward towards this goal it was not guaranteed thereby.

In 1921, Gandhi wrote in *Young India* that non-cooperators were at war with the government and were rebelling against it. Yet, earlier in 1915, he had declared his "loyalty to the British Empire" because he had "discovered that the British Empire had certain ideals with which I have fallen in love and one of those ideals is that every subject of the British Empire has the freest scope for his energies and honour and whatever he thinks is due to his conscience." This did not mean that Gandhi did not know the origins of British rule in India or that he was persuaded by the mercies of the *Pax Britannica* or that the achievements of Western society were to the advantage of Indians – the railways, the law courts and the educational system. The last were the means of British dominance over India. But he considered that "India was ground down not by the British rule but by Western civilization which had perpetuated that rule." (Nanda) But from the moment of his return to India at the end of 1914 from South Africa he had begun to see the harsh realities of British rule. It was also the passage of the Rowlatt Bill into an Act and the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre by General Dyer and his troops that influenced Gandhi. In 1921 he wrote in *Young India*: "It is contrary to my nature to believe in the depravity of human beings, but there is evidence of the depravity of the bureaucratic mind that it will stop at nothing to gain its ends."

**Stop to Consider:**

**Gandhi's testimony in 1922:**

I wanted to avoid violence. Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed. But I had to make my choice. I had either to submit to a system which I considered had done an irreparable harm to my country, or incur the risk of the mad fury of my people bursting forth when they understood the truth from my lips. I know that my people have sometimes gone mad. I am deeply sorry for it and I am, therefore, here to submit not to a light penalty but to the highest penalty. ...

I owe it perhaps to the Indian public and to the public in England, to placate which this prosecution is mainly taken up, that I should explain why from a

staunch loyalist and co-operator, I have become an uncompromising disaffectionist and non-co-operator. To the court too I should say why I plead guilty to the charge of promoting disaffection towards the Government established by law in India.

My public life began in 1893 in South Africa in troubled weather. My first contact with British authority in that country was not of a happy character. I discovered that as a man and an Indian, I had no rights. More correctly I discovered that I had no rights as a man because I was an Indian.

But I was not baffled. I thought that this treatment of Indians was an excrescence upon a system that was intrinsically and mainly good. I gave the Government my voluntary and hearty co-operation, criticizing it freely where I felt it was faulty but never wishing its destruction. Consequently when the existence of the Empire was threatened in 1899 by the Boer challenge, I offered my services to it, ... Similarly in 1906, at the time of the Zulu 'revolt', ... In all these efforts at service, I was actuated by the belief that it was possible by such services to gain a status of full equality in the Empire for my countrymen.

The first shock came in the shape of the Rowlatt Act—a law designed to rob the people of all real freedom. I felt called upon to lead an intensive agitation against it. Then followed the Punjab horrors beginning with the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and culminating in crawling orders, public flogging and other indescribable humiliations. I discovered too that the plighted word of the Prime Minister to the Mussalmans of India regarding the integrity of Turkey and the holy places of Islam was not likely to be fulfilled. But in spite of the forebodings and the grave warnings of friends, at the Amritsar Congress in 1919, I fought for co-operation and working of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, hoping that the Prime Minister would redeem his promise to the Indian Mussalmans, that the Punjab wound would be healed, and that the reforms, inadequate and unsatisfactory though they were, marked a new era of hope in the life of India.

But all that hope was shattered. The Khilafat promise was not to be redeemed. The Punjab crime was whitewashed and most culprits went not only unpunished but remained in service, and some continued to draw pensions from the Indian revenue and in some cases were even rewarded. I saw too that not only did the reforms not mark a change of heart, but they were only a method of further draining India of her wealth and of prolonging her servitude.

I came reluctantly to the conclusion that the British connection had made India more helpless than she ever was before, politically and economically. A disarmed India has no power of resistance against any aggressor if she wanted to engage, in an armed conflict with him. So much is this the case that some of our best men consider that India must take generations, before she can achieve Dominion Status. She has become so poor that she has little power of resisting famines.

Before the British advent India spun and wove in her millions of cottages, just the supplement she needed for adding to her meagre agricultural resources. This cottage industry, so vital for India's existence, has been ruined by incredibly heartless and inhuman processes as described by English witness. Little do town dwellers how the semi-starved masses of India are slowly sinking to lifelessness. Little do they know that their miserable comfort represents the brokerage they get for their work they do for the foreign exploiter, that the profits and the brokerage are sucked from the masses. Little do they realize that the Government established by law in British India is carried on for this exploitation of the masses. No sophistry, no jugglery in figures, can explain away the evidence that the skeletons in many villages present to the naked eye. I have no doubt whatsoever that both England and the town dweller of India will have to answer, if there is a God above, for this crime against humanity, which is perhaps unequalled in history.”

#### **4.4 THE QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT**

Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts in February 1942, when the Japanese were advancing rapidly in the Far East, were not in favour of the Japanese. “When Hitler, Churchill and the Japanese spoke with gun-ships and bombers, he could not remain silent.” “The enlarged war was sweeping Gandhi, his life-work and his dream aside. It was threatening everything he had built or given birth to, or nourished or cherished — Swaraj, an Indian nation, Congress unity, nonviolence, Hindu – Muslim friendship, Indo-British partnership .....”. He said: “I have no desire to exchange the British for any other rule. Better the enemy I know than the one I do not. I have never attached the slightest importance or weight to the friendly professions of the Axis powers. If they come to India they will not come as deliverers but as sharers in the spoil.” Foreign correspondents had even pointed out to him that India would be left exposed to a Japanese invasion if the British troops were to suddenly withdraw. So in view of the realities of the international situation, Gandhi had to deviate from his prior position due to this critical turn of events. As Rajmohan Gandhi writes: “It was his life's biggest challenge yet, and he came up, as he had done so often before, with a simple response. This time it was ‘Quit India!’ He would ask the British to just leave his land and ask his people to repeat the call.” Gandhiji knew the possible consequences – “There would be some violence, surely, if he pressed the call—in the summer of 1942 Indians were angry. But he would risk a little violence for the survival of nonviolence. ....British rule was ‘unnatural’

and had ‘choked Indian life’ . . . . .If the British did not leave, the call would nonetheless would proclaim that for Indians the first question was not Japan vs. Britain but Swaraj vs. slavery. When the call was given, most of India rallied behind him.” In June, Gandhi wrote in *The Harijan* that “ ‘abrupt withdrawal of the Allied troops might result in Japan’s occupation of India and China’s sure fall.’ “

**SAQ:**

Attempt a brief outline of Gandhi’s stand against imperial forces around 1942. (70 words)

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In July 1942, at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee in Wardha, it was resolved that British rule end immediately since the Cripps Mission (March 1942) had failed. If this appeal was not heard then a civil disobedience movement would be undertaken with Gandhi at its head.

This ‘Quit India’ resolution was adopted by the All-India Congress Committee at Bombay in August. As B.R.Nanda further narrates: “In London the feeling was that in the Cripps Mission the Government had gone as far as it could in meeting legitimate Indian aspirations, and that any action by the Congress which could jeopardize the conduct of the war at that critical juncture had to be met with the sternest measures.” In keeping with these harsh measures, Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad and other leaders in the Congress were arrested on 9<sup>th</sup> August, 1942. Reactions throughout the country were violent. Even though non-violence had been emphasized as a principle by Gandhi at the last meeting of the All-India Congress Committee, this was overturned by the peoples’ spontaneous anger. The repercussions

in terms of Government blows upon the people were equally violent. “The Government hit back with all its might; mobs were dispersed with firing and even machine-gunned from the air.”

R.Gandhi describes the aftermath of the arrests in these words:

“The arrest of Gandhi and the Working Committee triggered a spontaneous, nationwide wave of fury. Town after town, and village after village, found heroes willing to defy, disrupt, die. Six hundred were killed by the Raj’s police in the first four days, and over 1,000, .....by end-November. ....

“Pockets in Bengal, Bihar, UP, Bombay, Karnataka and Orissa declared themselves free. Factories went silent. ....From Berlin, Subhas’s voice encouraged the rebellion. Demonstrating Indians streamed out of bazaars, villages and colleges shouting ‘Do or Die’ . The Raj countered with arrests, beatings and bullets. In some places rebels were machine-gunned from the air.

“Over 100,000 Indian nationalists were jailed for indefinite terms, and the eruption was crushed by the end of August, but, in a letter to the King, [Viceroy]Linlithgow called Quit India ‘by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857’.

“It was not peaceful. Bridges were blown up, telegraph and telephone wires cut, police and post offices burnt down, employees of the Raj killed.....Though Quit India had negative consequences as well, it delinked the Indian people from their British rulers and fused them with the Congress. After August 1942 it became certain that the British would depart and the Congress take over; when, was the only question left.”

What is significant is that “Underscoring Gandhi as India’s biggest player still, Quit India also proclaimed nonviolence in the middle of World War II. The rebellion’s violent aspects could not conceal Gandhi’s salience or his message of nonviolence.”(R.Gandhi)

Gandhi expressed his argument that only India’s freedom could help the cause of the Allies. The British government was unable to accept this fact because imperial policy did not allow it.

## **Stop to Consider:**

### **Satyagraha and Ahimsa or Nonviolence:**

In 1928 Gandhi wrote in *Young India* as part of the centenary celebrations of the great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy:

“Tolstoy was the greatest apostle of non-violence that the present age has produced. No one in the West, before him or since, has written and spoken as he ..... True *Ahimsa* should mean complete freedom from ill-will and anger and overflowing love for all. For inculcating this true and higher type of *ahimsa* amongst us, Tolstoy’s life with its ocean-like love should serve as a beacon light and a never-failing source of inspiration.”

Bhabani Bhattacharya explains: for Gandhi, “Truth, the sovereign principle, includes numerous other principles, .....

It was the multitude, the dumb downtrodden millions, whom he was to build up into Satyagrahis. He laid it down that the first condition of civil resistance would be “surety against any outbreak of violence.....

“Satyagraha .....excludes every form of violence, direct or indirect, veiled or unveiled, and whether in thought, word or deed. It is a breach of Satyagraha to wish ill to an opponent.”

In his article, “The Message of the *Gita*”, Gandhi quotes from the *Gita*: “Do your allotted work but renounce its fruit; be detached and work; have no desire reward.” With this principle as a basis Gandhi moves forward to *ahimsa*. If there is action without the hope of its fruit, then there is no ground for *himsa*. Violence always proceeds from desire. Yet, Gandhi admitted that the *Gita* was not written to establish *ahimsa* since it was written at a time when warfare and *ahimsa* were hardly distinguishable. Gandhi’s interpretation of the *Gita* has been challenged by many scholars but as Bhattacharya notes, “Answering adverse comments, Gandhi confirmed in the strongest terms that non-violence was a tenet common to all religions and in India its practice was reduced to a science. Even if that practice was now nearly dead, “the eternal law of answering anger by love and of violence by non-violence” could well have a revival.”

The British Raj spread the idea that Gandhi had allowed the violence, even plotted it, and favoured the Axis powers ( Germany, Italy and Japan ) . Such propaganda had hurt Gandhi’s and the Congress’s image. The difficult question behind the launching of Quit India had also been one of identity – to affirm India not as British but as Indian just as much to make nonviolence

prominent as a principle. Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow: "...why did you not, before taking drastic action, send for me, tell me of your suspicions and make yourself sure of your facts? ..... You know I returned to India from South Africa at the end of 1914 with a mission which came to me in 1906, namely, to spread truth and nonviolence among mankind in the place of violence and falsehood in all walks of life.

The law of satyagraha knows no defeat. Prison is one of the many ways of spreading the message, but it has its limits .....

The fast that Gandhi now proposed began on 10 February 1943. "Gandhi mounted attacks from his detention camp on the Raj's distortions of Quit India before the Central Assembly in New Delhi and Parliament in London. Gandhi also issued a pamphlet from prison with Pyarelal's help. The Raj suppressed many of Gandhi's refutations. He wrote to Sir Reginald Maxwell, the home member in New Delhi, refuting his view that "the movement initiated by the Congress has been decisively defeated". Gandhi wrote: "I must combat this statement ..... Satyagraha knows no defeat. It flourishes on blows the hardest imaginable..... I learnt in schools established by the British Government in India that 'freedom's battle once begun' is 'bequeathed from bleeding sire to son.' It is of little moment when it is reached..... Sixth of April 1919, on which All-India satyagraha began, saw a spontaneous awakening from one end of India to the other. You can certainly derive comfort, if you like, from the fact that the immediate objective of the movement was not gained as some Congressmen had expected.

But that is no criterion of 'decisive' or any 'defeat'. It ill becomes one belonging to a race which owns no defeat to deduce defeat of a popular movement from the suppression of popular exuberance—maybe not always wise—by a frightful exhibition of power."

#### **4.5 THE QUIT INDIA SPEECHES, AUGUST 8, 1942**

In his speech on 7 August, 1942, Gandhi claimed that "When I raised the slogan 'Quit India' the people in India who were then feeling despondent felt I had placed before them a new thing. If you want real freedom you will have to come together and .....create true democracy—democracy the like of which has not been so far witnessed.....My democracy means



every man is his own master. I have read sufficient history and I did not see such an experiment on so large a scale for the establishment of democracy by non-violence”. In his vision Gandhi saw the Indian experiment as unprecedented in history.

On 8 August, 1942, Gandhi begins by affirming his adherence to the principle of *ahimsa* and tells non-believers of the principle to desist from voting for the resolution that would launch the Quit India movement. He refers to his position in 1920 and reaffirms his conviction regarding his principles – “I have not changed in any fundamental respect. I attach the same importance to nonviolence that I did then. If at all, my emphasis on it has grown stronger. There is no real contradiction between the present resolution and my previous writings and utterances.”

He calls forth all believers in ‘Ahimsa’. He sees Ahimsa as a powerful weapon even in the midst of the ‘scorching’ flames of Himsa. Not to use ahimsa would then be unforgivable. It is important to note here that Gandhi had disliked equating ‘Ahimsa’ with the English phrase, ‘passive resistance’. Ahimsa did not mean cowardice or surrender. When he refers to Ahimsa as a God-given “priceless” gift, Gandhi endows the Indian struggle with epic dimensions reminiscent of the *Gita*. The significance of this battle is universalised by referring to its scale – that it is no less than earth-saving: the earth scorched and pleading for deliverance from violent war.

**SAQ:**

Explain the significance of 1920 in the context of Gandhi’s struggle. (50 words)

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Beyond that, how does Gandhi see the Indian struggle? Not as a “drive for power” but as a purely nonviolent fight for India’s independence. Note the simplicity and precision of Gandhi’s language. And yet it is both impressive and picturesque. Russia and China were both threatened during the second

world war, China by Japan, Russia by German troops. A concrete analogy is given by Gandhi to distinguish the Indian struggle from the many struggles being waged elsewhere. He gives an example from military to highlight non-violence: a general becomes a dictator once he gains power through a coup. But for the Congress the end is not seizure of power for itself. "A non-violent soldier of freedom will covet nothing for himself, he fights only for the freedom of his country. The Congress is unconcerned as to who will rule, when freedom is attained." Selflessness is the basis of the present action as Gandhi points out. There can be no Ahimsa when there is covetousness. An abstract notion such as the one at hand is translated into concrete terms through the example he provides. In political terms Gandhi is here looking forward to a future to which diverse groups had begun to lay claim possibly leading to further conflict. Thus he declares with firmness that no community or group could sway the Congress which had always worked on a wider, national platform than communal politics.

"In the democracy which I have envisaged, a democracy established by nonviolence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master. It is to join a struggle for such democracy that I invite you today. Once you realize this you will forget the differences between the Hindus and Muslims, and think of yourselves as Indians only, engaged in the common struggle for independence." Freedom, equality, and national independence are the cornerstones of Gandhi's vision. It was the ultimate goal for which the struggle was being waged. It is not merely that the means to the ends is nonviolence. Gandhi calls attention to the shape of that end—equality, and freedom unhindered by communal ideas. No single community could dominate over the others. The Indian nation must be firmly united. Gandhi's language is simple and clear.

Lest it be thought that Gandhiji's fight was against the British race he emphasizes the target of his quarrel—not the British, but their imperialism. He stresses friendship with individuals. The flawed logic of the argument against the British only could lead Indians to even welcome the Japanese! This would have disastrous consequences for India's position. "The proposal for the withdrawal of British power did not come out of anger. It came to enable India to play its due part at the present critical juncture. It is not a happy position for a big country like India to be merely helping with money

and material obtained willy-nilly from her” . The crucial point that Gandhi makes is the absence of anger and hatred. He knew clearly that the Committee’s resolution should not be based on animosity or hatred towards the British. This was indeed a unique position but it is remarkable that Gandhi had the visionary outlook to try and transmit India’s status to a free, equal partner in the Allied campaign against the Axis powers.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Comment on Gandhi’s insistence on the unique nature of the Indian ‘revolution’ . What are the comparisons he draws upon to reinforce his argument?
2. The desire of Indians to be treated as equals with other free nations is not based on racism. How does Gandhi clarify his thesis?

The logic of non-violence puts forward the hand of friendship where it is most needed. Gandhi’s vision transcends both race and moment in a perspective that extends far beyond the momentary. He sees the British as having succumbed to a dangerous, destructive system which has led them to “the brink of an abyss”. The nature of the “mistakes” that the British have committed themselves to is the path of imperialism. We should read into this Gandhiji’s understanding that he considers it politically possible to veer away from an expected route in history. The example he gives is of course personalized – having to face laughter and ridicule in treading this unexpected and vastly different route. But underneath is the strong belief which is founded on a people’s current of feeling that force yields only resistance. The people of India cannot be forced to support the British in their crisis while they are treated as lesser mortals. Only goodwill issuing from a relationship of equality can bring forth this critical support in the battles of the world war.

As the resolution was put to the vote, thirteen members dissented. Gandhi congratulated the dissenters for their strength of conviction even though he pointed out their lack of political perspicuity. He goes on to remind everyone present of the feeling of unity that Hindus and Muslims had with reference to the country as a whole. He refers to the ‘Ali brothers’, “the colourful Ali

brothers, the Oxford-educated Muhammad, who wrote powerfully in English and Urdu, and his older brother Shaukat.”(R.Gandhi) They had been strongly impressed by Gandhiji’s speech on 31 March, 1915, before a large gathering of students in Calcutta. The Ali brothers were leaders who sought to bond with Gandhiji and met him. They were jailed soon after this event. When invited to a war conference by Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, in 1918, Gandhiji pressed for the release of the brothers’ who had been kept in gaol since 1915. As R.Gandhi tells us: “Keen to forge a Hindu-Muslim alliance, Gandhi pressed ‘his friend’ the Viceroy to release the Ali brothers, . . . . The internment had enhanced the brothers’ prestige in an India made increasingly resentful by the forced loans, coercive recruitment and rising prices entailed by the World War. In December 1917 the younger brother, Muhammad Ali, India’s most popular Muslim of the time, was named president in absentia of the Muslim League”.

Gandhi refers to his initial employment by Abdulla Sheth in South Africa. He gives a highly individual account of his desire for Hindu-Muslim unity: “Hindu-Muslim unity is not a new thing. Millions of Hindus and Musulmans have sought after it. I consciously strove for its achievement from my boyhood. While at school, I made it a point to cultivate the friendship of Muslims and Parsi co-students. I believed even at that tender age that the Hindus in India, if they wished to live in peace and amity with the other communities, should assiduously cultivate the virtue of neighbourliness. It did not matter, I felt, if I made no special effort to cultivate the friendship with Hindus, but I must make friends with at least a few Musulmans. It was as counsel for a Musulman merchant that I went to South Africa.”

Gandhi was acutely sensitive to the social divisions in India and his speech here reflects this sensitivity. To this overriding question, Gandhi gives his profoundest thinking. He gives the evidence of his personal life, his boyhood when he personally mixed with his Muslim friends and neighbours. He refers to his support to Muslims during the Khilafat movement. Gandhi’s support for the Khilafat movement had taken the form of his boycott of foreign goods and non-cooperation.

**SAQ:**

Though it was not directly linked with the struggle for an end to British domination in India, Gandhi gave to the Khilafat movement its political importance in terms of Hindu-Muslim unity. What were the reasons behind this? (80 words)

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Gandhi displays remarkable transparency here when he talks of his own Hindu background due to which he worships the cow. Gandhi refers to Maulana Abdul Bari, the preceptor of the Ali brothers, who lived in Lucknow. Such personal anecdotes make a refreshing departure from a rhetoric which can become mired in political expediency. We are also reminded by such instances of the extent to which political echoes seep into personal relationships and the need to recognise these as being important. He understands that this was probably the real obstacle to the achievement of democracy and freedom.

Gandhi refers also to the leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and the demand for a separate nation for the Muslims. He states his own method of considering such demands which many would find inconvenient or unacceptable. Gandhi's own method is to give other peoples' points of view proper regard and consideration based on which such points of view might be found just or yet unconvincing. He therefore disagrees with the advice given to him by Rajagopalachari (later the last Governor-General of independent India who was also a leader of the Congress) to give a promise based on expediency to Jinnah. In other words, Gandhi did not wish to compromise on morality even where the political gains would have been significant.

As a leader of the Congress, it is of the deepest concern to Gandhi that the organisation should maintain rigorous moral standards. He asserts that the

true democracy can only be founded on non-violence. There is no question of using force or coercive methods. “If the Hindus tyrannize over the Mussalmans, with what face will they talk of a world federation? It is for the same reason that I do not believe in the possibility of establishing world peace through violence as the English and American statesmen propose to do. ....The Congress cannot be party to such a fratricidal war. ....If you distrust the Congress, you may rest assured that there is to be perpetual war between the Hindus and the Mussalmans, and the country will be doomed to continue warfare and bloodshed. If such warfare is to be our lot, I shall not live to witness it.” Here Gandhi uses his powers of persuasion. He emphasises the role of the Congress as representative of the various minorities in the country and stresses the point that it was committed to a moral standard in this regard.

**SAQ:**

What is Gandhi’s meaning when he says, “To demand the vivisection of a living organism is to ask for its very life. It is a call to war.”? Which “organism” is he holding out for consideration? Is the comparison appropriate? (40 + 25 + 50 words)

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Taking Jinnah to be an interlocutor here, Gandhi argues that a common struggle for freedom from imperialism is the necessary step towards achieving a deeper, abiding unity between Hindus and Muslims which both communities have sought for many years. Yet even that could be held up if freedom was at stake. “I, therefore, want freedom immediately, this very night, before

dawn, if it can be had. Freedom cannot now wait for the realization of communal unity. If that unity is not achieved, sacrifices necessary for it will have to be much greater than would have otherwise sufficed. But the Congress must win freedom or be wiped out in the effort. And forget not that the freedom which the Congress is struggling to achieve will not be for the Congressmen alone but for all the forty crores of the Indian people.”

**Stop to Consider:**

**Khilafat Movement:**

B.R.Nanda writes: “The outbreak of the world war in 1914 added to the uneasiness of the Muslim community in India; the Sultan of Turkey, their Caliph [“head or Khalifa of the Sunni faithful around the world”], was allied with the Kaiser against their King-Emperor.” Lloyd George the British Prime Minister (1916 – 22) had asserted that Britain and her allies would not work “to deprive Turkey of the rich and renowned lands of Asia Minor and Thrace which are predominantly Turkish in race.” However, at the end of the war this seemed otherwise. As Nanda also writes: “During the years 1915-18, .....[Gandhi’s] advice was often sought by Muslim leaders on the future of the Caliphate –or as it came to be known—the Khilafat. .... Always his advice to his Muslim compatriots was to exercise patience and in spite of their deep frustration to give up thoughts of violence.” It was against the background of the Khilafat movement that Gandhi’s programme of non-cooperation was born. In May 1920, Gandhi “outlined a four-stage strategy for non-cooperation. In the first stage Indians should return titles and honorary posts. Later, when leaders gave the word, Indians should think of quitting civilian jobs with the government. The more distant third and fourth stages would involve withdrawal from the police and the military, and nonpayment of taxes.” In *Navajivan*, on 16 May 1920, Gandhi wrote of what advice he had given to Muslim leaders: “I told them that non-cooperation would be possible only if they give up the idea of violence. Even if there was a single murder by any of us or at our instance, I would leave. They agreed, and understood that non-cooperation was, in many respects, a more potent weapon than violence.” (R. Gandhi)

The achievement of freedom could not be reduced to the domination of any one group over the others. That would go against the principles of democracy. “The Congress does not believe in the domination of any group or any community. It believes in democracy which includes in its orbit Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Parsis, Jews-every one of the communities inhabiting

this vast country. If Muslim Raj is inevitable, then let it be; but how can we give it the stamp of our assent? How can we agree to the domination of one community over the others?"

Gandhi underscores his arguments about communal harmony by referring to his own domestic experience with the conversion of his eldest son, Harilal, to Islam. We must remember at this juncture that Gandhi's Quit India did not receive unstinted support from all quarters in India. British propaganda painted him as a supporter of the Axis powers (Japan and Germany). The propaganda used some comments made by Nehru in the Congress to vindicate the British campaign. Countering the prospective Quit India call, earlier, "On 17 July, . . . Frederick Puckle, director-general of information, Government of India, had asked chief secretaries of all provincial governments to mobilize public opinion against the proposed campaign, and suggested the use of a cartoon showing 'Hitler, Mussolini, Tojo, each with microphones saying, "I vote for the Congress Resolution."' "

"We have thus to deal with an empire whose ways are crooked. Ours is a straight path which we can tread even with our eyes closed. That is the beauty of Satyagraha . . . . In Satyagraha, there is no place for fraud or falsehood, or any kind of untruth. Fraud and untruth today are stalking the world. I cannot be a helpless witness to such a situation." Gandhi talks of abstractions in the most concrete terms here. His description of the ways of the British empire as being 'crooked' sums up the strategies of the Raj. He spells out the practical ways in which satyagraha must proceed. The spinning-wheel is the symbol of this movement towards freedom.

"It is not a make-believe that I am suggesting to you. It is the very essence of freedom. The bond of the slave is snapped the moment he considers himself to be a free being. He will plainly tell the master: "I was your bond slave till this moment, but I am a slave no longer. You may kill me if you like, but if you keep me alive, I wish to tell you that if you release me from the bondage, of your own accord, I will ask for nothing more from you. You used to feed and cloth me, though I could have provided food and clothing for myself by my labour. I hitherto depended on you instead of on God, for food and raiment. But God has now inspired me with an urge for freedom and I am today a free man, and will no longer depend on you." Gandhi often said that Indians had handed over the country to the British. As the



reverse of this, we see here how he uses Hegelian terms to buttress his argument: freedom cannot be obtained without the willingness to accept responsibility. Enslavement is also willing bondage and dependence. So the slave must also show the will to feed and clothe himself, in short, to take responsibility for himself. In the struggle for freedom, there will be no compromises and Gandhi here refers to the possible concessions that the government is likely to dole out in place of freedom. His main point is that freedom will not be sought as an article bought through violent means. "Every true Congressman or woman will join the struggle with an inflexible determination not to remain alive to see the country in bondage and slavery. Let that be your pledge. Keep jails out of your consideration. If the Government keep me free, I will not put on the Government the strain of maintaining a large number of prisoners at a time, when it is in trouble." The idea of civil disobedience is truly startling for us who live in an era of violence! The struggle was to be carried on in a manner that did not require the petty circumvention of the law but held each Congressman or woman to a higher law above the government's. Gandhi was not prepared to submit a single satyagrahi to the ignominy of being called a troublemaker. To that extent he is here showing how the fight for freedom is also a moral struggle till the end. Gandhi next addresses the journalists and lays out the steps that they should follow in the struggle for freedom. The press was asked not to cooperate with the government especially in the scurrilous campaign being conducted by Frederick Puckle.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Would you agree with the view that Gandhi's brand of nationalism is tempered with morality? Give reasons for your answer keeping close to the speech he delivered on 8 August 1942.
2. Gandhi clearly shows in his speeches that while the distinction between the political and the personal is important, the personal can also be political. How does he justify his stand? Keeping closely to his 'Quit India' speeches give his reasons.
3. How does Gandhi jettison any argument in favour of political expediency in the path of satyagraha? State his reasons for the moral role of the Indian National Congress.

Gandhi places a premium on honesty and openness in the course of the struggle. Since the desire for freedom is a fundamental right it cannot be thwarted through being secretive. Thus the readiness to face the violence of the State was necessary. As he had done earlier at the RTC, Gandhi now turns to the princely states of India which lay outside the British Raj.

The princely states, outside the British Raj, are asked to consider themselves to be a part of the country. While he disagrees with Nehru on the equality of status in the future, Gandhi pleads with the rulers of these states to accept the “sovereignty of the people” and to become servants of the people. “The Princes may say to their people : “You are the owners and masters of the State and we are your servants.” I would ask the Princes to become servants of the people and render to them an account of their own services. The empire too bestows power on the Princes, but they should prefer to derive power from their own people; and if they want to indulge in some innocent pleasures, they may seek to do so as servants of the people.” Is Gandhi being naïve here? No, on the contrary, it is his vision of the future which drives him to remind these rulers that their rule is at an end and that they should reorient themselves to a vastly different society than they were wont to rule. He assures them “an honourable place” in free India if they renounce their ownership of resources and become the trustees of such resources in a substantial sense. To those in government service, he suggests that they follow the example of Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade who openly declared his allegiance to the Congress. Gandhi has words of advice for the students and Indian soldiers also.

**Stop to Consider:**

**The princely states:**

“Whereas British India, covering two-thirds of the subcontinent, had come alive with the massive Civil Disobedience Movement under Gandhi in 1930, the princely states were islands of relative, but not complete, political quietude. They were largely playing the role they were designed to, namely, to act as buffers between territories directly under British rule. They thereby hampered, though not very effectively, the raging nationalist movement in British India.

A few princes themselves were, however, touched by the Gandhian movement, and their subjects had, in the same manner as the INC, established the All India

States People's Congress (AISPC). Although not as powerful as the INC, the AISPC had made certain demands, such as limiting the ruler's privy purse to a reasonable percentage of the revenues instead of the practice of some of them to use up 50 percent for their personal use.....The AISPC had also demanded the rule of law with adoption, as far as possible, of the laws prevalent in British India.”

#### **4.6 - SPEECH AT THE SECOND ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 1931**

##### **The Round Table Conferences**

Sometime in February 1930 Gandhi thought of assaulting the Raj with salt. As R.Gandhi describes: “By taxing the manufacture and sale of salt, the government was injuring ‘even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and the utterly helpless’. Nature had gifted salt to India, but Indians could not collect or use it without paying a tax much higher than the cost of removal. All were by the salt law, and all could defy it. .. Thanks to the salt tax—the simplest and most regressive form of taxing every Indian, including the poorest—British salt was easy to sell in India, and the government of India obtained two per cent of its revenue.” Before the protest began, on 10 March, at his ashram, Gandhi pointed out the significance to the gathering of more than 2,000 of what was about to happen: “Everyone is on the tip-toe of expectation, and before anything has happened the thing has attracted world-wide attention... Though the battle     The salt march began on 12 March and sparked off similar marches elsewhere in the country. Thousands were arrested. Gandhi was arrested on 5 May, 1930. Meanwhile the All-India Congress Committee had widened the scope of civil disobedience to forest laws, boycotting of foreign cloth and banks, foreign shipping and insurance companies, and the non-payment of taxes in ryotwari areas. Both Motilal Nehru and his son, Jawarlal, were also arrested. There were attempts at framing a truce but the gap between the British government and the Congress was by now much too wide to be easily breached. In London the first Round Table Conference met in November and December without any representation from the Congress which had boycotted it. Sir Tej Bahadur Saprú and M.R.Jayakar went from India. The British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald, had to adjourn the meeting upon seeing that it would not be representative.

On January 25, 1931, Gandhi and the members of the Congress Working Committee were unconditionally released. But even then there seemed to be no reason to call off the civil disobedience programme. Gandhi was not impressed by what had transpired in the Round Table Conference (RTC). In February Gandhi began his parleys with the Viceroy, Lord Irwin. After eight meetings some kind of an agreement was arrived at in the shape of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact which Gandhi himself viewed with some hope.

**Stop to consider:**

**The Round Table Conferences:**

The British government announced towards the end of 1929 that it would like a Round Table Conference for securing “the greatest possible measure of agreement” between the British and the representatives of British India and the princely states. “The British government called three Round Table Conferences (1930, 1931, and 1932) in London to which they invited representatives of the INC, IML, “Depressed Classes,” and the princes to meet the representatives of the British political spectrum. . . . The INC boycotted the first RTC. When civil disobedience spread all over the country, the viceroy was alarmed, because it was ruining the trade of the towns, pressed heavily on government revenues, and strained the police and the jails to the utmost. He sought accommodation with Gandhi. Irwin and Gandhi reached an agreement. Gandhi agreed to call off the movement after securing a formal agreement with the government as to its political conduct, and the Congress agreed to participate in the second RTC, with Gandhi as its sole representative.

The second RTC ended in failure to reach any accord primarily because of a lack of consensus on the minorities and the communal problem, in general. There was a change in government in Britain, which was also in the grip of the Great Depression. From this hostile environment, Gandhi returned disappointed and was quickly arrested by the government. There were wide-scale arrests of political activists, and the Congress itself was declared an illegal organization. With the leaders behind prison bars, none from the Congress could attend the third RTC.”

**The Text in Its Context**

With the pact with Lord Irwin behind him and the fullness of support for the ensuing struggle, Gandhi arrived in London on September 12, 1931. At the RTC, Gandhi was the sole representative of the Congress. B.R.Nanda

relates that upon being advised by G.D.Birla to prepare his speech beforehand Gandhi replied that he had not had the time to do so. He also added, “God will help me in collecting my thoughts at the proper time. After all we have to talk like simple men. I have no desire to look extra intelligent. Like a simple villager, all that I have to say is “we want independence”.”

We see Gandhi’s brilliant oratory here as he begins with an emphasis on the communal disharmony sown by British colonial rule. “Were Hindus and Mussalmans and Sikhs always at war with one another when there was no British rule, when there was no English face seen there? We have chapter and verse given to us by Hindu historians and by Mussalman historians to say that we were living in comparative peace even then. And Hindus and Mussalmans in the villages are not even today quarrelling. In those days they were not known to quarrel at all.” No words are wasted to make the point that the British presence was deleterious for India. One reason why Gandhi may have been keen to stress the fact that colonial rule has been destructive of the Indian social fabric is that at the RTC there were furious debates among the delegates as to the representation of minorities in India at the conference. He quotes Maulana Muhammad Ali to substantiate the distortions of historiography under colonialism. Gandhi knew clearly just how colonial rule aimed at the destruction of communal harmony. The colonial relationship was based on coercion and exploitation. It could only lead to enmity and violence. With our own knowledge we know just how the British policy was one of ‘divide and rule’. Nehru has called it the ‘ideology of empire’. Gandhi names all the various groups and communities who could come together with the dissolution of this unnatural relationship. He touches upon how British colonial conquest was different by nature from earlier invasions during which foreigners had come to India but not to further the animosities of cultural, linguistic or religious differences. “I dare to say, it is coeval with the British Advent, and immediately this relationship, the unfortunate, artificial, unnatural relationship between Great Britain and India is transformed into a natural relationship, when it becomes, if it does become, a voluntary partnership to be given up, to be dissolved at the will of either party, when it becomes that you will find that Hindus, Mussalmans, Sikhs, Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Christians, Untouchable, will all live together as one man.”

One can only conceive of the impact that these sentences must have had on the participants at the conference. The divisions in the Indian delegation

had become evident in the intense debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi, and the Muslims. In fact, “Ambedkar and leaders of some other groups at the RTC formed a united front of anti-Congress minorities to prevent the RTC from endorsing Gandhi’s demands.”

In an extempore radio broadcast before the conference, Gandhi said, “It is my certain conviction that no man loses his freedom except through his own weakness. I am painfully conscious of our own weaknesses. We represent in India all the principal religions of the earth, and it is a matter of deep humiliation to confess that we are a house divided against itself, that we Hindus and Moslems are flying at one another. It is a matter of still deeper humiliation to me that we Hindus regard several millions of our own kith and kin as too degraded even for our touch. I refer to the so-called “untouchables”.”

The other divisions in India, by Gandhi’s measure, came from the caste hierarchies as well as the feuding between the rulers of the princely states. He registers a political claim with the rulers of princely states: that they commit themselves to common fundamental rights for their subjects as well as for themselves. Gandhi’s commitment was to an egalitarian society as we have seen and he knew well the political target of his campaign. Independence from colonial rule would have no meaning for the poor and the humble if there was no adequate visualising of the post-independence scenario. A democratic polity was the ultimate goal which should not be allowed to be overtaken any single group or individual. As R. Gandhi tells us, in the year 1947, “From 8 April, when he first said that the question of the princely states could turn India into ‘a battleground...’, Gandhi cast a steady eye on it. His consistent position, expressed publicly and in talks with the Viceroy, was that the end of British paramountcy should lead to the people’s sovereignty, that the ruler could not have the ultimate say.” Clearly, then, as we see in his speech at the RTC, long before 1947, Gandhi had already grappled with the vital question of representative democratic rule.

Gandhi refers to the question of autonomy for the North-West Frontier Province which had been denied to it in the Government of India Act, 1919. He understood that by fulfilling the aspirations of the people of the province he would get their support for his campaigns. Thus, he appeals, “Prime Minister, if you can possibly get your Cabinet to endorse the proposition that from tomorrow the Frontier Province becomes a full-fledged autonomous province, I shall then have a proper footing amongst the Frontier tribes and convince them to my assistance when those over the border cast an evil eye on India.”

Gandhi displays a humility which one may not find customary in such circumstances. His speech is persuasive because he never lets the listener forget that the personal standards of conduct are as important as the larger political issues being debated.

**Stop to Consider:**

“The North-West Frontier province, administered from Peshawar, was created in 1901. The greater part of the British army in India was concentrated on the frontier or in cantonments in the Punjab. The province was not granted the degree of self-rule that was given to the other Indian provinces in 1919; but, by the Government of India Act, it was raised to the status of a governor’s province in 1935 and allowed provincial autonomy.”

“A Princely State, also called a Native State or an Indian State, was a nominally sovereign entity with an indigenous Indian ruler that was under indirect British control through the exercise of suzerainty or paramountcy. There were 565 princely states when the Indian subcontinent became independent from Britain in August 1947. The princely states did not form a part of British India (i.e. the presidencies and provinces), as they were not directly under British rule. ....Within the princely states the military, foreign affairs, and communications were under British control. The British also exercised a general influence over the states’ internal politics, in part through the granting or withholding of recognition of individual rulers.”

**Government of India Act 1919:**

The Act provided a dual form of government (a “dyarchy”) for the major provinces. In each such province, control of some areas of government, the “transferred list”, were given to a Government of ministers answerable to the Provincial Council. The ‘transferred list’ included Agriculture, supervision of local government, Health and Education. The Provincial Councils were enlarged.

At the same time, all other areas of government (the ‘reserved list’) remained under the control of the Viceroy. The ‘reserved list’ included Defence (the military), Foreign Affairs, and Communications. This structure allowed Britain to use the Princely States (who were directly represented in the Council of States) to offset the growing power of the native political parties.

The Act also provided for a High Commissioner who resided in London, representing India in Great Britain.

The Indian National Congress was unhappy at these reforms and termed them as ‘disappointing.’ A special session was held in Mumbai .

*-the extracts above are from the Wikipedia*

#### **4.7 SUMMING UP**

Gandhi's oratory is remarkable in that he lays out the issues clearly. There is no ambiguity but a constant reference to the moral standard. In his Quit India speeches, there is almost a messianic note in what he says thus bringing out the moral commitment to his political goal. Indeed, it even appears that this was not just a political programme but an issue of morality which no one could contend with. Non-violence or ahimsa is his weapon and it is God-given. This is a brilliant thought and Gandhi drives home his point by referring not to a military victory or defeat, but a continuing moral battle committing the Congress to a non-violent democracy, more perfect than the ones established through violence.

Gandhi's speech at the Round Table Conference stresses the question of autonomy to different sections of the country. In this sense he stood for the diversity of interests within India. He also emphasises here the personal affection he had for the English people. This becomes a reminder of the power of both satyagraha and ahimsa since violence is abjured and truth and moral force become the norms of conduct. Gandhi thus gives importance to the issues irrespective of who the opponent is.

#### **4.8 REFERENCES & SUGGESTED READINGS**

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**Unit 5**  
**Nehru's *Autobiography***  
**(Chapters 1, 3, 4, 19, 51 and 53)**

**Contents:**

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Form of the *Autobiography*
  - 5.3.1 Structure as Autobiography
- 5.4 Reading Chapter 1: "Descent from Kashmir"
  - 5.4.1 Reading Chapter 2: "Childhood"
- 5.5 Reading Chapter 3: "Theosophy"
- 5.6 Reading Chapter 4: "Harrow and Cambridge"
- 5.7 Reading Chapter 19: "Communalism Rampant"
- 5.8 Reading Chapter 51: "The Liberal Outlook"
- 5.9 Reading Chapter 53: "India Old and New"
- 5.10 Summing up
- 5.11 References and Suggested Readings

**5.1 OBJECTIVES**

As you read through this unit on a few chapters of Jawahar Lal Nehru's *Autobiography*, you will come across textual exegesis, or readings of the text, together with related material that you would find useful in learning more about Nehru's work and his life and times. Our aim here has been to enable you to do a few things by reading all that we have included here. Among these things that you will learn to do by the end of the unit, are the following:

- *obtain* a fair grasp of all that Nehru stands for intellectually
- *relate* his various works as constituents of a larger whole
- *describe* the extent of his work, and
- *identify* those elements of his writings that qualify them to be part of Indian Writing in English.

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION

To us, in India, Nehru belongs to the climate we live in. That is to say, we grow up singing, “Chacha Nehru”, and reciting his “Tryst with Destiny” speech at elocution contests. However, if somebody quizzes us, “When was Nehru born?” we can answer only, “November 14th.” If we are asked to display more information, we are likely to refer to him as “father of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi’s grandfather”, and so on.

In other words, Nehru’s name forms so deeply a part of our national heritage that we assume his relevance to our history as natural. This kind of understanding is only to be expected of figures, names and personalities with whom we have had the most personal and institutional familiarity in the course of our lives. So now that we have to read his writing as literary text, we re-set our frames or perspectives to understand him anew as one who documented our political, and intellectual history within a particular set of references. This problem is not made easier by the fact that we are reading his autobiography which, one would assume, contained all the facts and feelings that made him what he was. An autobiography is not a document that is all-inclusive if only because writing is an act which is both private and public. Also keeping in mind the fact that Nehru wrote his life-history before his career was completed, or before he became prime minister of a country free of alien rule, this *Autobiography* cannot give us the sweeping hindsight with which he would have found it easier to sum up events, etc. The date of publication of the *Autobiography* is 1936, when Nehru was about 46-47 years of age. If we set this beside his final moments, in May 1964 (when he was 74 years old), then Nehru was roughly at the mid-point of his career when he stopped to take backward look at what had transpired thus far. We can speculate, today, that had Nehru chosen to write about himself when he was Prime Minister, we would have found a very different document indeed.

**SAQ:**

Attempt to name some of the most important political contributions made by Nehru after he became Prime Minister. (50 words)

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If we dare to make a comparison of Gandhi as a writer with Nehru as yet another, contemporaries and colleagues leading a huge country to the inevitable process of freedom from foreign rule, we might start with recognising that whereas Gandhi works through his own ideology or consistent philosophy and vision, Nehru works around an ideology already familiar to the educated. Both these leaders chose to record some part of their lives in black and white — their writings give shape and form to a new Indianising of the idea of selfhood. Autobiography begs confession and self-revelation forcing the subject to a high level of self-consciousness so that the ‘self’ is brought to scrutiny.

In 1946, Gandhi saw Jawaharlal as an emerging leader fit to take the nationalist struggle forward. Gandhi’s opinion as to why Nehru should be chosen to head the movement was that “He, a Harrow boy, a Cambridge graduate and a barrister is wanted to carry on the negotiations with Englishmen.” How close Gandhi was to understanding this essential element of Nehru’s intellectual predilection can be gauged from what Nehru had expressed in 1927:

“To some of us in India, it may appear a foolish waste of time to indulge in fancies about a foreign policy in India.....Let us remember there are many countries and many peoples who suffer as India does today. They have to face the same problems as ours and it must be to the advantage of both of us to know more of each other and to cooperate where possible .....Whether we wish it or not India cannot remain now or hereafter, cut off from the rest of the world .....We must understand world movements and politics and fashion our own accordingly. This cannot mean that we have to subordinate our interests or our methods of work to those of any other country or organization.”

Passages such as these are clear indicators of Nehru's cosmopolitanism and his visionary perspicuity regarding the perspectives through which India would be seen as a member in the comity of nations. Despite the intensely nationalistic stand that he had to adopt in the public arena, Nehru was ridden with the thought of problems that would arise in the future. Perhaps Nehru – like Tagore – was acutely aware of the limits of nationalism and this is one view that colours most of what he has to record. The issue of nationalism is brought up in his *The Discovery of India*

The projections of Indian society and Indian politics through a misplaced 'nationalism' is criticized in Chapter 8, ("I Am Externed and the Consequences Thereof") he shows the mis-representation current in the newspapers:

"A reader of the newspapers would hardly imagine that a vast peasantry and millions of workers existed in India or had any importance. The British-owned Anglo-Indian newspapers were full of the doings of high officials; English social life in the big cities and in the hill stations was described at great length with its parties, fancy-dress balls and amateur theatricals. Indian politics, from the Indian point of view, were almost completely ignored by them, even the Congress sessions being disposed of in a few lines on a back page. They were not considered news of any value except when some Indian, prominent or otherwise, slanged or criticized the Congress . . .

Indian newspapers tried to model themselves on the Anglo-Indian ones but gave much greater prominence to the nationalist movement. For the rest they were interested in the appointment of Indians to important or unimportant offices, thier promotions and transfers —... ..

Conditions have changed greatly during the last twnty years because of the growth of the nationalist movement, and now even the British-owned newspapers have to give space to Indian political problems if they are to retain their Indian readers. . . ."

As we read through Nehru's text, we will see many concerns arising out of the uniquely cosmopolitan nationalism of Nehru, as also in his facility with seeing politics through an international perspective. Nehru's language is urbane and lucid with its own style often moving away from the confessional to the personalised discourse. Probably that is what makes the *Autobiography* so distinctly Nehruvian.

**SAQ:**

Does the writing of an autobiography, do you think, inevitably cause a split between the ‘professional’ (public) and the ‘private’ (domestic) aspects of the individual psyche? Or, would you say, the ‘self’ is seamless and therefore it is futile to trace such a split? Justify your stand. (80 + 80 words)

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**5.3 FORM OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Autobiography, as we all know, is ‘an account of a person’s life by him or herself’. However, while dealing with the form, certain issues should be taken into notice. An autobiography may be unreliable and fictional regardless of the author’s attempt to make it sound convincing and truthful. He/she may distort facts and suppress unpleasant things about events in their lives. Some might focus on their public ‘self’ rather than the private. It depends mainly upon the author’s\narrator’s focal point. For instance, André Gide in his autobiography, primarily narrates his personal traumas, often embedded with sexual and psychological overtones. In Winston Churchill’s autobiography, the focus is essentially on his social and political career. For Virginia Woolf, the task of the autobiography is to “locate those moments of being in which the self, as it were, coincides with self and intuitively recognizes an existential rightness and an underlying pattern”. Whatever the motif is, the genre is quite far-reaching in its application and it strives and grows rapidly from the second half of the 20th century.

### 5.3.1 STRUCTURE AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As you read these lines you should begin with puzzling over why we have titled this small section as, structure as autobiography. The title is meant to make you think as what is the ‘structure’ that is being referred to – perhaps it would be more transparent to simply say, ‘autobiography as structure’! But that would lead us back to the problem – what is the structure that calls itself ‘autobiography’?

Nehru’s autobiography appears to have a conventional, chronological organization. It begins with a description of Nehru’s ancestors and culminates in the chapter, ‘Some Recent Happenings’. The book is divided into sixty-eight chapters and the bulk of this book is dedicated to depicting his life during the freedom struggle. Apart from that, he adds two postscripts and a chapter entitled, ‘Five Years Later’. It is noteworthy that his childhood and adolescence occupy only four chapters. After that, he shifts to his prime concern, which is his introspection over his own interpretation of and involvement with the events of the earliest part of the twentieth century.

As a possible site to explore, we might consider whether Nehru’s account of both himself as well as the nation consists in seeing events and ‘growth’ as being linear. Does he conform to the structure imposed by the autobiographical narrative by being linear? That is to say, does Nehru consistently project his psychological development as being a growth in the powers of understanding or does he, at any point, pause to reconsider his earlier versions of people and incident as being limited faulty? Unless these considerations are taken into account we will be left with an incomplete understanding of his achievement.

**SAQ:**

Should we assume that since Nehru, at the time of publishing the *Autobiography*, was yet steeped in the national movement, he saw his whole life as a trajectory of national awakening? Would such an assumption be valid as an explanation of all that he includes in this book? (80 + 80 words)

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Returning to our first puzzle regarding ‘structure’, we could say that any autobiography is a story of events, etc., with the subject as centre or ‘focus’. But Nehru seems to veer away from this idea. At times we feel that he is far from being involved with events on such a large-scale. But it is, after all, *an autobiography*. We may perhaps be right to state that the term ‘autobiography’ gives to Nehru the space or licence to construct the history of a nation from his personal point of view. In that sense, then, it may be right to consider structure as the shape of a narrative to which has been given the familiar label of “autobiography”.

He lays stress, in his introduction, on his maturing consciousness: “My attempt was to trace, as far as I could, my own mental development, and not to write a survey of Indian history”. Throughout the book, this essence is realized in the backdrop of India’s political turmoil. While writing this autobiography Nehru had a public image in his mind. In this book, the author’s public face mediates and then filters the private person. As Iyengar points out, personal history is interfused with national history and therein Nehru’s personality evolves in the context of the national struggle.

**Nehru’s language:**

Throughout the autobiography, he uses a very evocative language, a language which Tom Wintringham hails as ‘a supreme example of the King’s English’. His language changes from objective retrospection to imaginative vitality depending upon his moods and feelings which makes its narrative gripping and free-flowing. For instance, we can look at the two chapters ‘My wedding’ and ‘The Delhi pact’ and compare these with each other.

### **Nehru on the English language:**

“I believe that a language is a greater test of a nation’s character than almost anything else. If a language is strong and vigorous, so are the people who use it; if it is rather superficial, ornate and intricate, the people reflect it. Of course this may be more correctly put the other way about, for it is the people who create the language. A language which is precise makes the people think precisely....

...Classical languages have played a very great part in the development of human society. At the same time they have rather impeded the growth of popular languages. So long as the learned thought and wrote in the classical language, there was no real growth of the popular language. ....

In India we are rightly committed to the growth of our great provincial languages. At the same time we must have an all-India language. This cannot be English or any other foreign language, although I believe that English, both because of its world position and the present widespread knowledge of it in India, is bound to play an important part in our future activities. . . .

.....Language is a very delicate instrument, evolved in its higher aspects by fine minds and strengthened by the popular use of it. ....It grows like a flower and too much external compulsion retards that growth or twists it into a wrong direction.

It is not very material what we call this language, whether Hindi or Hindustani, except for the fact that every word has a history behind it and connotes something very definite, which limits its meaning. What we must be clear about in our minds is the inner content of the language and the way it looks at the world, that is, whether it is restrictive, self-sufficient, isolationist and narrow, or whether it is the reverse of this. We must deliberately aim, I think, at a language which is the latter and which more than any other today, has this receptiveness, flexibility, and capacity for growth. Hence its great importance as a language. I should like our languages to face the world in the same way.”

(- 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1949, *National Herald*)

It can also be contended whether Nehru achieves a structural unity in this book, whether the structure is rigorously controlled by an idea. The structure is, of course, loose but the book has never been considered to be a superficial commentary on his life. Nehru has astounding analytical power, a very keen insight and so, the mode of self-questioning, as he claims in the introduction, persists throughout the book.

You should stop to consider as to how an autobiography should be structured. Should it start with one’s birth? Where should it end, on the



other hand? Can one describe one's whole life in terms of a single idea? In fact, do we live by singular ideas? These questions should come to your mind so that you see Nehru's problem in 1936, when he chose to write about himself.

As we have mentioned earlier, the idea central to the text is his 'mental development' in the backdrop of the Indian nationalist struggle, progressing from outward to inward and resulting in cohesion of the structure and its themes.

### **Stop to Consider:**

#### **Autobiography in the Indian Context:**

Did Nehru look back to any indigenous traditions of writing about the self? This question should not be overlooked since literary activity necessarily partakes of the cultural resources of a community. We will not find it easy to attach an ethnic, or a community's, label to Nehru despite the depiction of his own Kashmiri origins and upbringing. The obvious explanation regarding the 'national' stature of Nehru is the context of the Indian nationalist struggle against the British which called for an "Indian" identity rather than a narrowly local one.

Historian-scholars like David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn also point out that India had her own indigenous patterns of writing a 'life-story'. Given Nehru's Westernized education it may be irrelevant to join his *Autobiography* to these indigenous practices which were really hagiographies or genealogies. Yet, we do find Nehru's autobiography considerably lacking in the "confessional" tone we have seen in autobiographies like Bertrand Russell's. We also see Nehru writing of his own development strictly in terms of the events around him. Chapters like "The Liberal Outlook" do not constitute autobiographical material except to let us know, through references, the personalities, etc., making up national history. At times, we are left feeling that we are reading Nehru's history of the movement for Indian independence. In that case, why *autobiography*? These issues should enliven your reading of the work and provoke your interest in the methods that erect barriers between different branches of knowledge.

### **5.4 READING CHAPTER 1: "DESCENT FROM KASHMIR"**

The first chapter reflects on Nehru's ancestors' cultural and social background, which significantly influence Nehru's childhood. The epigraph of Chapter 1 is a quotation from Abraham Cowley: "it is a hard and nice

subject for a man to write of himself; it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ear to hear anything of praise for him". The first chapter sums up the rise and fall of the Nehru family since the Mughal era, the importance of education in moulding the family's fortunes and prominently, the early youth of Nehru's father.

Nehru takes the help of both oral and written sources to formulate his views regarding his ancestors as he draws up a convincing narrative. He tells us that the Revolt of 1857 "put an end to our family's connection with Delhi, and all our old family papers and documents were destroyed in the course of it." We can only speculate just how much valuable detailed information must have been lost in such turmoil. This beginning, on the other hand, brings together the dominant and apparent ethos prevalent in the era. The family moved to Agra, another city with a Mughal heritage. From the narrative we see how this was a major change comparable to the one two centuries earlier when the family had come down from Kashmir. The chapter is entitled, as we note, "Descent from Kashmir". Any sustainable tradition of knowledge in the family would be oral. But some features are swiftly raised to our attention: Nehru's grandfather was Kotwal of Delhi during the British Raj, and the knowledge of English provided the family with succour in distress. For two generations at least, the family had been involved with government and administration. We can ask here whether the privileged surroundings of early childhood ensured the course of Nehru's later developments. On the whole, the latter part of the first chapter is a brief summary of the years between 1861, when his father was born, to around the last decade of the century when Jawaharlal himself was a small child.

While on the subject of his father, Nehru is both cynical and full of admiration. He disparages his father's aloof nature, his opportunistic 'neutral' policy, and above all his disdain for his fellow compatriots. Nehru remarks on his father, 'He had no wish to join any movement or organization where he would have to play second fiddle.' (p. 4, *ibid*) Simultaneously, another picture of a dedicated worker and an audacious person also comes into view.

**Stop to Consider:**

Shashi Tharoor tells us:

"...the correspondence between father and son strikingly reveals Motilal's faith in his son's destiny. Motilal, a man of monumental self-assurance and incandescent

temper, known for erupting in rage and thrashing his servants, comes across as gentle, loving, almost sentimental in his tenderness for his son – and throughout the correspondence he makes no secret of his ambitions for, and expectations, of Jawaharlal.”

(—Nehru: *The Invention Of India*,. Chapter 1: “With Little to Comend Me’ 1889-1912’)

**SAQ:**

“An ever-increasing income brought many changes in our ways of living, for an increasing income meant increasing expenditure. . . And gradually our ways became more and more Westernized.” What insight is provided here regarding the cultural transitions in Indian society in the late nineteenth century? (60 words)

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Like an expected formal autobiography, Nehru adopts an almost ‘logical’ beginning focusing in the first chapter on the ancestors’ chronicle from which starts the narrative time. He has relied much on anecdotes that he accumulated from his elders and other sources to track down his family’s history. He recalls that “over two hundred years ago, early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, our ancestors came down from that mountain valley to seek fame and fortunes in the rich plains below. Those days were the decline of the Mughal empire.” (p. 1, *An Autobiography*) These anecdotes are mainly informative in their nature and trace the family genealogy through Mughal times and then the British Raj.

Apart from his father, Nehru’s elder uncle, Bansi Dhar Nehru, is also described concisely. Motilal, his father, was born and brought up under his tutelage. Nehru reflects, “The two were greatly attached to each other and their relation with each other is a strange mixture of the brotherly and the paternal and filial”. (p. 3, *An Autobiography*). Here, too, he is relying on second-hand sources to gather information.

**SAQ:**

If we accept that as readers of autobiographies we are bound to accept what the subject provides, what makes the reader of an autobiography look for corroboration? Attempt to define this problem. (90 words)

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**Check Your Progress:**

1. Comment on the problem of ‘structure’ in autobiography. Does Nehru’s method provide a valid solution to the question? How would you assess such ‘validity’?
2. What kind of a glimpse are we provided with into the antecedents of the Nehru family? Give a summary of Nehru’s account of his father.

**5.4.1 READING CHAPTER 2: “CHILDHOOD”**

“Childhood” deals with his recollections of various issues about which he yet had hazy notions. He declares, “My childhood was thus a sheltered and uneventful one.” (p. 6) Mostly, he recounts his relationship with his parents in this chapter. He loved and admired his father but he was also critical of some of his traits. That, in a way, made him more intimate with his mother. He also gives his reminiscences of the conflict between the Europeans, Indians and the Eurasians and he admits, “I listened to the grown-up talk of my cousins without always understanding it.” But most interestingly, Nehru clarifies, “Much as I began to resent the presence and behaviour of the alien rulers, I had no feeling whatever, so far as I can remember, against individual Englishmen.”

We see here how the past is filtered through memory. If you have read Russell's autobiography, then you would notice that he has used personal documents and letters to authenticate his narration. In the case of Nehru, this is not so.

Calling upon his memories of the many marriage ceremonies which he attended as a child, he comments, in the same chapter "Indian marriages, both among the rich and poor, have had their full share of condemnation as wasteful and extravagance display." We are aware that this is not a child's opinion but the adult Nehru's. This can be said regarding his views on religion and festivals, too. In this context, Peter Abb's comment on Herbert Read's autobiography may be applied to Nehru, "He is paradoxically caught in a language quite beyond the range of the child." (p. 516, *Autobiography: quest for identity*). Abb refers to Read's childhood consciousness as 'unpremeditated', a free flow of his childhood memories. Nehru, on the other hand, intrudes into his childhood narrative and imposes his opinions on his past recollections making its flow somewhat sluggish.

He is quite selective in describing the events in his childhood. He has laid stress on those things which were vital in moulding his self in his later life. For instance, we can talk about his childhood reflections on religious pomposity in his family. He says 'It seemed to be a woman's affair. Father and my other cousins treated the question humorously and refused to take it seriously.' (p. 8) This lavish show of religious ceremonies revealed its foibles and negative aspects. However, we must note that his ideas and notions on religion, too, were never consistent. Later, in *Glimpses of World History* he spoke of the inner religiosity free from dogmas and ceremonials that could be a way of maintaining moral and spiritual standards. In the *Autobiography*, too, he remarks, "What then is religion? Probably it consists of the inner development of the individual, the evolution of his consciousness which is considered good." (p. 379) Accepting this, he is particularly critical about its negative aspects in relation to the perception of the masses and its use for political ends. You can read the chapters 'What is Religion?', 'Communalism and Reaction' to see Nehru's ideas on the topic.

Besides his parents, he also vividly describes his father's munshi, Munshi Mubarak Ali. For Nehru, he was a storehouse of stories and he played a precious role in stirring his imagination. The festivals he witnessed including

Holi, Diwali, Janmashtami, and Mohurrum gave him a sense of the multicultural diversity of India and enabled him to understand its uniqueness. He also fondly recalls his birthday celebrations where he became the primary centre of attraction but the reminiscence of his birthday celebration also reminds him of his present. He ironically comments, ‘I did not realize then that a time would come when birthdays would become unpleasant reminders of my advancing age.’

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Nehru’s account of his childhood highlights the main influences on his impressionable mind. Discuss.
2. Discuss the first four chapters of Nehru’s *Autobiography* as a single unit or as the earliest chapter of his life.

**5.5 READING CHAPTER 3: “THEOSOPHY”**

In Chapter 3, entitled “Theosophy”, we read of how Jawaharlal encounters ideology in its various shades. The title of the chapter is appropriate in the sense that Nehru is not interested in recalling his relationship with the man who taught him theosophy –which would have revealed another intimate dimension of his life –but in the way he confronted various levels and types of ideas: the Boer War, Kashmiri Brahminism versus Europeanism and nationalistic ideas. We are also told of the items of his boyish reading. From this point it becomes clear that Nehru is going to quest for the roots of his ideological struggle against colonial domination.

If you are familiar with the name of “Anand Bhawan”, you will definitely find it interesting to know that the Nehrus moved to this bigger house when Jawaharlal was ten years old. As we have mentioned above, in this chapter we learn of how the subject was socialised, or, how the ten-year old boy learnt of the deeper principles guiding his society. For instance, we should read with care how the Kashmiri community reacted to the ‘Europeanization’ of its members. As we are told, the purification ceremony for the re-entry of the ‘europeanized’ traveler – like the elder Nehru – began to lose its meaning over time as it presumably brought out into the open the inevitable

conflict with ideas of cultural tolerance and progress in India. Nehru himself labels the Kashmiri concern with cultural identity as being “racial”.

A lasting influence on Nehru seems to have been in the shape of Ferdinand T. Brooks, a follower of Mrs. Annie Besant. Brooks helped Nehru to cultivate a taste for books and reading. The ecumenical knowledge of philosophy from scriptural sources – Buddhist, Hindu, Greek (Pythagoras) – was probably invaluable in training Nehru to adopt a world-encompassing vision in his later political life notwithstanding his own self-disparagement: “I have a fairly strong impression that during these theosophical days of mine I developed the flat and insipid look which sometimes denotes piety and which is ..often to be seen among theosophist men and women.” At the time, Nehru was in his early teens and this entire association with Brooks and theosophy is brought to a close with Brooks’ departure. But the young Nehru was also idealistic who dreamt of heroism and brave deeds.

The chapter in Harrow and Cambridge begins after May 1905 when the entire family moves to England.

**SAQ:**

How would you sum up Nehru’s attitude towards theosophy (a) in boyhood, and (b) in adulthood? Can you suggest a possible reason for Nehru’s subsequent turning away from it? (40 + 40 + 60 words)

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## 5.6 READING CHAPTER 4: “HARROW AND CAMBRIDGE”

The narrative forms an almost coherent unit from Chapter 1 to 4 as it deals with the formative years of Nehru’s growth to maturity. Chapter 2, “Childhood” recounts his relationship with his father and the family customs. We also see the homely, comfortable environment in which Jawaharlal found his boyish satisfactions.

Chronologically in order as well as continuing with the narrative of his mental development, Chapter 4 focuses on his life at Harrow and Cambridge, which played a powerful role in shaping his political and social consciousness. In this chapter, Nehru comments on many issues that he observed and experienced during his brief sojourn. Here, in this, his position is essentially of an outsider who feels himself privileged more than the rest, because of his education in Europe. He comments, “I was never an exact fit. Always I had the feeling that I was not one of them, and the others must have felt the same way about me.” (p. 17) He is acutely conscious of being one who is receiving the benefits of colonialism.

In some ways, at Harrow Nehru’s bonds with India were reinforced as he tried to keep abreast of happenings in his homeland. However, Nehru describes his feelings at this time in these words: “My general attitude to life at the time was a vague kind of cyrenaicism, partly natural to youth, partly the influence of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater.....I write of cyrenaicism and the like and of various ideas that influenced me then. But it would be wrong to imagine that I thought clearly on these subjects then or even that I thought it necessary to try to be clear and definite about them. They were just vague fancies that floated in my mind and in this process left their impress in a greater or less degree.....”

### SAQ:

Would you consider the description of the years at Harrow and Cambridge to be ‘normal’ for Nehru’s situation? Does the chapter add to the reader’s interest? (60 + 60 words)

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The personal encounter with colonialism had a profound effect on Nehru's family. The Indians who got educated abroad thought themselves to be better Indians. He confesses, "Some of the noted politicians visited us at Cambridge. We respected them but there also a trace of superiority in our attitude. We felt that ours was a wider culture and we could take a broader view of things." (p. 22) He ponders over the nationalist struggle in India, talks about issues like sex, morality and religion, tries to adapt into England's ambience but in his entire endeavor he remains a dreamer. He comments, 'but it was all make-believe. We played with the problems of human life in a mock-serious way, for they had not become real problems for us yet.' It is worth mentioning that Nehru is very reclusive about his personal/private life. The construction of his public self is predominant even in this chapter. We can compare this chapter with Russell's 'adolescence' to see how the mode of representation keeps on shifting according to the author's subject-positioning. Like Nehru, he too mentions in 'Adolescence' the subjects that interest him but he gives equal importance both to his private and public world. For Russell, the central point of interest is the subject himself, — Russell — not the people. But Nehru reflects on his social persona in these years and particularly his father's political activities in India while taking a critical look at the latter's ideas and views. Nehru underlines the carelessness of his youth: "life was pleasant, both physically and intellectually, fresh horizons were ever coming into sight, there was so much to be done, so much to be seen, so many fresh avenues to explore ... But it was all make-believe. We played with the problems of human life in a mock-serious way, for they had not become real problems for us yet, and we had not been caught in the coils of the world's affairs."

Nehru's education at Cambridge and Harrow forms an influential period in his life as it forms a base in formulating his philosophical and political views.

Various ideas influenced him then, including socialism and cyrenaicism but he also admits that he did not think it necessary to try to be clear and definite about them. Literature also attracted him a great deal and the works by litterateurs such as Bernard Shaw, Havelock Ellis and the like stirred him. In fact, Nehru’s language and style evolved from these influences. He considered himself very sophisticated. Meanwhile, he was constantly disturbed by the political turmoil in India. He was aggressive towards his father for not supporting the extremist nationalists which made Motilal infuriated at his son’s behaviour. His travel on the continent, on the other hand, helped him in broadening his mind.

**SAQ:**

Consider the reasons as to why Nehru was upset with his father’s political views. (80 words)

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**5.7 READING CHAPTER 19: “COMMUNALISM RAMPANT”**

Before you read this chapter, it is important that you go back a little to a point in Indian history when Indians thought of themselves as being one. If we read through Chapters 8 to 12, Nehru’s account of the turmoil in Indian politics makes for a fascinating reading of the situation in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 7 tells us of “The Coming of Gandhiji: Satyagraha and Amritsar”, the end of the first World War, Jallianwala Bagh and its aftermath in Punjab. Chapters 8 and 9, broadly speaking, show Nehru’s initiation into the lower-class movements in India. Candidly, Nehru sums up the magnitude of the troubles of Indian farmers by comparing it with the sense of his own ignorance: “What amazed me still more was our total ignorance in the cities of this great agrarian movement. No newspaper had contained a line about it; they were not interested in rural areas. I realized

more than ever how cut off we were from our people and how we lived and worked agitated in a little world apart from them.”

Meanwhile, the idea of a self-ruled nation captioned by the term, *Swaraj*, uplifted through the method of non-cooperation was beginning to do its work. In Chapter 9 — “Wanderings Among the Kisans” – the description of Nehru’s attendance at meetings with the *kisans* is a sensitive reminder of just how the nation is coming together. The agrarian movement of the *kisans* and the non-cooperation movement “were quite separate, though they overlapped and influenced each other greatly in our province”. The work of the Congress was important in upholding the morale of the people just it did much to contain the potential for violence: “Especially powerful was the influence of the Congress in favour of peace, for the new creed of non-violence was stressed wherever the Congress worker went. This may not have been fully appreciated or understood but it did prevent the peasantry from taking to violence.” We should observe here that Nehru, like his colleagues, was attuned to the prevailing problems of agrarian unrest and the possibility of large-scale violence.

**SAQ:**

Would you agree with the view that at this point Nehru has adopted an objective view of himself (as in the first paragraph of Chapter 19) juxtaposed against an objective view of Indian politics judged through hindsight ? (70 words)

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Gandhi’s role in the politics of the Congress party, according to Nehru, became full-fledged with the Special Session at Calcutta in 1920. Nehru describes the effect of non-cooperation on the masses who experienced “a tremendous feeling of release...a throwing-off of a great burden, a new sense of freedom”. Nehru also gives an astute account of the psychological

effects of “non-violence” on the average Englishman. In Chapter 12, “Non-violence and the Doctrine of the Sword”, Nehru further gives his endorsement of the doctrine of non-violence and writes in some detail about its political, ideological and moral aspects. When we reach Chapter 19, on rampant communalism, we have already been led through the mass of events connected with the workings of the Congress as the British establishment reacted. With Nehru’s naming of the chapter after the recognition of the different manifestations of political turbulence in the country, we should be alive to the manner of his writing about it.

**SAQ:**

Does the ‘self’ appear here in this political analysis? Is Nehru interested in giving us a subjective view of how he understood the events and problems brought up here, or is he being ‘neutral’, ‘politically correct’, and ‘objective’ in his account ? (70 + 80 words)

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In this chapter, Nehru gives his thoughts on a range of subjects from the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations, to the question of the goals of the nationalist movement.

The description goes back eleven years and he admits that only a faded impression of all these remain in his mind. An important statement he makes here, regarding the course of political changes in the country is that “The atmosphere of distrust and anger bred new causes of dispute which most of us had never heard of before.”...He pinpoints some of these problematic issues and goes on to condemn the operations of possible *agent*

*provocateurs* who incite communal tension: “religious passions have little to do with reason or consideration or adjustments, and they are easy to fan when a third party in control can play off one group against another.”

The sense of community generating communal intolerance is shrewdly seen by Nehru to be tied to religion and incited and reinforced by reactionaries among both Hindus and Muslims and then given full scope by the machinations of the British government.

He blames the want of clear ideals and objectives in India’s struggle for independence that helped the spread of communalism obliquely. According to him, many a Congressman was a communalist under his nationalist cloak. On the other hand, the Muslim communalists, too, were successful in exploiting the poorer Muslim people by inciting their animosity against the comparatively rich Hindu community. He nostalgically recollects his childhood when the Ram Lila was celebrated in Allahabad. It was a Hindu festival but the Muslims also participated in it enthusiastically. He comments, “Surely religion and the spirit of religion have much to answer for.” (p. 141)

Nehru’s political analysis stressed the economic underpinnings of communalism – “Every one of the communal demands put forward by any communal group is, in the final analysis, a demand for jobs, and these jobs could only go to a handful of the upper middle class. . . . These narrow political demands, benefiting at the most a small number of the upper middle classes, and often creating barriers in the way of national unity and progress, were cleverly made to appear the demands of the masses of that particular religious group.”

Meanwhile, because of the rootless position of the leaders, they saw no clear connection between their routine afflictions and their fight for Swaraj. He observes, “But they were all upper middle class folk, and there were no dynamic personalities amongst them. They took to their professions and business and lost touch with the masses. Their method was one of drawing room meetings and mutual arrangements and pacts and at this game their rivals, the communal leaders were greater adepts.” (p. 139) For Nehru, all these political, economic, or communal problems could be solved only by revolutionary methods. Here we must note that in the 1920s and 30’s Nehru’s vision was essentially that of a Marxist socialist. In fact, his socialist leanings seemed to be more potent than his nationalism. He looked at socialism as an effective weapon that could transform society fundamentally, and could

eradicate capitalism and feudalism. Therefore, he opts for an entirely different political structure for India to attain not only political freedom, but social and economic freedom also. Nehru believed strongly at this period that socialism was the most pertinent way to achieve all these goals. He declares, “The whole idea underlying the demand for independence was this: to make people realize that we were struggling for an entirely different political structure and not just an Indianised edition (with British control behind the scenes) of the present order, which Dominion Status signifies. Political independence meant, of course, political freedom only, and did not include any social change or economic freedom for the masses. But it did signify the removal of the financial and economic chains which bind us to the City of London, and this would have made it easier for us to change the social structure.” (p. 136)

He scathingly criticizes the compromising nature of the political leaders who had become puppets in the hands of the British government as they stick to their reformist outlook and cannot think of other options. Therefore, he stresses on the revolutionary and planning solutions of the problems faced by India – “the time had gone by when any political or economic or communal problem in India could be satisfactorily solved by reformist methods. Revolutionary outlook and planning and revolutionary solutions were demanded by the situation. But there was no one among the leaders to offer these.”

**Stop to Consider:**

At this juncture, we should be aware that Nehru’s interpretations are rooted not only in his deep understanding of world politics or the course of international politics; he also depends upon what we can rightly call a ‘historical consciousness’. You might have so far noted that there was a strong element of nostalgia in the early chapters. But nostalgia is tied to a romantic longing for the past. Such nostalgia give way as we see towards the end of the fourth chapter, to a rising consciousness of the course of political events. Later, in such chapters as “The Liberal Outlook”, Nehru’s narrative account is overtaken by a keen awareness of the march of history.

For Nehru, the past has become a field of discovery. He tries to see how the present is shaped by the past which has turned into a living reality. This was the time when world history was sought to be interpreted by Marx and

Engels. On Nehru, Marx's influence is conspicuous but he also disagrees with him. He attacks religious blindness as the root cause of the weakening of Hindu-Muslim relations. "It seems amazing that a question which could be settled with mutual consideration for each other's feelings and a little adjustment should give rise to great bitterness and rioting. But religious passions have little to do with reason or consideration or adjustments . . . "

### 5.8 READING CHAPTER 51: "THE LIBERAL OUTLOOK"

This chapter contains Nehru's study of the Indian Liberal Party whose core was made up of the members of Servants of India Society. The occasion for this study arises from the visit he paid with Gandhiji in Poona to the Servants of India Society's home. Nehru's impressions begin with the utter amazement over the members' lack of concern with the larger problems of "the agrarian crisis and the industrial depression causing widespread unemployment." In the search for the answer to this lack of involvement with the burning issues of the day, Nehru makes a scathing attack on the so-called Indian 'Liberals' for their "politics ....of the parlour or court variety". He is particularly critical of their detachment from the rest of the world, their disinterestedness in India's burning problems and their hesitance in taking audacious decisions. Further, they have no connection with the masses. Nehru admits that all these are applicable to a section of the Congressmen also.

**SAQ:**

What kind of political associations enter with the term, 'liberal'? What is normally meant by saying, "liberal in politics"? Is Nehru discussing these very meanings here? (30 + 40 + 50 words)

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As we have noted above, the historical consciousness of the subject is fully in display here. Nehru analyses the adoption of the term, “liberal” in the Indian context, in contrast to the English background where the Liberal economic policies of free trade and *laissez-faire* had given rise to the label. He thus says, “The desire for freedom in trade and to be rid of the King’s monopolies and arbitrary taxation, led to the desire for political liberty. The Indian Liberals have no such background. They do not believe in free trade, being almost all protectionists, and they attach little importance to civil liberties as recent events have shown.” This analysis stems not just from differentiating between the English and the Indian context, but by juxtaposing the different moments in history that gave us the term, “liberal”.

This was the period when Nehru’s political views were overwhelmingly influenced by socialism and opted for revolutionary methods to eradicate social, economic, and political problems of India. In achieving this goal, he views the Liberal party as a major threat. Being an erudite scholar of world history, he clearly understood the adoption of various perspectives on the course of history. Therefore, he could differentiate between the Indian Liberals and the European. He could see that the European liberal tradition emphasized democratic form and personal freedom and had a certain ideology as their background..

Throughout the chapter, Nehru advocates radical social change to fend off the influence of capitalism. Nehru opines, “On the whole the liberal group represents bourgeoisdom *in excelsis* with all its pedestrian solidity” (p. 411)

**SAQ:**

Why does Nehru devote a whole Chapter to critiquing the liberal attitude?  
(80 words)

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Picking upon the defining characteristic of the Liberals,— moderation—Nehru unravels its moral or ethical implications: “moderation, however admirable it might be, is not a bright and scintillating virtue. It produces dullness.” He brings in the example of the Liberal newspaper in Allahabad and shows the proximity of moderation (a liberal stand) to mediocrity. Nehru continues with his analysis of the Liberal mindset by setting it within the context of the immediate historical moment. Change is the order of the moment and the Liberals are unable to cope with this process. Nehru’s emphasis, in his critique of “liberal” moderation, is on the need for radical change. Old age, he declares, is characterized by the avoidance of risks. But India, at the moment, “is now convulsed by the forces of change, and the moderate outlook is bewildered.” Existing views have to be revised, a change that the Liberal is not capable of: “Old assumptions fail them, and they dare not seek for new ways of thought and action.” The thoughts of Dr. A.N. Whitehead which he had expressed in the European context, are applicable here: “The whole of this tradition is warped by the vicious assumption that each generation will substantially live amid the conditions governing the lives of its fathers, and will transmit those conditions to mould with equal force the lives of its children. We are living in the first period of human history for which the assumption is false.” But Whitehead’s analysis, Nehru says, is too moderate. Such lack of insight is permanently true. He then turns to Gerald Heard for the understanding that human history is created by people and that any thwarting of a course of action is really the result of imperfect understanding or assumptions. He even goes on to fault Gandhiji for giving in to these false assumptions.

**Stop to Consider:**

**Henry Fitzgerald Heard** commonly called **Gerald Heard** (October 6, 1889 - August 14, 1971) was a historian, science writer, educator, and philosopher. He wrote many articles and over 35 books. Heard was a guide and mentor to numerous well-known Americans, ..... He first embarked as a book author in 1924, but *The Ascent of Humanity*, published in 1929, marked his first foray into public acclaim as it received the British Academy’s Hertz Prize. From 1930 to 1934 he served as a science and current-affairs commentator for the BBC..... In 1937 he emigrated to the United States, accompanied by Aldous Huxley, Huxley’s wife Maria, and their son Matthew Huxley, to give some lectures at Duke University. In the U.S., Heard’s

main activities were writing, lecturing, and the occasional radio and TV appearance...

**Roy Campbell** (2 October 1901 – 22 April 1957). He was a South African poet and satirist. He was considered by T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas and Edith Sitwell to have been one of the best poets of the period between the First and Second world wars, but he is seldom found in anthologies today. Some literary critics claim that his connections to right-wing ideology and his willingness to antagonize the influential literati of his day damaged his reputation.<sup>1</sup>

**Alfred North Whitehead:** He was an English mathematician who became a philosopher. He wrote on algebra, logic, foundations of mathematics, philosophy of science, physics, metaphysics, and education. He co-authored the epochal *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell.

Nehru relentlessly points out the ideological deficiencies of being 'Liberal'. Acknowledging that "We are all moderates or extremists in varying degrees, and for various objects. If we care enough for anything we are likely to feel strongly about it, to be extremist about it." Probed at greater length, such moderation or liberalism extends only up to a degree of comfort. Nehru candidly applies these strictures to his own party men but also recognises that it is the handiwork of Gandhiji alone that "every Congressman has kept some touch with the soil and the people of the country". The Liberals fail where the Congress achieves on account of ideological shortcomings. Gandhiji's ideology is not ridden with the fault of the Liberals' – "a vague and defective ideology".

Nehru goes on to stress the importance of deep and sincere thinking that precedes the creation of an ideology. He thus refers to "the old pagan feeling" or the prehistoric moment of deep thought before religion entered into human civilization to supply readymade ideology or philosophy. It is in this context that his argument runs out its full length, to arrive at the realization that where patriotism was concerned a similar judgment can be stated: "It is often enough the refuge of the opportunist and the careerist, and there are so many varieties of it to suit all tastes, all interests, all classes. ...Patriotism is no longer enough : we want something higher, wider and nobler." Nehru condemns unthinking patriotism – "If Judas had been alive today he would no doubt act in its name." Thus it is apparent from all of the above that

Nehru identifies what goes by the name of “Liberal” with what is lazily regarded as convenient.

Thus, Nehru explains his stand on the Liberal with the rhetorical question: “are we to restrain the legs that move not and the hands that are palsied?” By opposing the moderate attitude of the liberals, he advocates some extreme measures to change the dominant set-up. For him, this radical change is possible only through socialism. He reveals an acute sensitivity to ideas of ‘taking risks’ and ‘embracing changes’. He cites the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution as the basic examples so as to show how the political, economic and the social structure of a society could be radically changed.

**Stop to Consider:**

**‘Golden Mean’**

“In philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, the **golden mean** is the desirable middle between two extremes, one of excess and the other of deficiency.”

“In his most important ethical treatise, the *Ethica Nicomachea* (Nicomachean Ethics), he (Aristotle) sorts through the virtues as they were popularly understood in his days, specifying in each case what is truly virtuous and what is mistakenly thought to be so. Here, he uses the idea of the Golden Mean, which is essentially the same idea as the Buddha’s middle path between self-indulgence and self-renunciation. Thus courage, for example, is the mean between two extremes: one can have a deficiency of it, which is cowardice, or one can have an excess of it, which is foolhardiness. The virtue of friendliness, to give another example, is the mean between obsequiousness and surliness.”

“Aristotle does not intend the idea of the mean to be applied mechanically in every instance: he says that in the case of the virtue of temperance, or self-restraint, it is easy to find the excess of self-indulgence in the physical pleasure, but the opposite error, insufficient concern for such pleasures, scarcely exists.”

(Encyclopedia Britanica, Vol. 18, P. 499)

The next chapter, (no.52) “Dominion Status and Independence” gives us further clarifications of how Nehru viewed his own stand vis à vis India and the contemporary modern world. From his study of the inner workings of

the Liberal’s mind, he moves on to gauge the validity of the differing ideologies and political programmes, explaining the process by which he had arrived at his own standpoint.

**SAQ:**

How will you explain the implications of the word, “ideology”, as used in the present context? (50 words)

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**5.9 READING CHAPTER 53: “INDIA OLD AND NEW”**

Nehru begins this chapter by tracing the gradual development of a view of India freed of “the British ideology of empire”. The paradox that interests Nehru is that nationalistic thought in India evolved despite the official circulation of an imperialist view of the nation. So we see that “Gradually we began to suspect and examine critically British statements about our past and present conditions, but still we thought and worked within the framework of British ideology”. Nehru’s subtle analysis centres on the word “un-British” to pose the difference between the individual Englishman and the “framework of British ideology”. It seemed to be accepted that the individual Englishman could be “un-British” when he committed an error; this was tantamount to saying that the imperialist system imposed on India was not wrong or unjust. What could amount to injustice or a wrong was only the individual offence. What Nehru is emphasizing is that Indians themselves had succumbed to the idea that British colonialism brought great benefit to the Indian nation.

Then, Nehru also tries to show how Indian nationalistic thought developed on the basis of material written by authors with a “moderate outlook”. He gives the names of Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Dutt, William Digby and others. The representation of India through the imperialist ideology had created problems of political strategy – a point that touches Nehru to the

quick. By giving the title, “India Old and New”, Nehru is not simply posing India as passing through the ages – old to new. What seems to prompt him towards a discussion of India in its varying garbs is the idea that India, as projected through the eyes of the imperialist, and India as projected through the eyes of people like Nehru and Gandhi, are two widely differing projections. In this sense, Nehru is absolutely involved with the question of the politics of representation.

**Stop to Consider:**

**William Digby, 5th Baron Digby** (20 February 1661 – 27 November 1752), was a British peer and Member of Parliament.

**Romesh Chunder Dutt**, was a Bengali civil servant, economic historian, writer, and translator of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

**André Siegfried** (April 21, 1875 – March 28, 1959) was a French academic, geographer and political writer best known for his commentaries on American, Canadian, and British politics.

- (*Wikipedia*)

The chapter is important for here Nehru examines some important issues crucial to understanding the different tactics employed by the colonizers while ruling India. The British had cast India in a pattern favourable for their domination. But the challenge to this British conception was possible only as a better understanding of its historical evolution arose from further research. Nehru and his colleagues could not immediately wrest free of the pattern of thought set in motion by the colonisers and he thus explains how the Liberal comes to be mired in the colonial argument: “That is still the position of Indian nationalism . . . the Liberal is unable to grasp the idea of Indian freedom, for the two are fundamentally irreconcilable.” The Liberal and even the Congressman lived mentally in the preceding (the nineteenth) century because their knowledge had not been augmented or improved with new information. The belief, for the Liberal and similar thinkers, was based on imperialist thinking which could not sanction the idea of Indian independence. So, for the Liberal, progress was to be understood as the idea “that step by step he will go up to higher offices . . . That is his idea of Dominion Status within the Empire.” Nehru makes explicit what is wrong

with this thought: “It is a naïve notion impossible of achievement, for the price of British protection is Indian subjection.” Nehru’s support comes from what Sir Frederick Whyte knew –that “as long as [the Indian] cherishes this delusion he cannot even lay the foundation of his own ideal of self-government.”

### **Stop to Consider:**

Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India*, published about a decade after his *Autobiography*, is dedicated to his “colleagues and co-prisoners in the Ahmadnagar Fort Prison Camp from 9 August 1942 to 28 March 1945”. In this later work, Nehru expatiates upon the national cultural heritage and identity which was inevitably born of the nationalist struggle. We get a view of this process of maturing of the vision of India. We can relate the chapter (“India Old and New”) to what comes in this later, important work by looking at passages such as this one (Chapter 3, “The Quest- The Panorama of India’s Past”): “There seemed to me something unique about the continuity of a cultural tradition through five thousand years of history, of invasion and upheaval, a tradition which was widespread among the masses and powerfully influenced them. Only China has had such a continuity of tradition and cultural life. And this panorama of the past gradually merged into the unhappy present, when India, for all her past greatness and stability, was a slave country, an appendage of Britain, and all over the world terrible and devastating war was raging and brutalizing humanity. But that vision of five thousand years gave me a new perspective, and the burden of the present seemed to grow lighter.”

Nehru does not randomly search out the Indian heritage for exotic ideas. As he says, “The search for the sources of India’s strength and for her deterioration and decay is long and intricate. Yet the recent causes of the decay are obvious enough. She fell behind in the march of technique, and Europe, which had long been backward in many matters, took the lead in technical progress. Behind this technical progress was the spirit of science and a bubbling life and spirit which displayed itself in many activities and in adventurous voyages of discovery. New techniques gave military strength to the countries of western Europe, and it was easy for them to spread out and dominate the East. That is the story not only of India, but of almost the whole of Asia.

Why this should have happened so is more difficult to unravel, for India was not lacking in mental alertness and technical skill in earlier times. One senses a progressive deterioration during centuries . . .

Yet this not a complete or wholly correct survey. If there had only been a long and unrelieved period of rigidity and stagnation, this might well have resulted in a

complete break with the past, the death of an era, and the erection of something new on its ruins. There has not been such a break and there is a definite continuity. ....Being an Indian I am myself influenced by this reality or myth about India, and I feel that anything that had the power to mould hundreds of generations, without a break, must have drawn its enduring vitality from some deep well of strength, and have had the capacity to renew the vitality from age to age.”

Nehru moves towards reinforcing his argument with the help of the evidence of events in the world: the power and wealth of the British ruling classes had also received substantial help from the Indians. Nehru quotes from André Siegfried: (in translation) “Because of the hereditary habit of having power joined to riches, he ended by contracting a manner of being aristocratic, curiously imbued with an ethnic divine right which continued to accentuate itself while the supremacy of Britain was already being contested . . . The young generations of the end of the century . . . came feeling themselves unconsciously that success was their due.”

That manner of interpreting things is interesting to underline because it clarifies the particularly delicate psychological reactions of the British. One cannot fail to notice that, it is in the external causes, that England believed, it found its difficulties; always to begin with, that it is in the fault of someone else, and if it regains its prosperity, if that someone else reforms himself . . . always that instinct to wish to change others instead of changing himself.” [From *La Crise Britannique au XXe Siècle*]

**Stop to Consider:**

Nehru’s analysis of the British view of India is sharp and clear and even astonishing that it resounds with the kind of insight we nowadays associate with Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. The controlled, passionate anger appears in the precision: “There was something fascinating about the British approach to the Indian problem, even though it was singularly irritating. The calm assurance of always being in the right and of having borne a great burden worthily, faith in their racial destiny and their own brand of imperialism, contempt and anger at the unbelievers and sinners who challenged the foundations of the true faith – there was something of the religious temper about the attitude. Like the Inquisitors of old, they were bent on saving us regardless of our desires in the matter. Incidentally, they profited by this traffic in virtue ...”

In the next few lines Nehru discusses the conflict of views regarding the past history of the Indian nation. The main conflict would stem from the contrast posed by the Indian view to the British one. Nehru names the British view as consisting of “fanciful pictures”. He fully acknowledges, in the next paragraph, the obvious weaknesses of the Indian past but sums up the strengths in something that lies beyond the grasp of the British: to this he gives the appellation, “the spirit of India” or, in other terms, “her immemorial culture” which is formed by the wisdom of the *Upanishads*. He puts this idea into simple words: “Like all ancient lands she was a curious mixture of the good and bad, but the good was hidden and had to be sought after, while the odour of decay was evident and her hot, pitiless sun gave full publicity to the bad.”

Nehru is prompted by the thought of a unifying culture to compare India with Italy : “Just as Italy gave the gift of culture and religion to Western Europe, India did so to Eastern Asia, though China was as old and venerable as India. And even when Italy was lying prostrate politically, her life coursed through the veins of Europe.” In parallel, Nehru takes up the comparisons of Austria with England to show the merits of such a comparison. But he refers to Metternich for the term “geographical expression” to explore a new perspective on India. Metternich had applied the term to the case of Italy presumably....

Nehru takes the pains to make a fair evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of India from time immemorial. He believes that succession, assimilation and synthesis are inherent in Indian civilization. Indian national culture was amply strong in not losing its originality under pressure from outside forces. Yet it could not preserve its political freedom. By adopting the anthropomorphic method of personification, Nehru takes apart the evasions that creep into our evaluations “We seek to cover truth by the creatures of our imaginations and endeavour to escape from reality to a world of dreams.”

**Stop to Consider:**

**Klemens Wenzel, Prince von Metternich** (May 15, 1773 – June 11, 1859) was a German-Austrian politician and statesman and was one of the most important



diplomats of his era. He was a major figure in the negotiations before and during the Congress of Vienna and is considered both a paradigm of foreign-policy management and a major figure in the development of diplomatic praxis. He was the archetypal practitioner of 19th-century diplomatic realism, being deeply rooted in the postulates of the balance of power.

—(*Wikipedia*)

Nehru searches for the common bonds of Indian society and finds “an active sustaining principle” which allowed it to defend itself from both external and internal forces. However, this principle did not make possible the preservation of political freedom or ensure political unity. Indians paid dearly for the neglect of these facts. “Right through history the old Indian ideal did not glorify political and military triumph, and it looked down upon money and the professional money-making class.” Nehru’s incisive analysis looks at the contradictions of Indian cultural standards: “The old culture managed to live through many a fierce storm and tempest, but though it kept its outer form, it lost its real content. Today it is fighting silently and desperately against a new and all-powerful opponent – the *bania* civilization of the capitalist West.”

Nehru does not make an unmindful comparison of East with West. He also takes into account the new resources that it brings: science, and “the principles of socialism, of co-operation, and service to the community for the common good.”

## 5.10 SUMMING UP

Nehru had inherited his broad internationalism from the traditions of European rationalism and liberalism that he absorbed during his stay at England. In this regard, Nehru’s position is a curious one. He is the one who has the benefits of British colonialism and attempts to know his native land through the books written by the outsider/colonizer. His literary heritage is, too, significantly English.

In the narrative time of this book, the nation was experiencing the third phase of nationalism that Frantz Fanon points out. In this fighting phase, the native intellectuals became directly involved in the people’s struggle against

colonialism. Traditional culture was mobilized as a part of the people's fight against oppression. On the other hand, anti-colonial movements such as India's freedom struggle, used the English language to challenge colonial rule, borrowed their vocabulary to counterattack their "grand narrative". Nehru is against 'domination' and the 'intellectual and moral leadership' of the colonizers.

For Nehru, central to the idea of nation is the narration of history. Nehru questions the construct of history in India by the British as a tool of colonial hegemony. This apparatus is essentially imperialistic in nature, which does not allow the oppressed to think about the other narratives. Here Nehru posits himself as a thinker of 'resistance' to such ideology. Nehru looks at India as a centre of inclusion and exclusion. He remarks, "There was an active sustaining principle, for it resisted successfully powerful outside influence and absorbed powerful influence that rose to combat it." (p. 431) The so-called 'Bharat Mata' is, at present, brutally treated by the outsiders and she has lost much of her earlier glory. Yet most of the Indians fail to see her actual condition and seek to cover the truth. Nehru talks about the illusions of this make-believe world. He lays stress on two words: 'reality' and 'dream'. India is trying to come to terms with reality while dreaming of a new world. Nehru believes that the main opponent is 'the bania civilization of the capitalist west' However, he also admits that its very antidote lies in the West. Nehru relied extensively on the principle of socialism, showing thus how powerfully at that time he believed in the extermination of social and economic inequity among the Indians, the most apposite approach for India to accommodate herself into her 'present conditions and old thought.' He concludes the chapter with a warning, "the ideas she adopts must become rooted to her soil." (p. 432, *Autobiography*)

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Consider the various narrative compulsions that shape Nehru's *Autobiography*.
2. Comment on the involvement of nationalism, internationalism, nostalgia, and the difficulties of representation in Nehru's re-tracing of Indian history.
3. Illustrate the view that Nehru's *Autobiography* is less of an "egotistical narrative" that he attempts and more of his 'personal' involvement in the national struggle.

## **Stop to Consider:**

### **Nehru's 'Epilogue' (Chapter 68)**

"I have reached the end of the story. This egotistical narratives of my adventures through life, such as they are, has been brought up to today, February 14, 1935, District Gaol, Almora. Three months ago today I celebrated in this prison my forty-fifth birthday, and I suppose I have still many years to live. I feel full of energy and vitality. I have a fairly tough body, and my mind has a capacity for recovering from shock, so I imagine I shall yet survive for long unless some sudden fate overtakes me. But the future has to be lived before it can be written about.

The adventures have not been very exciting perhaps; long years in prison can hardly be termed adventurous. Nor have they been in any unique, for I have shared these years with their ups and downs with tens of thousands of my countrymen and countrywomen; and this record of changing moods, of exaltations and depressions, of intense activity and enforced solitude, is our common record. I have been one of a mass, moving with it, swaying it occasionally, being influenced by it; and yet, like the other units, an individual, apart from the others, living my separate life in the heart of the crowd. We have posed often enough and struck up attitudes, but there was something very real and intensely truthful in much that we did, and this lifted us out of our petty selves and made us more vital and gave us an importance that we would otherwise not have had. . . .

To me these years have brought one rich gift, among many others. More and more I have looked upon life as an adventure of absorbing interest, where there is so much to learn, so much to do. ....

In writing this narrative I have tried to give my moods and thoughts at the time of each event, to represent as far as I could my feelings on the occasion. It is difficult to recapture a past mood, and it is not easy to forget subsequent happenings. Later ideas thus must inevitably have coloured my account of earlier days, but my object was, primarily for my own benefit, to trace my own mental growth. Perhaps what I have written is not so much an account of what I have been but of what I have sometimes wanted to be or imagined myself to be.

Some months ago Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyar stated in public that I did not represent mass-feeling . . . We disagree about most things, I suppose, but we agree on one somewhat trivial subject. He is absolutely right when he says that I do not represent mass-feeling. I have no illusions on that point.

Indeed, I often wonder if I represent anyone at all, and I am inclined to think that I do not, though many have kindly and friendly feelings towards me. I have

become a queer mixture of the East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me, as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways; and behind me lie, somewhere in the subconscious, racial memories of a hundred, or whatever the number may be, generations of Brahmans. I cannot get rid of either that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions. They are both part of me,..."

### 1.11 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Unit 6

### Nirad C. Chaudhuri : *A Passage to England*

(Part I, Chapter - 7, Part II, Chapter - 2, Part III, Chapter – 1, 3)

#### Contents:

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 About the “Unknown Indian”
- 6.4 Context of Writing
- 6.5 Reading Part I, Chapter 7: “The Mother City of the Age”
- 6.6 Reading Part II, Chapter 2: “The Eternal Silence of These Infinite Crowds...”
- 6.7 Reading Part II, Chapter 1: “Shakespeare in Today’s England”
  - 6.7.1 Reading Part II, Chapter 3: “Adventures of a Brown Man in Search of `Civilization”
- 6.8 Summing up
- 6.9 References and Suggested Readings

#### 6.1 OBJECTIVES

You will be reading, in this unit, about the writings of an Indian writer of English prose, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who had become an extremely controversial name with the publication of his work in the 1950 and ‘60s. However, today we count his name among those who have given contemporary shape to Indian Writing in English, and Indian English prose, in particular. The experience of reading his work is probably unsurpassed for the flavour of its linguistic virtuosity and the sharpness of his cultural analysis. As you read this unit below, you will have behind you your reading of his *A Passage to England*. Our purpose here is to help you

- *place* the work in the field of Indian Writing in English
- *probe* the intertextual connections that enrich our reading
- *explain* the overall framework of references, and
- *recognise* the significance of the work, finally.

## 6.2 INTRODUCTION

The anthology of *Modern Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi, 1994), edited by Dr. K. M. George, gives this epigraphic summary of Nirad Chaudhuri's life and career: "After a crowded career involving journalism and government service, he settled down to a full-time writing career after the phenomenal success of his very first work, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, in 1951. Finally he made Oxford, England, his home. His other writings include *A Passage to England* (1959), *The Continent of Circe* (1965), *Scholar Extraordinary* (a biography of Max Mueller, 1974) and *Clive of India* (biography, 1975). He is a recipient of the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize (1986) and Sahitya Akademi Award (1975). Apart from the biographies, his writings are difficult to characterize, and they are best regarded as an exciting blend of history, cultural analysis and philosophical reflection.

*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is simultaneously an autobiography and a running commentary on historical developments paralleling personal life. The strength and uniqueness of the work derive from its skilful weaving of personal history into public history. The work ends quite logically with a provocative essay on Indian history...."

We have brought to you this little introductory sketch to help you to an imaginative grasp of the scope of Chaudhuri's work in English prose. Critics point to the "classical" style of his writing and that seems to be indeed the best description of his achievement. Perhaps, what is meant by "classical" is the restrained expression in presenting his point and the ability to perhaps stretch the sinews of the language to accommodate anything unfamiliar or difficult to name. For instance, Chaudhuri catches up with irony and some humour a sense of the exceptional even as he philosophises on the cultural attitude towards time epitomized by the place of the familiar horoscope in an Indian household.

*A Passage to England* belongs to the category known as "travel writing" but it greatly surpasses all that we associate with the category. It is a book about cultural difference, the testing of cultures and his attitudes towards diverse aspects of civilization: religious worship, wealth, heritage, inter-personal associations, and so on. To some extent, all travelogues can touch

upon these ideas, but Chaudhuri equates “passage” with new understanding rather than with departure and arrival in unfamiliar terrain.

**SAQ:**

Does the title, *A Passage to England*, seek to draw any parallel with E. M. Forster’s novel, *A Passage to India*? If you do find any connection or association, how would you state it? (50 + 70 words)

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**6.3 ABOUT THE “UNKNOWN INDIAN”**

We can consider Nirad Chaudhuri as a representative Indian voice in any discussion of the cultural encounters between Indian and Western norms. To embark on such a discussion we have to look at his autobiography. Chaudhuri called his autobiography, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. There is a sense of irony in this because his writings became so controversial as to fetch him grudging fame. Meenakshi Mukherjee, the Indian critic, declares: “The twin themes that run through all of Chaudhuri’s books . . . are himself and India, sometimes himself as an Indian, at other times India as defined by his own life.” She further informs that “He has written his autobiography over and over for fifty years — in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1959), *A Passage to England* (1959), and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch* (1987), and less obviously in most of his other books.”

In Book II of his *Autobiography*, Chaudhuri tells us: “I was born on Tuesday, Agrayayana 9, in the year 1304 of the Bengali era (which corresponds to 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1897) at 6 a.m. local time.” Most interestingly, we are also told the unexpected — that he cannot prove this date; that he has no Western-style certificate; that he has no Eastern-style horoscope; that the only “proof”

is the entry he saw in his mother's notebook on the fly-leaf, although that notebook was no longer in existence at the time of writing. The reader begins to wonder what game is being played out by Chaudhuri. But a few lines later, we are brought to understanding the different methods of keeping track of time among the different classes of people. The poor, as the author points out, related the passage of events in terms of bodily experience. The rich had sophisticated means to record time.

With the profound depth of feeling in which Chaudhuri's writing is so immersed, he looks at this matter of the time of birth in the terms of its control over people's lives; he talks of the village women who bear children: "The lives of those women were as featureless as the landscape of their country. They were punctuated only by the experiences of births when they were not marked by the slightly more memorable experiences of deaths. Thus, the entire chronological system rested on the correlation of events inside and outside the body, and with its help all the children of the village were placed in a series like potsherds from an archaeological site. It was marvelous to see how this method enabled the women to keep an unerring grip on the age of the entire village population. But, of course, it was useless to outsiders."

Chaudhuri's account proceeds to include the whole "theory of life" that horoscopes reflect of the conditions in Bengal of his early years. His *Autobiography* is not as introspective as we might expect since we learn a lot about Bengal and its society. We have to turn back the pages from the point we quoted above, to Book I, its "prefatory note", entitled "Early Environment". Chaudhuri lays out his design transparently: the "basic principle" of the book was that "environment shall have precedence over its product". Thus he begins with the account of the place of his birth, a "little country town", the "ancestral village" to be presented next, and then the "village of my mother's folk".

Lastly, England figures as the place as influential as the earlier three and fills up the fourth chapter. Within this chapter, under the section, "Familiar Names", the writer names the items of knowledge that fashioned the idea of the 'Western' world. He gives us, in a self-deprecatory manner, how he and his associates imagined the English landscape or the English scene, in the section called "The English Scene". So, we are told that "However scrappy and simple our ideas of English life and society might have been,



they could not exist at all without the accompaniment of some visual suggestion. Everything we read about the British Isles or in English, evoked pictures of the external appearance of the country even when not avowedly descriptive. But, we had plenty of verbal descriptions, and in addition to these we had pictures to go upon. Taken together, these gave us the impression of a country of great beauty of aspect, a country which possessed not only beautiful spots but also place-names which sounded beautiful.” As we read further into this chapter we are likely to be brought up short against passages which sound highly controversial and which possibly gave rise to the kind of opprobrium that has made Chaudhuri such a controversial writer against the context of British colonialism.

In her essay on Chaudhuri in *The Perishable Empire*, the eminent critic Meenakshi Mukherjee helps us to an essential aspect of his writing in English — its western frame of reference. This sets it apart from his Bengali writing where the references are to Bengali, Sanskrit and other Indian sources. Mukherjee makes the extremely pertinent observation that “Because he responds to life only when it is refracted through the prism of art and literature, he makes a sweeping judgment that all Indians perceive life second-hand.”

We could sum up the hallmarks of his style: formal statement of what is to follow, precise and crisp details of the visible scene, the subtle cultural markers that particularize the scene brought in with the utmost dexterity and then the inferences that proclaim wide knowledge and deep study.

**SAQ:**

How do the words “an unknown Indian” universalize the “self” who narrates the life-history in the *Autobiography*? (100 words)

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Chaudhuri's birthplace was different from his ancestral village. He was born in Kishorganj, while his ancestral village was Banagram, both of which were in the same district of Mymensingh, then in East Bengal.

Chaudhuri died in the year 1999, having lived in Oxford, in England.

**SAQ:**

Chaudhuri's knowledge of people and social behaviour is never restricted to modernizing details of a scene. He inserts such details that show a 'cultural' intimacy. Can you name some of these in *Passage to England*? (50 words)

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**6.4 CONTEXT OF WRITING**

As students of literature and literary writing, we must take care to understand a work in the context of its composition. But we must also take extra care not to over-emphasize such 'context' while explaining a work. So, here, we may try to explain why or just how Chaudhuri came to write a book like *A Passage to England* in terms of its context but we must also be aware that a writer does not just lift a pen and write when the 'context' arises. It could be the case that a writer may toy with the literary idea for a long time and then eventually, at an opportune moment, set down the idea in black and white. So, which 'context' will have to be considered in such situations is a matter deserving proper awareness. Thus, while we may refer to Chaudhuri's actual visit to England as 'context' for his *Passage* it may not necessarily lead us to a significant analysis.

Yet, it would not be irrelevant to note that in the introductory "Plea for the Book", Chaudhuri recounts— "It was in the spring of 1955 that I paid a short visit of five weeks to England, rounding it off with two weeks in Paris and one in Rome. . . The point of giving these figures lies in the range and intensity of the experiences I went through in these eight weeks. . . Hardly

less important is the fact that among all these things were a great many that I had longed to see since my boyhood.”

We are further shown some sentiment regarding the reception given to the articles emerging from the tour. The experience subsequent to Chaudhuri's tour of England clarified their nature such that he goes on to state: “What my senses were dealing with and striving hard to grasp was the reality I would call Timeless England, which I was seeing for the first time, and which I was inevitably led to set against the Timeless India in which I had been steeped all my life. Any acuity of the senses that I developed when abroad was due, not to any innate perceptivity, but to the impact of one big and unfamiliar reality on another equally big though familiar. That is why, in this account of England, India will be found to be walking in freely. I could not define any sensations about the new country without placing them against those about the only country known to me.” This brings to the fore the method that he adopts to highlight his impressions of what he sees. It also lays stress on the fact that perceptions are perhaps never quite as neutral as we consider them to be. ‘Reality’ thus is something not formed only for the moment, by the senses, but something that is carried around mentally till there is a mental encounter with something different. This seems to be the gist of what Chaudhuri writes.

Further, he writes: “I could not define my sensations about the new country without placing them against those about the only country known to me. In fact, I do not think I had any conscious theory at all: my senses worked below the conscious level in such a manner that one-half of my perception of England was the perception of something *not-India*. I saw things there in doublets – there were the things which were positively English, but there were also their shadows cast in a dark mass under the light from India.” These lines are important for the pattern we see in the book. More often than not Chaudhuri is able to vivify his impressions through the contrast he provides with Indian situations, etc. The explanation he gives for the quality of his impressions is lucid: “Of course, my mind was not a clean slate. On the contrary, it was burdened with an enormous load of book-derived notions, . . . ideas of England were all acquired from literature, history, and geography. . . . On this was superimposed all the news of their political, social, and economic troubles that had been broadcast to the world in the previous forty years or so.”

**Check Your Progress:**

1. *A Passage to England* has as much to do with the theme of 'India' as it has to do with either 'travel' or 'England'. Critically examine the validity of such a view with reference to the text.
2. To what extent does Nirad Chaudhuri's *A Passage to England* clarify his point that his "mind was not a clean state" when he undertook the tour of England? Support your answer with textual references.

In the second chapter of the first part, "Meeting the Third Dimension", Chaudhuri refers to a more subtle aspect of his travels in England, the physical sense of reality-unreality that accompanies intercontinental travel. He pinpoints this as "the combination of light and temperature". He explores this "third dimension" through the chapter and reflects that this great difference in the nature of the sunlight "also creates a mood of pervasive wonder, so that a man from the tropics finds it impossible to be gay or blithe in England, although he may be very happy and even aching joyous". The psychological effects of a physical difference is underlined as contributing to the sense of cultural remoteness. Thus, the writer is eager to stress his special understanding of "not so much of the psychological, as of the optical effect of this light. Everything in England presents itself to us in a manner different from visual phenomena on the plains of India. We get a curious sense of the reality of the third dimension". At the end of the chapter, the writer reiterates: "If all this sounds very fanciful, there is at all events my experience of the English scene. After seeing it I have come to feel how idle it is to speak of an objective vision. We see the world as it dictates our way of seeing..."

Chaudhuri's style does not bear much summarizing; it successfully retains its transparency and lucidity that make a difficult subject easy to understand. You will experience this clarity as you read through the *Passage*.

**SAQ:**

Attempt a suitable translation for the word, "Passage" in the title of the book. (50 words)

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**6.5 READING PART I, CHAPTER 7: “THE MOTHER CITY OF THE AGE”**

The obvious reference here is to London. He begins by judging London through its architecture. This point leads him on to discussing the different periods of history that London has survived as a city. Naturally, some of the greatest changes in the West have come about through socio-economic processes and Chaudhuri goes on to view London as one of the great centres of the Industrial Revolution —

“I suppose the great industrial cities would go with London. I did not see any of them with the exception of Birmingham, and that only very cursorily. It struck me, at all events visually, that Birmingham was a replica of nineteenth-century London. I think I can count it and also its fellows among the offspring of London. and the Great Mother of modern cities has many children both in the West and the East. I include Calcutta among them”

These are not casual remarks; they are backed by extensive historical knowledge. To see Birmingham as London had done in the nineteenth century is due to the awareness of the sweeping changes over the country brought about by the march of industrialization at the time. Simultaneously, to connect this fact with Calcutta is correct because Calcutta, as the first Presidency town of British India, too was swept over by the march of Western industrialisation.

**Stop to Consider:**

In Chapter IV of his *Autobiography*, Chaudhuri writes: “The story of our preoccupation with England may justifiably give rise to skepticism. I have described the three places which constituted our boyhood’s actual environment. If these descriptions have served their purpose, then with the sensation of that environment fresh in mind, one could question the presence in it, not only of any

knowledge of England, but also all means of knowledge. I too shall most readily admit that our means of knowing was as casual as our knowledge was extraordinarily uneven. If I may put it that way, the chiaroscuro of our knowledge of England was extremely sensational. It had intense highlights in certain places and deep unrelieved shadows in others, so that what we knew gripped us with immeasurably greater power than it would have done had we seen it in more diffused and, consequently, more realistic light. On the other hand, what we did not know was so dark that we could easily people the void with phantasms evoked out of our ignorance.”

Chaudhuri’s historical knowledge is geared to the understanding of English moods as we can see when he informs us that “town”, the word used without an article, meant ‘London’ to the eighteenth-century Englishman, so important was the city. As if to lure the potential tourist, Chaudhuri enumerates the “beauty spots” of London, reminding us that “it is not usual, or fashionable either, to speak of the beauty of London”. He tells us of St. James’s Park, Trafalgar Square, Whitehall, London’s Norman and Gothic styles, Henry VII’s Chapel, St. Paul’s, and so on. But we not allowed to rest content with so much: “Yet I am perfectly sure that not one of these ways is the right one to see London *qua* London, not only of our days but also of the eighteenth century”.

We are then, through the ‘eyes’ of the author, led on the journey out through the city, the “grey and grimy flesh of the city, exposing backyards, clothes-lines, peeled-off plaster, kitchens, bathrooms and coal-heaps” to the countryside. As if to sum up a more balanced view, it is stated: “London must be regarded as the base of a new mode of human existence, and that is what it has been in the last hundred years or so, and is today. It is a town which has broken out of the old classification of human habitations as rural and urban. It is no longer a historic city, although it has a long history. London is neither Westminster Abbey ...It has absorbed all its past, near and distant, in its present.” The ‘passage’ to an understanding or appreciation of London cannot be superficially placed on physical or commercial splendour. It should be seen as the landmark in the evolution of a society. So its past can only mean by what it has contributed to the present. This passage of time or history is evident in the proof of its structures.

We should be keen to the manner in which Chaudhuri does not submerge his commentary in visual or descriptive details. Rather than trying to arrive at either a positive or a negative stand regarding the impressions of London, the writer emphasizes a subjective view but tempered with an historical understanding.

**SAQ:**

How much importance would be attached to the fact that the writer's impressions of London are given a whole chapter? (80 words)

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We could compare this chapter with Chaudhuri's description of Delhi in *The Continent of Circe* or the description of Calcutta in his *Autobiography*.

**6.6 READING PART II, CHAPTER 2: "THE ETERNAL SILENCE OF THESE INFINITE CROWDS..."**

Chaudhuri clarifies here that here his interest is "with the public behaviour of the English people". He compares how the English conduct themselves in public with Indian manners and finds that the latter are more hearty in public than in private. He gives an example of an Indian's complaint regarding "the silent habits of the English people." He describes the incident in these words: "A sailor perishing in the Arctic Ocean could not have felt more strongly about the icebergs."

Chaudhuri's task is difficult and he resorts necessarily to his personal experience. He experienced the typical English silence in public when he went down Oxford Street. He finds Pascal's description apt to sum up this experience. We can appreciate Chaudhuri's familiarity with the work of the

famous 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (after whom we even have a computer programming language being named!). He goes on to tell us that such public silence was the norm even in the pubs or restaurants. This standard is a contrast to the behaviour of the Indians, besides other Europeans. There follow five humorous paragraphs on Chaudhuri's experiences in the buses of Delhi. The last anecdote that he narrates is not merely amusing but also touching and Chaudhuri comments finally that "It is this *comédie humaine*, this large-hearted wiping out of the distinction between public and private affairs, this craving for sympathy in widest commonality spread, that make us recoil from the dreariness of the public behaviour of the English people."

Chaudhuri's accounts are based on the idea of cultural neutrality, in the sense that there is no acknowledgement of a cultural gap in his perceptions. The ordinary travelogue is likely to emphasize this very cultural gap in giving colour to the narrator's perceptions. To that extent, Chaudhuri, we can say, does not exoticize what he sees in England and this may be the reason for his adding that Englishmen "have heard the comment mostly from Frenchmen and other Europeans, and so can have no conception of the contrast they present to our ways in India. It is this contrast rather than the general fact of the silence which I wish to bring home..."

As he searches for the telling difference between the British and the Indian he finds it difficult to essentialise this contrast. Chaudhuri sees acculturation as a process and revisits the past history of ancient India to understand how Indians assumed their typical character.

**Stop to Consider:**

You will find it relevant to remember here that the question of conception, misconception or, representation in general, is integral to the genre of travel-writing or writing that is based on the difference of culture. Chaudhuri highlights this issue in *The Heart of India* (or *The Continent of Circe*). In the introductory chapter entitled, "The World's Knowledge of India Since 1947", we are given an appraisal of the information gathered by the British during their rule: "So long as British rule lasted, its strongest point was District or local administration. In the same way, the strongest point of the intellectual equipment was its empirical value, derived from a mass of information collected through directed field



exploration.” This knowledge was useful but it covered rural India and the common people. “The men who collected this knowledge knew little about the Westernizing middle-class, and certainly cared still less. They were repelled by this class of Indians, and always denied their representative character and discounted their influence and power. The result was an insistent emphasis on the static and conservative aspects of Indian life and thought. In this way they were one-sided, but the one-sidedness was in favour of what was and will always remain nine-tenths of India.

All this has been not only changed but replaced by the opposites. The seekers of knowledge about India are no longer workers seeking it for practical ends, but nearly all . . . engaged in observation and interpretation, sometimes out of intellectual curiosity, sometimes in the service of preconceived ideas and policies. . .

...these men stay in the Westernized quarters of the big cities and know nothing of the truly Indian parts of even the same cities. . .

Thus, the world’s knowledge about India today is obtained overwhelmingly at one remove from people belonging to the Westernized and urban upper middle-class, who have become the heirs of British rule. . . in the very nature of things they are unqualified to give a full or fair view of what is taking place in the country. . . it would be a mistake to think that as a class they deceived intentionally. They are so completely imitative of the West, so dependent on current literature written in English, mostly by foreigners, for their knowledge of their own country, so ignorant about the original sources of knowledge, and so formed by the urban upbringing that the whole of traditional and rural India remains outside their ken. . .”

This passage makes abundantly clear the point that representations are often dependent on the personal location of the subject. Knowledge of a topic or an object arises through various contestations or through certain complexes of sources which give shape to the final result. India, if it is to be known properly, Chaudhuri clarifies, must be represented in all her aspects. The source, therefore, cannot be only one.

## **6.7 READING PART III, CHAPTER 1: “SHAKESPEARE IN TODAY’S ENGLAND”**

The writer begins by reminding us that this part of the work is entitled, “Cultural Life”. Together with chapter 3, of this section, we can look closely at what Chaudhuri takes up as defining a culture. He explains, in the opening paragraph as to what he selects—Shakespeare—as ‘culture’. He begins, “We in Bengal used to worship him”. Details of the luncheon provided at the

391<sup>st</sup> anniversary are given with some ironic humour in describing the people who made the appropriate speeches. He compares Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford, with status given to his native place in Bengal, — "Here was a little town doing quite well on Shakespeare, as the country town in which I was born did on litigation, which in its turn was kept going by the money brought in by jute."

What interests and amuses Chaudhuri is the commercialization of Shakespeare and his answer to the comparison with Indian practices is that "In our country religion is still more commercialized but religion is there." This is from the letter he had written to his family. The point that Chaudhuri understands is that Shakespeare's literary value is subsumed by the commercial value his name generates. Thus, "Nobody flourishes on Kalidasa, however heavy he might be as a brick to throw at Englishmen when they talk about Shakespeare." Chaudhuri is remarkably neutral in his assessment of the English adoration of Shakespeare in that he does not see anything regrettable in the current attitude towards the literary icon: "It is only when a man tries to read Shakespeare as he reads a modern novel that he feels how strangely distant and even absurd Shakespeare can be. But in contemporary England he seems to have become popular entertainment."

Chaudhuri embarks on a lively account of good productions of *As You Like It* at the Old Vic and then at Stratford, and the literary satisfaction he got from these. What he finds surprising is that the part of Rosalind in *As You Like It* which involves dressing up a boy as a woman (that being the usual method in Shakespeare's time) and projecting it as a woman dressed up as a youth (Ganymede), is still practiced. "The question arose in my mind – what had made a contemporary producer keep that bit of typical stage trick of the Elizabethan age?" An inference he makes regarding the contemporary attraction of Shakespeare among English audiences is hasty—"The immediate explanation I gave to myself was that the English people remain basically Elizabethan and have always been so." His attendance at the production of Racine's *Athalie* leads him to dwell further upon the question: "What was the relation between a modern civilized people and their classics? I asked myself."

**Stop to Consider:**

**“The Heart of India”**

Following Meenakshi Mukherjee’s assessment that Chaudhuri’s constant preoccupation is himself and India, we should consider his method in sketching both himself and India.

In *The Heart of India* we can follow this preoccupation through the adoption of his method which takes into account what he sees to be cultural markers.

One such noticeable marker is the idea of difference and the obstacles to knowledge:

The chapter, “The World’s Knowledge of India Since 1947” begins with the statement that knowledge should be complete and ‘accurate’. But the chapter gives way to outlining the obstacle to obtaining such satisfactory knowledge. Many a such obstacle is tied to the question of its sources. Chaudhuri gives full attention to the role of newspapers in the compilation of such knowledge or information. More importantly, he evaluates the novelists writing in English:

“in order to be novelists in English these Indian writers are faced by a problem of writing for tackling which.....Most Indian writers solve this problem, not by choosing a genuine Indian subject and creating an adequate Western idiom to express it, but by selecting wholly artificial themes which the Western world takes to be Indian, and by dealing with them in the manner of contemporary Western writers. To put it briefly, they try to see their country and society in the way Englishmen or Americans do and write about India in the jargon of the same masters. . .

Even those who write ‘travelogues’ or ‘reportage’ have adopted this curious manner. They write as they were Western journalists.”

The next chapter, “Culture Begins at Home”, takes Chaudhuri to yet another question surrounding people and cultural artifacts. He narrates how the English continued to revere the old country-houses which were now thrown open to the public to view them. We are given his own insight into the similarity of the *pietra dura* panels to be seen both in Penshurst Place and the Diwan-i-Am in Delhi. Then he quotes from the letter of a friend regarding what was seen in Kenwood House. Even though Chaudhuri does not indulge in seriously introspecting into his views of the English cultural habit, the chapter is most revealing of one aspect of his English sojourn.

### **6.7.1 READING PART III, CHAPTER 3: “ADVENTURES OF A BROWN MAN IN SEARCH OF CIVILIZATION”**

We are taken through a whole paragraph as the chapter opens, to be informed of the predominance of the conception of Europe put into place by the those who were educated at London School of Economics. This finding is modified: “I cannot say that this Europe of current politics and economics does not exist. But at all events it does so in a dimension of reality which is not perceptible through the senses. One has to make a special effort to discover it”. We are faintly mystified by what he says next – “there is another Europe which is tangible everywhere. It is not simply that you can see this other Europe if you want to, you cannot escape it even if you do not.” What he means by this is, “the Europe of European civilization”. Chaudhuri remarks on the ubiquity of the European past in its present, through the items of its cultural heritage. This observation comes with a statement of the writer’s ‘Indian’ mental habits. “India is a land of ancient and massive civilizations, but the universal recognition of this fact has enabled us to repudiate the contact with the past.”

His own experience leads him to conclude that “For the great majority of my countrymen their historic civilization is a culture in the anthropologist’s sense of the word. It has been reduced to its simplest to become a more or less inert psychological environment, in which they live as fish do in water.” We have to read this together with what precedes it in the earlier paragraph telling us why Chaudhuri himself thought that he had not “captured its spirit”, that is, the spirit of Indian culture. He makes a distinction between the Western understanding of culture and the Indian. It is pertinent here to stress Chaudhuri’s use of the term, anthropology. We should remember that modern anthropology is of Western origins and Chaudhuri is right in saying “Our men of culture practise it in the abstract, as modernist painters practise abstract art.” The practice of abstract art, we can presume, is not cultivated but comes easily. Nationalism comprises a part of the ‘cultural consciousness’.

**Stop to Consider:**

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her essay “The Anxiety of Indianness”, refers to Raja Rao’s canonical statement made in his ‘Foreword’ to his novel *Kanthapura*. Mukherjee uses this statement to discuss the position of Indians writing in English, the novelists, in particular. For us, this discussion has some relevance in helping us to situate Indian writers in the canvas of world literature. She takes up English fiction written by Indian writers because it has gained international repute: “in the long history of Indian literature(s) writers in English are the latest arrival, some might even say interlopers, and certainly people who have taken their shoes off and made themselves at home. But the metaphor may not be quite appropriate because writers in English need not take their shoes off to be comfortable: they keep them on because they are, at least potentially, among those whom *Time* magazine calls “the new makers of World Fiction”, whose raw material may be in India, but whose target readership spans countries and continents, keeping them ever-ready to undertake journeys — either real or figurative. Taking off your shoes will not do when you have to travel these days.”

The writer gives clearly his reasons for expecting a certain kind of cultural receptivity among the English. He is taken by surprise therefore “I did not think that the highest expressions of English civilization had become museum exhibits, but I did assume that they would be found to be surviving as more or less exclusive activities in more or less exclusive circles, in short, as the esoteric interests of a dwindling *élite*. What I saw was, however, the opposite.”

The next few pages cover Chaudhuri’s enjoyment of the many cultural artifacts. You can make a list of these. Towards the end of the chapter, Chaudhuri addresses the reader: “The things I have been singling out for mention may be set down as very special interests. Some of them are, but that would not invalidate the point I am wishing to make about the general character of the cultural life of the English people.” What is his point? “These things were not on view for me, *pour mes beaux yeux*; they were meant for the natives. If in Shakespeare and the country houses my interests coincided with theirs, in the case of these things their interests must have coincided with mine.” He uses this argument to ‘prove’ that the English valued ‘civilization’. But, inevitably, “someone might ask me, ‘What is civilization?’ Chaudhuri’s answer is the argument he gives for the changing

cultural status of soap: “when mankind had taken a new leap towards material progress, advanced thinkers identified civilization with soap, as the symbol of cleanliness.” This changed as ideas of sanitation became universal and even co-existed with extreme forms of vulgarity or mental barbarism. As he points out, some proponents of culture have even begun to deny its values. The chapter ends with the difficulty of defining ‘civilization’. Anything, as Chaudhuri explains, may function as a cultural marker—Shakespeare, as much as the Chelsea Flower Show.

**Check Your Progress:**

1. Recount in your own words Nirad C. Chaudhuri’s impressions of London. How much did he count its importance in terms of its historical standing?
2. What are the ‘adventures’ that Nirad C. Chaudhuri includes in his account of his search for ‘civilization’? Explain his use of the term, “adventures” in this context.
3. Explain Nirad Chaudhuri’s juxtaposition of “Timeless England” with “Timeless India” in his account of the passage to England.
4. ‘Passage’ rather than ‘travel’ is the theme of *A Passage to England*. Highlight Nirad Chaudhuri’s persistent concern to circumvent the stereotypes of travel writing in his work.

**6.8 SUMMING UP**

The unit has sought to help you with understanding the finer points of this classic text of Indian Writing in English. Your reading of the book should reveal to you just how deeply and with profundity Nirad Chaudhuri takes up his subject. We have tried above to make this very clear just as we have tried to show you the themes and strategies of his writing. You must keep firmly in view the fact that Chaudhuri’s work takes its original flavour from the times that he wrote in—not long after the achievement of Indian political independence. The racial polarities were strongly at work in this context and when Nirad Chaudhuri gives us his descriptions of England and

Englishmen we have to compare this with what he attempts in his other works. His rhetoric is therefore often charged with contemporary views of what cultural difference implied or contained. The sojourn in England was a cultural event that had a significance much beyond what we would ascribe to it today. It still remains nearly unspeakable in our postcolonial times.

*A Passage to England* is highly important for the way it enlightens us regarding the question of representation. If Nirad Chaudhuri's concern is to be just to his impressions of England, his concern is equally with being just to the portrayal of his own countrymen. In both directions enters the difficulty of cultural location. As you have read through the unit, this should have become clear.

## 6.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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