
Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India*: The Writing of History, Fighting for Freedom in Ahmandnager Jail

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**Summary**

Jawaharlal Nehru is another combatant against the English Colonial system known for his long struggle for national self-determination. Like Gandhi, and other twentieth-century anti-colonial revolutionaries—some famous, some not—he was educated in the colonial home country at the best institutions; in Nehru’s case, Cambridge University and the Temple Inn Bar. This experience of English “civilization,” India’s suffering and predicament as a subject nation and the injustices of foreign rule, prompted him to political action—action that led to his confinement in His Majesty’s Prisons for a total of nine years. He was then elected prime minister of a newly independent India just two years after getting out of prison. *Discovery of India*, written during his longest prison stay, is a panoramic view of the country—its history, people, politics, and future.—J.W.R.

**Introduction**

On a sweltering August pre-dawn in 1942, the 52-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru was abruptly woken in his sister’s house in Bombay and informed that the police had arrived to arrest and take him to jail. Neither surprised nor alarmed, he took his time to shave and write a few letters, before accompanying the police to Bombay’s railway station, the Victoria Terminus, where a special train conveyed him and many others to an old medieval fort in the western town of Ahmandnagar. This was to be his confined space for the next three years till his release in June 1945. This was where he completed perhaps his most famous book, *The Discovery of India*.

Jawaharlal Nehru was no stranger to prison. From his first arrest and conviction in 1921, he was jailed eight times and spent a total of nine years incarcerated. Each time his jailer was the British government, which ruled India at that time; on each occasion, his offence was blatant and deliberate opposition to that foreign rule with the intention of ending it. For Nehru was amongst the most illustrious of Indian freedom fighters, a prominent member and leader of the Indian National Congress, immersed in its efforts to obtain India’s independence from the British. He led and participated in agitations, protests, acts of civil disobedience, consistently and energetically defying British authority for more than twenty years. In response, the British arrested and detained him—and many others, including Mahatma Gandhi—in a variety of Indian jails. Freedom was eventually won in August 1947 and Jawaharlal Nehru became independent India’s first Prime Minister. By then he had also published several books, mainly produced behind bars.

*The Discovery of India* was the last of his three most distinguished books, prior to which were *The Glimpses of World History* (written in the form of letters to his daughter, Indira, in 1934) and the 1936 *An Autobiography*. There is a discernible development of themes and preoccupations through the three books, and *The Discovery of India* is a culmination of Nehru’s explorations of history, India and himself, and a preparation for India’s self-governance and his assumption of power. In “discovering India,” he was delineating its past, dissecting its colonial present and determining its independent future.
Biography and Political Beginnings

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in 1889 into an affluent, upper-class Brahmin family of Allahabad, a culturally and politically vibrant northern Indian city. His father, Motilal Nehru, was a self-made, successful lawyer, who joined the Indian National Congress to challenge British rule. Yet he had many English friends who enjoyed his lavish and convivial hospitality. Motilal's liberal social views, his rejection of caste restrictions and his genial agnosticism, encouraged a lively, open formative environment for the young Jawaharlal. But as the only child for almost ten years before the birth of his two much younger sisters, he experienced a loneliness that seems to have remained a part of his temperament even in his most tumultuous political days.

He was initially taught at home by European governesses and tutors, and at the age of fifteen travelled to England for his education in the most elite English institutions from 1905 to 1912: first at the exclusive private school, Harrow, then at Cambridge University for a degree in science. This contributed to his life-long appreciation of a scientific outlook and scientific achievements, and complemented his love of literature, history, even sociology, as reflected in his writings. His biographers have noted that in college he encountered the ideas of progressive intellectuals, such as Bertrand Russell, John Maynard Keynes and George Bernard Shaw, studied about the Italian revolutionary Garibaldi and the French and American revolutions, and was attracted to the English Fabian Socialists' views, which advocated a gradual and reformist form of socialism. He also followed closely the development of India regarding calls for Swaraj (the movement for more Indian involvement in governance) and Swadeshi (the movement to promote Indian products and boycott imported British goods).

Jawaharlal completed a law degree, passing the London Bar exam, and finally returned to India in 1912 to enter his father's flourishing legal practice, and marriage to Kamala after overcoming reservations about an arranged marriage to an unknown bride. Though Kamala suffered frail health, she participated in the freedom struggle and was jailed on one occasion. She died before Indian independence, and The Discovery of India begins with poignant descriptions of her final illness and death.

Motilal, eager to devote more time to Indian nationalist politics, delegated much of his successful legal practice to his 23-year-old son. But legal cases never engaged Jawaharlal's interest as he wrote, "I felt I was being engulfed in a dull routine of a pointless and futile existence" (Wolpert 29). And the biographer Stanley Wolpert writes, "the only diversion Jawaharlal could find for his unused energy and intellect was Indian politics ... [it] offered him an arena of conflict, one sufficiently diverse to invite intellectual dissent ... in this impossible imperial Raj" (Wolpert 29–30).

Jawaharlal attended his first political meeting of the Indian National Congress in December 1912, after which his commitment to the freedom struggle became all-consuming. Working for and leading the Congress party, he developed a close association and partnership with Gandhi: Gandhi seemed "the only person giving effective reply to the brutality of the British," writes Nehru expert S. Gopal (787). In the campaigns against British rule, Nehru also embraced the Non-Violent Civil Disobedience informed by the Gandhian principles of Satyagraha (which literally translates as "insistence on truth"). The tactics of Satyagraha—strikes, protests, pickets, deliberate infringement of British laws—were aimed at asserting the "truth" of Indian rights, exposing and countering the venality of colonial laws, challenging British authority, and weakening the capacity of colonial institutions to function effectively. Retribution—from beatings to arrest and imprisonment—was inevitable, and its endurance was integral to the Satyagraha doctrine as explained by Gandhi: "a vindication of truth by the infliction of suffering not on the opponent, but on oneself" Non-violently combating the inequities and inequities of British rule was an honorable duty; unflinchingly accepting the brutal brunt of the law, injury and imprisonment, and continuing the struggle were aIso an indictment of British injustice.

Nehru's Satyagraha activism began in 1919 when the British imposed measures suspending all civil liberties of Indians, including the right to peaceful assembly. In response the Congress party authorized nation-wide strikes and protests which Nehru supported with alacrity as "a way out of that tangle, a method of action which was straight and open and possibly effective. I was aflame with enthusiasm ... I hardly thought of the consequences—law-breaking, jail-going" (Wolpert 40). When British troops massacred civilian families gathered in Amritsar city's Jalianwala Bagh, Britain's moral authority to rule collapsed and India erupted in outrage and protests. Nehru travelled around villages mobilizing Satyagraha actions, and seeing rural India for the first time, he records, was "a revelation. We found the countryside afire with enthusiasm and a strange excitement. Enormous gatherings would take place at the briefest notice by word of mouth" (Wolpert 46). The ubiquitous abject poverty, a legacy of colonial neglect, presented a "new picture of India ... naked, starving, crushed and utterly miserable," shamed his "easy-going and comfortable life" and "filled me with a new responsibility." Many years later, The Discovery of India evoked the degradation he witnessed and its urgent remedies: to eradicate the failed British rule, and advance a socially just independent future.
Jail Terms

By 1921, the year of Jawaharlal's first jail term, he had "become wholly absorbed and wrapt in the movement," experiencing with his co-workers, "a kind of intoxication ... the happiness of a person crusading for a cause," untroubled "by fear or hesitation." He "gave up all my other associations and contacts, old friends, books, even newspapers," except when they dealt with the "work at hand." Later, somewhat remorsefully, he recalls how he "almsost forgot my family, my wife" and infant daughter, as he "lived in offices and committee meetings and crowds," and felt the "thrill and power of influenceing the mass" (Wolpert 49–50).

Nehru's first jail sentence in December 1921 was for protesting against the visit to India by the Prince of Wales, an extravagantly ceremonious symbol of imperial rule. Nehru and his father were arrested while addressing a large crowd, and Motilal proclaimed it "a high privilege to serve my motherland and by going to jail with my only son" (Wolpert 50). Father and son in Lucknow jail were hardly alone—30,000 protesters against the Prince were His Majesty's jailed "guests" across the country.

Released three months later in March 1922, Jawaharlal was back in jail in May after he had organized pickets against merchants selling foreign cloth. The charges were "intimidation and abetment of an attempt to extort" and the sentence two concurrent jail terms of nineteen months. After Jawaharlal entered Naini Jail in April 1930 for illegal salt manufacture, a symbolic breaking of British salt monopoly, his 69-year-old father Motilal soon joined him on sedition charges. Jawaharlal's major concern was for his ailing father crammed into an 11 feet square cell. The family's eminent position kept them supplied with abundant fresh fruit and good food otherwise not available in prison. Motilal recorded his appreciation of Jawaharlal's solicitous care in a letter: "he anticipates everything and leaves nothing for me to do. I wish there were many fathers to boast of such sons" (Wolpert 114).

Jawaharlal Nehru returned alone to prison in January 1931, sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment for inciting peasants not to pay taxes, followed by arrest in 1940 for sedition. But his final incarceration in 1942 in the remote, rugged barracks of the converted Ahmadnagar Fort, was the longest, and possibly harshest. Nehru and the entire Congress party leadership landed in jail when they launched the uncompromising "Quit India" movement, refusing to support the British World War II effort without assurance of Indian self-governance. And in Ahmadnagar jail he completed The Discovery of India.

When not in jail, Nehru plunged into the unceasing political work of organizing, negotiating, public speaking. He also traveled abroad, including to Spain during its Civil War and the Soviet Union. In Europe he visited labor organizations, mines and factories and attended a Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Brussels, strengthening his socialist, anti-imperialist proclivities. In the Soviet Union, he was "impressed by the tremendous changes" produced by the Russian Revolution, and recognized that "socio-economic emancipation" needed to accompany the political change pursued by the Indian nationalist movement, writes political scientist L. S. Rathore. However, David Kopf insists that Nehru was "not seduced by Communist propaganda," and B. G. Gokhale claims that Nehru's early enthusiasm towards the Soviet Union for "one of the mightiest experiments in history" was later "tempered by the events of the Stalinist era." Moreover, argues Gokhale, "the Gandhian influence on him was so deep and pervasive that Nehru could not subscribe to the violence implicit in Soviet brutalities, and his Liberal Humanist sympathies rejected Soviet-style coercions, regimentation and suppression of freedoms. Not surprisingly, Nehru fiercely abhorred the Fascism emerging in Europe and unequivocally declined invitations from Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany in 1936 and 1937.

Jail Experience

During his nine years in jail, Nehru celebrated several birthdays, but also suffered the deaths of his father and wife. The conditions of these jail terms varied from comforts such as "rickety furniture" provided by kind jail staff to deprivations of reading, writing and family visits, mosquito and bug infestations. Accommodation could be a single cell or one shared with another inmate, often a political colleague or on two occasions his father. At Ahmadnagar he was disconcertingly first housed in a large space with several other political prisoners, though eventually he had a more private space.

Nehru had a variety of responses to these enforced periods in jail. He invariably used the actual arrest, trial and sentencing to make some of his most flamboyantly defiant speeches, repudiating British rule, proclaiming imminent Indian triumph, welcoming his arrest as an honor and glorifying jail "as a heaven for us ... a holy place of pilgrimage," (Wolpert 56). During his 1922 conviction, he exulted in sedition as the "creed of the Indian people" (Wolpert 56). In 1930, he declared he had "no other profession, no other business ... or aim than to fight against British imperialism and drive it from India," willing to pay the price in bloodshed and suffering to realize "the India of our dreams" (Wolpert 118). Following his 1942 arrest, Nehru is reported to have quoted Oliver Cromwell's defiance to the English monarch: "You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you" (Kennedy 155).

Release from prison was also attended by statements fiercely denouncing "the larger prison that is India today," and anticipating the time when "we will demolish all the prison walls that encompass our bodies and minds, and function freely as a free nation" (Wolpert 297).

Incarceration, writes Stanley Wolpert, would "become the highest form of Nehru's national service" (57), though S. Gopal argues that a "thrill" and "emotional nationalism" are more evident in Nehru's earlier jail-related letters and diaries (Gopal 788).

For most part, Nehru seemed to adjust to the rigors of prison life, writing to his sister about waking at 3:30 in the morning, and following an orderly...
Sometimes the forced inaction of prison brought relief, and he wrote in letters about “slowly developing a measure of serenity, poise, strength of purpose” (Fisher 371), and that “prison life has one sovereign virtue ... teaches one detachment and the capacity to see things in their proper perspective.” But he also complained about being “bored, fed up, angry with almost everything and everybody ... my companions who get on my nerves, with the country in general for not being aggressive and active as it might, with the British Empire and above all, with myself” (Wolpert 135).

When conditions were tightened, he was denied family visits and banned from writing, his thoughts were plaintively bleak: “Same round day after day, nothing to distinguish one day from another,” an “occasional missed meal” seeming like a “remarkable event.” Books came to his rescue: “what we ule do without these to escape from ennui and depression” (Wolpert 138). While prison afforded him respite from the frenzy of political action and provided a sanctuary to think and write, yet he was frustrated, almost agonized, by his separation from ongoing political actions, deliberations, negotiations and important decisions.

This was definitely the case during his three years in Ahmadnagar prison when he wrote The Discovery of India. In the outside world major decisions were being made regarding India’s future—especially intense debates about Muslim demands for a separate state—from which he felt excluded. His co-prisoners did include other Congress party notables, such as Sardar Vallabhai Patel and Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. In addition to his own writing, he read books such as Plato’s Republic, Proust, and Lin Yutang’s With Love and Irony.

His greatest mode of relaxation seemed to come from gardening, and he created and worked every day on a rose garden with gardening equipment provided by the prison administration and the help of non-political prisoners. A badminton court was also built by the prison authorities and the political prisoners’ leisure time was often occupied by games of badminton. In between the blossoming roses and badminton games, he finished The Discovery of India.

The accumulated convictions and understandings from his varied experiences, travels, political engagements, prodigious reading and writings are processed and refined in The Discovery of India. Nehru’s biographers and analysts usually remark on his complex, often contradictory, world-views and intellectual affiliations: “half-Liberal, half-Marxist view of history,” contends S. Gopal (305); “intellectually rooted in European Enlightenment, but also in Hindu Vedantic philosophy” (Mathur 528); a scientific rationalist, but not a dogmatic atheist (Rathore 460). “The study of Marx and Lenin,” wrote Nehru, “helped me to see history and culture in a new light” (Mathur 530), and he adopted aspects of a Marxist theoretical approach: “the dialectic of continuous change by evolution” (Gokhale 313), the interplay of economics and politics, of imperialism and capitalism, and the role of impersonal forces, class conflicts and social struggles in historical narratives and political action. However, Nehru’s passionate humanism “rejected a mechanistic view of human nature” (Gopal 789), writing history not just of impersonal masses, but of individuals as “singular creatures ... of spirit and dignity, in involved in endless struggle ... suffering repeated martyrdom ... also rising again and again and triumphing over every adversity” (Gokhale 316).

The Book The Discovery of India

Among the early reviewers of the book, Benjamin Schwartz in 1947, described it as an “indispensable book for understanding India ... mature, lucid, eminently readable,” and in a 1991 article, historian David Kopf endorsed it as “a brilliant exposition of Indian cultural change and continuity over five millennia,” and “not only a history of India, but a superb comparative history of India and the world” (62). Nehru began work on it during his 1940–1941 incarceration in Dehra Dun jail, and continued after 1942 in Ahmadnagar. But in the Introduction he confesses an ambivalence about the project: “Du ring all these months I have often thought of writing, felt the urge to do it and at the same time a reluctance ... My friends took it for granted that I would write and produce another book, as I had done during previous terms of imprisonment” (34). Yet he hesitates, anxious that it won’t be “of particular significance,” distanced from the events swirling in the outside world, “what would my poor writing of a past and vanished age be worth then” (34)? He plans to discard the existing pages as “stale and uninteresting” and envisions a different way to assemble his narrative of “the debris of a half-forgotten past” (35).

This new narrative would address the questions that are raised at the beginning of the chapter titled “The Quest”: “What is this India apart from历史 physical and geographical aspects? What did she represent in the past? What gave strength to her then? How did she lose that old strength, and has she lost it completely? Does she represent anything vital now, apart from being the home of a vast number of human beings? How does she fit into the modern world?” (49)?

In answering these questions, Nehru composed a book that comprises history, social analysis, autobiographical details and intellectual explorations, in a combination of the modes evident in his earlier Glimpses of Human History and An Autobiography. This book focuses on the making and renewal of India: its diverse, multi-religious, multi-ethnic cultural and economic history, its contemporary predicament under British rule, existing problems and their future solutions in an independent Indian nation. A major purpose is to understand and explain the causes, circumstances and consequences of India’s colonization by the British. Despite multiple conquests and disruptions in the past, India and its people had prospered and advanced. By contrast, India under the British is reduced to degradted, abject subjecthood. It is to retrieve India from this subjecthood that he fights against British rule, goes to prison and writes his book.

Two other important aspects of his imprisonment also direct the narrative, especially the latter sections of it: one, to explain why he and the Congress Party had refused to support the Allied war effort (in spite of his unwavering anti-fascism) unless India was free. Second, his evident dismay and a larm that while he and the Congress leadership were in prison, the Muslim League and its leader Jinnah (a former Congress leader) were free to pursue their goal of a separate Muslim state which Nehru strenuously opposed.

A Book Description and Analysis

It is curious that the book, intended as an exploration of a complex national history, starts with a very personal account of the last years of his wife’s illness and death. He describes how during his previous internment in 1934, he was briefly released so he could visit his wife, a tuberculosis patient in a sanatorium in the German Black Forest. She briefly recovered, but died some years later and he dedicated his second book, An Autobiography, to her. Then, after this brief foray into personal grief and remorse, he launches into aspects of his prison life and his book’s subject.
India's history is traced from the 5000-year-old advanced civilization of Mohenjo Daro, through successive dynasties and kingdoms, invading armies, settling powers, and the strengths and weaknesses of different periods are appraised. Nehru particularly values India's capacity to absorb and accommodate diverse, enriching influences. Central Asian tribes, Afghan and Mongol conquerors all arrive, mingling, assimilating, and contribute to the eclectic cultural ethos. India, he writes, "was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer ... had been inscribed ... yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously" (59). The diversity, furthermore, doesn't preclude a "tremendous impress of oneness" t hat "has held us together" (59). This "oneness" is sometimes vague mystification; sometimes evoked through illiterate village folks' familiarity with the same stories from ancient epics. A distinguishing feature of the oneness is a consistent record of "cultural fusion and synthesis" which first began between migrating Aryans and local Dravidians (73). "Basic Indian culture," he insists, is defined by "the astonishing inclusive capacity to absorb foreign races and cultures," and the concomitant willingness of foreign arrivals (whether people or ideas) to enter into the synthesis and fusion. This notion of the Indian identity gives Nehru the greatest personal satisfaction, enables him to argue that Muslims in India don't need a separate homeland, and defines the vision of a secular, pluralist India.

He situates India in a wider international context by emphasizing the close ties and vital contacts from ancient times with Sumeria, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Arabia, China, and Indian commercial and cultural influence in East and Southeast Asia. In this pluralistic, inclusive India, religions coexist, classical and vernacular languages flourish, science and mathematical concepts are developed and disseminated in a wider world. Golden ages of a r tic brilliance and economic vitality do not end when Islam arrives: new forms are invigorated, new splendors conceived, but India's scientific legacy suffered.

Nehru documents all the mathematical and scientific achievements up to the 8th century CE, and then laments the decline of scientific inquiry. He particularly faults the Mughals (the last imperial rulers before the British) for neglecting scientific pursuits and areas such as ship-building (even though he notes that Indian-built ships were used in the Napoleonic wars) and ceding scientific progress to Europe from the 16th century onwards, which propelled European domination in the subsequent centuries. There's particular chagrin that Europeans came to India for Indian manufactured product s, such as textiles; then acquired the power to destroy the industry. As the industrial revolution flourished in England, colonial policies stifled any prospect of industrial growth in India. Nehru locates Indian subjugation and inferiority in its current industrial backwardness, and therefore his vision for the Indian future emphasizes the revival of science and industry ... almost a return to a past glory.

In this ebullient narrative of hybridity and harmony, of strangers settling and adapting, of the indigenous enriched by the imported, only the British are an anomaly. They are conquerors who control but reject India as home; they exert superiority rather than civility; as blatant colonialists they exploit, extract and deplete India's resources. To create a "classic colonial economy" India was reduced to a supplier of raw materials and a market for England's industrial goods (299). British plunder, heavy duties and neglect disfigure and ruin Indian lives: impoverishment and unemployment for the industri al and artisanal class, multitudes forced into agriculture, fragmentation of land, rise of landlords and moneylenders, debts and taxes, breakdown of traditional structures (i.e feudal princes), in their administration, and allied with "reactionary elements" (330), installing feudal landownership and creating landlessness. They also suppressed Indians' freedom to pursue industrial growth and were reluctant to advance reforms in education and health care, except under enormous pressures from educated Indians. He concedes that "English education put Indians in touch with current western thought" but they were an anomaly. They are conquerors who control but reject India as home; they exert superiority rather than civility; as blatant colonialists they exploit, extract and deplete India's resources. To create "a classic colonial economy" India was reduced to a supplier of raw materials and a market for England's industrial goods (299). British plunder, heavy duties and neglect disfigure and ruin Indian lives: impoverishment and unemployment for the industrial and artisanal class, multitudes forced into agriculture, fragmentation of land, rise of landlords and moneylenders, debts and taxes, breakdown of traditional structures (i.e feudal princes), in their administration, and allied with "reactionary elements" (330), installing feudal landownership and creating landlessness. They also suppressed Indians' freedom to pursue industrial growth and were reluctant to advance reforms in education and health care, except under enormous pressures from educated Indians. He concedes that "English education put Indians in touch with current western thought" but they were an anomaly. They are conquerors who control but reject India as home; they exert superiority rather than civility; as blatant colonialists they exploit, extract and deplete India's resources. To create "a classic colonial economy" India was reduced to a supplier of raw materials and a market for England's industrial goods (299). British plunder, heavy duties and neglect disfigure and ruin Indian lives: impoverishment and unemployment for the industrial and artisanal class, multitudes forced into agriculture, fragmentation of land, rise of landlords and moneylenders, debts and taxes, breakdown of traditional structures (i.e feudal princes), in their administration, and allied with "reactionary elements" (330), installing feudal landownership and creating landlessness. They also suppressed Indians' freedom to pursue industrial growth and were reluctant to advance reforms in education and health care, except under enormous pressures from educated Indians. He concedes that "English education put Indians in touch with current western thought" but they were an anomaly. They are conquerors who control but reject India as home; they exert superiority rather than civility; as blatant colonialists they exploit, extract and deplete India's resources. To create "a classic colonial economy" India was reduced to a supplier of raw materials and a market for England's industrial goods (299). British plunder, heavy duties and neglect disfigure and ruin Indian lives: impoverishment and unemployment for the industrial and artisanal class, multitudes forced into agriculture, fragmentation of land, rise of landlords and moneylenders, debts and taxes, breakdown of traditional structures (i.e feudal princes), in their administration, and ally
Such freedom clearly has profound resonances for someone in prison; for someone from a subjugated land. Books and his writings offer Nehru a measure of freedom in prison. But, perhaps concerned that his intellectual wanderings may seem isolated from reality, he records that when he was free he discovered a lot of India by actually travelling around different places, recreating the mountains, rivers, monuments, pilgrim sites, which also gave him insights into the past (51). Self-conscious about his elite status, concerned about being considered removed from the masses, he effuses about visits to the villages, mostly for political purposes, addressing rallies and exhorting freedom. He sometimes writes about villagers with an embarrassment of grace and suppleness and dignity and poise and, very often, a look of melancholy” (67–68). But he invariably registers the abject poverty to which the villages were subjected (58), and excruciating generalizations: “Many a sensitive face and many a sturdy body, straight and clean-limbed; and among the women there was grace and suppleness and dignity and poise and, very often, a look of melancholy” (67–68). But he invariably registers the abject poverty to which the villages were subjected (68) and justify his struggle.

Thus the book discovers the past, records the present and projects both overtly and implicitly, into the future. After his release from Ahmadnagar prison, Nehru participated in the final freedom negotiations with the British, and was the elected prime minister of India's parliamentary democracy from 1947 till his death in 1964. Political writer Ramchandra Guha recently asserted, "We live in a world shaped by him and his colleagues. Adult suffrage, a federal polity, the mixed economy, non-alignment in foreign policy, cultural pluralism and the secular state—these were crucial choices made by the first generation of Indian nation-builders … made collectively, but with the consent and justification of one man above all … Jawaharlal Nehru" (1961).

_The Discovery of India_ has glimpses of policies and Constitutional provisions that would be adopted by independent India under Nehru’s prime ministership. The secular nationalism, industrialization and poverty alleviation that constituted India’s “modern” identity are formulated in the book. Co-existing Socialist and Liberal impulses envisioned a planned, “mixed economy” (combining private enterprises and state-owned industry), to ensure that development benefited the poorest. India's secularism, which constitutionally guarantees equal rights and freedoms to all religions, is often ascribed to Nehru's pluralist, inclusive vision. India's future internationalism, its non-aligned equidistance in the Cold War, relations with China and the non-Western worlds are intimated in the book. The India discovered, to become India advanced, had first to be a free India. The past was not a foreign, nor an other country. It was the same country, awaiting a new future.

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Many voices of protest have been silenced by prison or execution, but some managed to make themselves heard loud and clear—and did so under the most difficult circumstances. The ideas and actions of the authors represented here have helped to shape the course of history, and to forge our collective identity.
Civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr, wrote this open letter in April 1963, in which he defended peaceful protest against racism when he was imprisoned for organising a non-violent protest against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. It was in this letter he penned the now-historic phrase “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” which became an important reference for the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Notorious French libertine the Marquis de Sade wrote prolifically during his years in prison, churning out 11 novels, 16 novellas, and 20 plays. The 19th century Irish playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde penned his moving essay on faith and spirituality, De Profundis, while incarcerated in Reading jail.