

National Imagination and Postnational Condition: Autobiography and the Shaping and Reshaping of Indian Political Discourse

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Abstract: This paper looks at the genre of autobiography and its usage and evolution in the hands of political leaders in India. Comparing two autobiographies, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* and Lalu Prasad Yadav's *Gopalganj to Raisina: My Political Journey* it explores the narrative of what Jaffrelot has classified as two major moments in Indian political history. Carrying forward Elleke Boehmer's discussion on political autobiographies in postcolonial world, who explores the allegory of leaders' journey as nation's emergence, this paper reads the two leaders' autobiographies to compare and contrast their lives, political thought and the nature of allegory with the nation.

Keywords: autobiography, allegory, nationalism, caste, postnation

Introduction

In the arena of political discourse in India, there have been two major waves dedicated to self-defining of the political subjectivity by the people. These movements not only succeeded in forging newer essentialist identities but also sought democratisation on the basis of these identities—with considerable success. The nationalist movement against the British rule in India defined the Indian-ness of the people against the British, and declared the illegitimacy of British rule on the basis of their foreign origin and commitment. This awakening of an 'Indian' selfhood among the people ultimately led to the institutionalisation of Universal Adult Franchise in India or, in other words, institutionalisation of political democracy in India. However, political democracy remained largely reflective of the unequal societal order for a long time. The political discourse, at the national level, remained largely centred on the considerations established by the Indian National Congress – since the inception of the modern Republic – till its fault lines began to show in the 1960s. The nationalist manoeuvre of the Independence movement which, according to Partha Chatterjee, had made an “appropriation of peasant support for the historic cause of creating a nation state” began manifesting its shortcomings (Chatterjee 45). The decade saw the emergence of an alternative political discourse at the national level—one that was concerned with the historic oppression of the lower caste and peasant groups, especially that of North India. Christophe Jaffrelot expresses this development in the following words:

In the mid 1970s the Congress had reached a kind of stalemate since it was congenitally unable to reconcile political and social democracy in North India, the meta-region commanding the fate of the whole country (Jaffrelot 9).

Further, this rise of the lower caste groups from North India in the political discourse of the country has been described by Jaffrelot as “the second age of Indian democracy” (Jaffrelot 9). The nationalist movement of early twentieth century and then the rise of the lower caste anti-Congressism in the last

quarter of the same are two defining moments of not only the mobilisation of specific groups of people in active politics but also the larger political discourse concerning the self and the nation.

Despite considerable discursive changes in the two aforementioned moments of Indian political history, there is a trans-historical truth about the nature of relation between people and their leaders. Political movements, even while carrying egalitarian values, remain centered around personalities of its leaders—a trend especially notable in the third world. While exploring the reasons behind this trend is not a scope of this paper, it gives an important point to reflect upon the self-expression by the political leaders and their reception by the masses who follow their narrative. The narratives of emancipation require a human manifestation whose own improving condition could be seen as the success of the movement. Story of an individual's life becomes a significant point of contact between the leaders and the masses as it gives legitimacy to the movement by showing the sincerity of their leaders and a promise of success. In her work on postcolonial nationalism and male leaders' autobiographies, Elleke Boehmer observes a trend in Postcolonial autobiographies where "the leader's individual selfhood is equated with the nation's collective identity" (Boehmer 66). Benedict Anderson has pointed out the importance of production and distribution of nationalistic literature as an important factor in shaping the political imagination of the masses. Autobiography, though they are written not entirely for the purpose of ideological propaganda, play that role for its consuming public. The trend of ideology-critique in literary studies, emerging out of Marxist understanding of literature and culture, have long since established this idea. Moreover, the role of a leader-as-writer has its own consequence in the narrative, since the leader does not retire from his political role while donning the garb of a writer. The two roles feed into each other in the autobiography of a political leader. This usage of the genre serves not only a confessional purpose but also has a manifesto-like orientation. As much as it is a record of a political life, it is also meant to influence and reproduce such lives—especially when it is written during the leader's active years of his leadership. Not only are these texts products of the authors' political convictions but are also meant as tools for propagation of their political discourse. Writing about the shaping of a national imagination in its male leader's image, Elleke Boehmer mentions that the leader's autobiography "supplies defining images, drawn from the life, through which to understand the nation's emergence into subjecthood, and to justify its new arrangements of privilege and authority" (Boehmer 67). This is particularly true for a country like India where the authority to produce national imaginings remain in the hands of the same elite group which also has the privilege of consuming the written word—especially those written in the English language. This truth about concentration of literary and cultural production as well as the production of political discourse in the same class opens up the ethical task of making speculations beyond the nation-form along with a critique of elite cultural production. Explorations of post-national prospects, as opposed to nationalist imaginations, becomes not only a political task but an analytical force for understanding alternative narratives. If a certain type of political autobiography becomes a narrative of the nation, autobiographies of political leaders who rose in opposition to such politics would provide alternative meanings of community and political vision. Such alternative narratives, I argue, need to be analysed for their breaking away from what Etienne Balibar calls "fictive ethnicity" of the nation form (Balibar 359). It would be interesting to draw such a contrast between two autobiographies from the Indian context since the country's history, as proposed along the lines of Jaffrelot's argument above, has two defining moments of overall political discourse, both representing a democratic development—one political and another social. The following sections of this paper look at autobiographies of two leaders associated with the two waves of democracy – political and social – that India witnessed in the twentieth century. The paper shall look at Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, originally published in 1936, and Lalu Prasad Yadav's *Gopalganj to Raisina* (2019) whose account reflects on his early life of dispossession and a coming of age into the moment of alternative political assertion of the late twentieth century. The paper shall compare the politics expressed by the two texts as well as contrast them on the basis of their engagement with production and challenge to nationalist discourse and imagination.

Jawaharlal Nehru and the Moment of Nationalist Manoeuvre: *An Autobiography*

In his essay “The Constitution of Indian Nationalist Discourse” Partha Chatterjee has described three stages in the formation and development of the discourse of Indian nationalism. The “moment of departure”, the “moment of manoeuvre”, and the “moment of arrival” mark the chronological discursive temperaments within the nationalist thought (Chatterjee 44). While the moment of departure marked an attempt at establishing a cultural superiority of the Indians over the British, developed in the hands of writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the two steps that followed it were subtler and worked rather inwardly and insidiously. The second, according to Partha Chatterjee, was the moment of manoeuvre, led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, which sought to “take nationalist politics to the peasantry” and in doing so it either “transformed” the peasant consciousness or “appropriated” it (48). This was also the time of introduction of utopian ideas like ‘Ramarajya’ into the peasant consciousness. The third and last step was that of departure, which came in the nationalist discourse under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. This was a time of a shift from the earlier ideological manoeuvres towards finding pragmatic solutions for the problems of an emergent nation-state. *An Autobiography*, if looked at in the light of Partha Chatterjee’s classification of nationalist thought, is a document concerning the last two phases in construction of nationalist discourse. On the one hand, it narrates a categorical departure from Gandhi’s idealism, and on the other hand – coming from a socially elite vantage point – presents a nationalist vision based on similar notions of subjecthood as Gandhi’s.

Nehru’s *An Autobiography* lays down its purpose of reproducing the proposed discourse in the opening few pages itself. The 1982 version of *An Autobiography* begins with a Foreword by Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, who declares the book as a narration of “not merely the quest of one individual for freedom, but an insight into the making of the mind of new India” (xv). The claim of being the “mind of new India”, paired with the author’s own admission that “for foreign readers, I would have written differently, or with a different emphasis,” establishes the book’s purpose as not merely a personal recollection but also as a document laying down a proposition for a target audience i.e. the national subject (Nehru xv).

Much like a religious scripture beginning with a genealogy of its prime figure, *An Autobiography* begins with description of Nehru’s family from two generations before him—with specific dates where the narrative requires. In narrating the life journey of his grandfather, for example, the author mentions that “it was in Agra on the sixth of May 1861 that my father was born” (Nehru 2). It brings out his social status as that of the elite class which had access to documentation of births and deaths during the period of British rule. Close access to the institutions set up by colonial rule is a testament to the fact of ownership of resources which the larger colonised population was deprived of. The author, however, does not shy away from acknowledging his social privileges in the least. Far from it, he seems to be presenting his early life with a grandeur in its description, in order for laying a claim as a suitable leader and a provider of hope in the process. In defining his childhood as “sheltered and uneventful” and overt admission of having spent most of his time in close quarters with British machinery, with expressions like “In my heart I rather admired the English,” we find an emerging postcolonial leader expressing his awareness of both the concerned cultures and presenting himself as one who knows the best way to negotiate for a better future for the people of his country (Nehru 6). On a cultural level, Nehru’s autobiography presents an informed critique of superstitions around him, such as that of a ceremony of purification which a Brahmin had to go through upon his return from Europe, in the third chapter. However, the more important critique that is made in the book is not that of the social evils but that of the political practices in his own movement. Nehru writes:

My politics had been those of my class, the bourgeoisie. Indeed all vocal politics then, and to a great extent even now, were those of the middle classes, and Moderate and Extremist alike represented them and, in different keys, sought their betterment. (Nehru 48)

This awareness of the nationalist movement not being representative of the masses is further exemplified with the mentions of newspapers “owned and controlled chiefly by the landlords and the industrialists” which alone was called “nationalist” (Nehru 49). What seems to be happening here is a socialist analysis of the nationalist movement he had been associated with. However, this awareness of the nationalist movement being elite in nature is not to be taken as a complete disillusionment with it on the part of the author. The elitism of the movement could well be a positive aspect of it, when thought of in terms of the capacity needed for running the machinery of a novel nation-state. This needs to be seen as a point where Nehru differed and departed from Gandhi, but not quite. If Gandhi’s method of using religious symbolism in his speeches among the poor irked Nehru, the act of involving peasantry in the nationalist movement and affecting their consciousness itself drew no similar criticism from him. Writing about the fusion of religious elements in the movement, he states:

Even some of Gandhi’s phrases sometimes jarred upon me—thus his frequent reference to *Rama Raj* as a golden age which was to return. But I was powerless to intervene, and I consoled myself with the thought that Gandhiji used the words because they were well known and understood by the masses. He had an amazing knack of reaching the heart of the people. (Nehru 72)

With these words, Nehru expresses a disassociation from the economy of expression and reception which was peculiar to Gandhi’s interactions with the masses. However, this almost painful submission is followed by an admission, almost as a counter point to this expression. With the words that follow, one can read his engagement with Gandhi’s method as not being a criticism but a mere cultural difference which Nehru was too faraway to relate to. As he further writes:

But I did not worry myself much over these matters. I was too full of my work and the progress of our movement to care for such trifles, as I thought at the time they were...so long as our main direction was correct, a few eddies and backwaters did not matter. (Nehru 72)

Here, not only an informed position is being taken on the use of metaphysical elements in a popular movement, but the involvement of larger masses is being used for justifying these elements as well. Religious ideas, which supposedly troubled Nehru when proclaimed before the masses, is being hailed as something which connected people in a way that was incomparable to any other form of expression. Nehru’s nationalism can thus be deduced from his critique of the use of religious symbols in nationalism, and then finding its validity in the larger good of the movement. The means were not important as long as it served the purpose of manoeuvre well. This very idea of appropriating peasant consciousness is of prime importance for the success of the movement—this is not only the *story* of Nehru’s autobiography but is also its *proposition*. The nationalist imagination of India which *An Autobiography* presents is that of an informed social elite during colonial rule, for whom a transfer of power from the British hands to an Indian hand was the sole concern during the movement’s progression. The imagination of the nation, in this view, considers social change as a gradual process which political democracy would naturally usher. This idea guided the political imagination as well as social consciousness for decades. Despite its critique and discomforts – or more so, because of them – Nehru maintains a uniquely nationalistic standpoint, and *An Autobiography* presents a strong nationalist discourse. *An Autobiography* feeds into the nationalist politics of manoeuvre of the time and contributes to the promises of the emergent nation. The imaginations of Indian politics that the book presents remained unquestioned for a long time—till the political rise of the lower castes in North India in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Gopalganj to Raisina: A Postnational Narrative?

The idea of India constructed through the nationalist movement and inherited as a legacy of anti-colonial struggle proved detrimental to the cause of social justice in the long run. It was evident from the awareness of the same by the mainstream leaders like Nehru and their unwillingness to pursue an alternative path. Sumit Sarkar has drawn attention to the stark distinction between the nationalist

movement led by Middle-class leadership and the ‘popular’ struggles led by peasant and tribal leaders in late colonial India to point out their differing concerns, methods and goals of anti-colonial movement¹. The conservative elements of nationalist thought, coupled with Nehruvian appropriation of it into state-ideology, not only ruled out possibilities for alternative politics but also ensured that any radical political thought deserved rightful suppression. Partha Chatterjee recounts the early years of the implementation of Nehruvian rationality of the nation-state in the following words: “The coercion of the state was itself a rational instrument for the achievement of progress by the nation. It was to be used by the state with surgical dispassion, and would be justified by the rationality of its own ends” (Chatterjee 58). Such coercion was necessitated by the project of keeping up the integrity of the newly formed nation-state which in turn necessitated the suppression of voices which sought to break the political and cultural hegemony of the existing nationalist imagination. Apart from the state coercion, nationalism served as an ideology that shaped popular consciousness—especially in the North. According to Christophe Jaffrelot, “in northern India more than anywhere else” Gandhi’s doctrines and ideas had “strengthened the conservatives within Congress” since the time of the anti-colonial struggle (8). This accumulation of conservatism over time necessitated a break away, which came in the form of the emergence of lower caste politics in the later decades.

Today, liberalisation of Economies has given rise to debates around questions of newer subjecthood, in the wake of cross-cultural exchanges. Theoretical formulations around moving beyond the national boundaries and imaginations are being made. These discussions, such as that in Jurgen Habermas’ *The Postnational Constellation* (1998) or Arjun Appadurai’s “Patriotism and Its Futures”, began with the idea of the “post-national” condition as a mingling of people from different nationalities. A major intervention in conceptualising the postnation, however, has been made by Nivedita Menon, in her essay “Thinking through the Postnation” published in 2009, which suggests looking within the national boundary in order to move beyond the nationalist imagination. She writes,

The sense in which I will use the term ‘postnational’ ... is very different from this sense in which corporations and the self-defined ‘global civil society’ conceive of spaces above and beyond the nation-state. (Menon 317)

Menon conceptualises the postnational as “a vantage point that insists on location in the face of translatability” (317). Possibilities of moving beyond the nation can emerge and remain located within the spatial boundary of a nation. The awareness of an absence of universality in the nationalist thought provides a valid ground for alternative prospects. Jaffrelot’s “second age of democracy in India” which came into being as a result of the rise of the lower castes in North India, can be seen as a departure from the national imagination of the past and towards an alternative politics which I shall be calling “postnational”, following Menon’s formulation. The many developments associated with it were within the spatial boundary of the nation, and beyond the elite nationalist imagination formulated by the Indian National Congress since the anti-colonial movement. This alternative politics, which focused on democratisation on the social level, through political power, introduced reservations for the “Other Backward Classes” in government institutions through the implementation of Mandal Commission Report in 1990. This was in direct contrast with the monolithic imagination of Indian society fostered by nationalist manoeuvres where the elite section virtually spoke for all. Interestingly, this was also the time of the rise of the regional political parties in north India. Socio-political democracy and an alternative to monolithic political power in the hands of a single national party went hand in hand. Since our concern is life narratives of political leaders (and our assumption is that they are meant to reflect the authors’ politics as well as serve as allegorical representation of the political discourse effected by their movement), we would look at an autobiography by one of the major leaders of this second phase of democracy in India.

One of the tallest leaders to come out of the late twentieth century politics of anti-Congressism was Lalu Prasad Yadav. Recounting the moment of agitation for Mandal Commission implementation – a milestone for the alternative political assertion – Yadav writes in his autobiography, *Gopalganj to*

Raisina, “I was determined to execute the Mandal recommendation in both letter and spirit” at the cost of being called a “symbol of anarchy” (Yadav 88). This political assertion at the national level spearheaded by the lower caste groups from north India indeed came to be seen as a moment of anarchy for the nationalist politics and imagination.

Lalu Prasad Yadav’s autobiography, *Gopalganj to Raisina*, came out in the year 2019—the year for country’s five year termed general elections. In the book, Yadav critiques the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party representing his archrival ideological position in contemporary political scenario, much more harshly throughout the text than the Indian National Congress against which his early politics and political career had taken shape. This can be seen as a critique of the ideas that inform the two parties in their practical purposes—the former’s more so now than the latter’s. In other words, Yadav recognises the dynamism of the relationship between proclaimed political ideology and the real-life practices which the political parties as their *modus operandi*. The political inheritance of the social evils of caste and class in the Indian National Congress against which he had built his politics was now inherited by the BJP—hence a complete shift of bullseye. He ensures that an understanding of such dynamism comes out as part of the message of his narrative. Narrating an incident where Yadav had saved a woman from a group of preying men who had surrounded her, he makes sure to make a point of the social vision of his politics. He writes:

As I reached near the brick kiln, I found six men catching hold of a woman... The offenders were shocked and surprised to see me in the dead of night... I then escorted the terrified woman, who belonged to an ST, to my vehicle... Then I got cases lodged against the six offenders; they were all BJP men from the Brahmarshi Samaj—an upper caste group—and hailed from proper Bihta suburb. (Yadav 62)

The narrative is overtly expressive of the power-relation between different caste and tribe groups as they manifest in the instances of atrocities. What it also does is presenting a discursive significance of the incident and conveying the political commitment behind his own action. In narrating a tale of his dynamism in saving a Scheduled Tribe woman from members of Brahmarshi Samaj associated with the BJP, the narrator is exposing before the audience several social realities and even hinting at social responsibilities. *Gopalganj to Raisina*, much like Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, is thus meant not only as a confessional or retrospective text but as a manifesto for reproduction of the author’s own politics. A critique of the exploitative neo-nationalism is made evident in the story, even when the context is deeply personal. What is also evident throughout the text is an attempt at changing the essentially exploitative “system” which had been constituted with the birth of the Indian nation-state. Under the subheading “Betrayed by the Bureaucracy”, he explains the failure of his plan for establishing *Charwaha Vidyalayas* (Cowherd Schools) for children who could not go to traditional schools because of their working hours in the fields. A failure of the plan after its initial success is attributed to the fact that he “did not have an adequate number of IAS officers who were committed to the cause of the oppressed and the economically and socially backward classes” (Yadav 93). Tussle with the bureaucracy has been a recurrent theme of the post-Congress era politics in India, and can be seen as a part of the politics against the grain. Yadav’s constant dispute with administrative officers is not only a conflict between two individuals, or even two institutional positions of power, but between a leader who has emerged with the politics of social justice and the dominance of the social elite in the institutions set up by the nationalist politics of half a century before.

In posing a counter-position, *Gopalganj to Raisina* touches upon several different themes. Compared to Jawaharlal Nehru’s *An Autobiography*, Yadav’s autobiography presents a distinctly alternative viewpoint on meta-narratives like religion. If Nehru expresses occasional discomforts with overtly irrational practices, Yadav begins his text with an attack on the scriptural base of the social disparity which he witnessed around him. In the Introduction, he writes:

Even the Manuvadi forces, who subscribe to the caste hierarchy, today claim to be the champions of Babasaheb’s legacy. It would not be out of place to mention here a passage in one of the sacred texts that reflects the caste conundrum:

*Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, nari,
Sakal tadna ke adhikari.*

(The illiterate, the low-caste, the animal and the woman,
They deserve to be beaten up to drive sense into them.) (Yadav 11)

Moreover, the contrast in description of birth and early childhood is even more telling of the social conditions and the consequent possibilities available in life. Nehru's autobiography begins by narrating his grandfather's descent from Kashmir, his father's birth on a certain date, and facets of his protected childhood. In contrast, Lalu Yadav's begins with a sense of humility in its content and expression. In his opening words, "I began my innings in this world in a very ordinary environment. It was as ordinary as ordinary can get. In fact, so ordinary that none in my family seemed to know my exact date of birth" we see a laying out of destitution upon which the narrative further builds its politics (Yadav 1). In the formation of the narrative, Yadav remains keen on presenting his voice not only as belonging to a 'backward' caste, but also as an assertive leader of the same. If on one level, it is a story of a person of socially marginalised section rising to a position of power, it is also about hardships faced and assertions made in its course. The strategic political statements, made between narrating tales of personal and political adventures, can be seen as an attempt in making a place for oneself in the tradition of autobiographies, and also creating and sustaining a political discourse which remains at the risk of being engulfed by nationalistic metanarratives. When looked in comparison with Nehru's autobiography, and Elleke Boehmer's articulation about anti-colonial leaders' autobiographies serving an allegorical function, Yadav's narration can be seen as a post-national political practice, which indulges in breaking glass ceilings on multiple fronts of the setup established by the nation-state – social, political and discursive – while insisting on no real affiliation whatsoever with globalization debates which the speculations of 'post-nation' has usually taken in the final decades of the twentieth century².

In the concluding chapters of *An Autobiography*, Jawaharlal Nehru lists out visions for – and hurdles in – the establishment of a Socialist economy in India. In flirting with the idea of Socialism, he mentions an interesting opinion of Sir Malcolm Hailey who had "prophesied that India will take to National Socialism" as a possibility (Nehru 590). The many considerations around Socialist and Marxist theory, its manipulated application in various countries, and the theory's defense against practical manifestations constitute an entire long chapter in Nehru's text. It can be considered as a vision of the narrator and a logical conclusion to his lifelong efforts. Formation of what has come to be known as 'Welfare state' where the benefits are diffused to the dispossessed from the centralized nation-state's apparatus comes out as the defining proposition of Nehru's writings and political practice. In contrast, the major considerations for Yadav in *Gopalganj to Raisina* is the democratisation of society vis a vis the elitism of bureaucratic and political structures, which cause disservice to the marginalised population. Yadav, in contrast with Nehru whose concern was strengthening of political institution for progress and development, represents a politics which seeks to make changes in the social and political structure itself. He dedicates the Epilogue of his autobiography for comparing the 1975 Emergency with the present i.e. the time of BJP government in power, and declares the latter as more challenging and dangerous. If Nehru's primary concern is economy, Yadav's is democracy.

This divide between the focus on economic welfare by one and societal democracy by the other can be understood through Partha Chatterjee's explanation of two types of "societies" that came into form in the post-colonial era—civil and political. "Civil Society", constituted by the elite section of the country, dedicated itself to the work of welfare for the people, whereas the "political society" became a source of mobilisation – often against the former section – for bringing about "democracy" in social and political quarters (Chatterjee 169). In the light of this formulation, and the narrations of the two autobiographies that we have discussed above, it would not be wrong to postulate that *An Autobiography* is a document of a unique nationalist vision, narrated through an individual leader's life story, representing and addressing the civil society of the modern nation-

state. In contrast, *Gopalganj to Raisina* introduces a postnational prospect, representing and seeking reproduction of a “political society”, from within the spatial boundary of the Indian nation, for fostering newer social, political and narrative frameworks.

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Notes

¹ See Sarkar, Sumit. *‘Popular’ Movements And ‘Middle Class’ Leadership In Late Colonial India*. K P Bagchi and Company, Calcutta, 1983. <http://archive.org/details/dli.bengal.10689.12708>.

² For a discussion on globalization and postnation, refer to Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996).

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