

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's Speech 'Tryst with Destiny': Some Implications

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Abstract: Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the independent India, delivered a speech entitled "Tryst with destiny" towards midnight on 14 August 1947. Speaking from the ramparts of the historical Red Fort in Delhi, he addressed the speech to the Constituent Assembly and to the millions of Indians as well. In his brief and passionate speech, he refers to many important issues concerning India's past, present and future and dwells on the deeper *raison d'être* of the upcoming freedom. He lauds the distinction of India in terms of its constant engagement with the spiritual quest it pursued from the dawn of history; celebrates the significance of the present moment and outlines what path India ought to pursue in future. It is a symbolic speech and has multiple implications having relevance even circumstances that exist today. It has also been a wonderful piece of literature in terms of theme. The paper interprets the symbolic meaning of the brief speech by comparing it with Lincoln's *Gettysburg address* and Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. While making us aware of the responsibility, Nehru enlarges the context of freedom in the light of well-being of the whole humanity. The account given below gives a critical perspective on the central motif of "destiny" that constantly figures in Nehru's speeches. It emphasizes the value of non-violence, the glorious legacy of culture and carves out the blue-print for building a prosperous and democratic Indian nation.

Keywords: freedom, future, responsibility, blue-print, democratic

Introduction:

Some words, some speeches by great men are always remembered by people for generations. Because of their universal appeal they become timeless. Speeches of great leaders have their unique place and value in literary history. Such valuable words serve as a torch bearer for the generations to come. Abraham Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of the Independence*, Martin Luther King's (Jr) *I have a Dream* have gone down in the history as memorable events. These addresses are often pretty brief but quite inspiring to the people at large. Shakespeare called brevity as the soul of wit. In this particular speech, the tone, substance, occasion, style render ample scope for a range of interpretations. Consequently, the present speech is considered as a superb piece of oration in this millennium.

From sleep to awakening:

Nehru's reverence for freedom and the aspiration of the whole humanity flows constantly through this brief speech. He points that the stroke of midnight matters because though the rest of the world is in deep sleep-the moment matters little for them-India awakes to life and freedom. "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom." [1]

She was forced to sleep due to suppression for one and half a century and sometimes it appeared as if it is dead, but it was not so. At the advent of freedom, the soul has begun to utter something in whisper as her freedom of speech was banned for years under the colonial rule. As noted by Iyengar it is "the modern India awakening from the stupor of the centuries and taking the first firm steps in the direction of the future" [2]. The freedom of expression was denied to it. The nation of millions took pledge in the past to make India free. Now that much awaited moment has arrived. This is natural to a nation forced to be slave, but this sort of confusion is a temporary phenomenon. Sri Aurobindo agrees that "certainly the outward members were becoming gangrened; the powers of renovation seemed for a moment to be beaten by the powers of stagnation, and stagnation is death. Now that the salvation, the reawakening has come, India will certainly keep her essential spirit, will keep her characteristic soul" [3]. As in *Discovery of India* and *Letters from father to a Daughter*, the pendulum moves from past to future, and the perception of the present which also marks the dividing and connecting link is clearly evident. His preoccupation with the history is evident here once again in that he revolutionizes the very definition and dynamics of history: "history begins anew for us, the

history which we shall live and act and others will write about”.

The concept of pledge:

Nehru describes this mission as ‘a pledge’, ‘an unending quest’, ‘the ideal’, ‘a triumph’, ‘a challenge’, ‘a responsibility’, ‘an ambition’, ‘work’, ‘a dream’, ‘a noble mansion’, ‘a great adventure’, ‘a bold advance’, ‘an endeavor’ etc. Through this brief speech Nehru outlines the vision for an ideal India. Sonia Gandhi in Foreword to “*An Autobiography*” remarks that in all of Nehru’s works “runs the common thread of Nehru’s own vision and ideals-his passionate commitment to democracy and social justice, his intense aversion to totalitarianism, and fundamentalism, and his exuberant celebration of India’s pluralistic culture” [4]. We had made a tryst with the destiny long ago and now we are to redeem the pledge. Philosophizing on it, he contemplates that such pledges cannot be redeemed wholly or in full measures, but they can be fulfilled substantially. Unquestionably, it matters much even if we redeem such prayers substantially. Therefore he refers to this mission of India as being “her unending quest”. Accordingly, making India free from the yoke of foreign rule was the pledge that the Indians had taken long back. Since from this moment India is free, Nehru questions how this sort of freedom would actually work. The speech brilliantly answers this very question. It has become relevant once again because the task of freedom has been accomplished; now the next step is to wipe tears from the face of the poorest citizen in the country. He brings the poor at the helm of affairs. Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam concludes that “Gandhiji’s strikingly simple criterion was that every action proposed or contemplated, should in its implementation wipe the tears of a poor and downtrodden person” [5]. Both the ideal of nation and freedom remain incomplete if the poor are in tears. His main concern is to find out ways and means in this free nation to improve the lot of the common men, peasants and workers. This is the challenge that we need to accept in the years to come. Unless and until we achieve this object of natural justice, we cannot say for sure that we have redeemed the solemn pledge. He further adds that we feel pleased that we have redeemed one pledge; we need to take another pledge of dedication to serve India and her people. The pledge can be redeemed only when the fruits reach to the grassroots in this nation.

It is this sense of being free that life begins to awaken. Substantial emphasis has been placed on this special present moment because he remarks that such moments are rare in history when the humanity steps out from the old to the new. Similar transition has been described in *Lincoln’s Gettysberg Address* as “a new birth of freedom” [6]. He describes this transition as the “dissolution of the political bands” to the “powers of the earth”. In the *Declaration of Independence* the rationale behind this severance of the ties with the old

bonds has been stated in clear terms: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”[7].

The strength:

Nehru terms this freedom as an opportunity as a bright future awaits the nation. Such transitions don’t happen again and again; they are rare. He hints that freedom is a means not an end; the end is the triumphs and achievements that the suppressed soul could not realize during the foreign rule. These opportunities bring both material as well as spiritual prospects. At this moment of jubilation, he reminds us of the challenge that this prospect of freedom has brought with it. So, it is in this context that he terms the future that lies ahead as being a challenge. The harrowing experience of the past has to be forgotten and we need to look at the future full of prospect. And we have every reason to look at the future positively. India always had this power to bear in mind, through times of ease and hardship, the luminous ideal, the quest which constitutes its strength. In her evolution over the eons she always rediscovered herself. India has been striving for this “unending quest” since “the dawn of history”. By saying this he also underscores the greatness of our country and so the phrase “the dawn of history” carries a special value and meaning suggesting that even in the prehistoric times the people in this part of the world were cultured and more conscious and more organized. This is the reason why great civilization called Harappa flourished on the banks of the rivers in the subcontinent. Therefore, at this juncture, Nehru asks us to “live up to that high standard”. He aptly describes the Indians as “the citizens of a great country”. Hard work has been a national characteristic of the Indian soul. In the past we have taken pledges and the time has come to work harder to fulfill the pledge. Our first priority is to give a helping hand to millions who are suffering. This is the meaning of the service that we ought to render to the oppressed by the internal and external factors. This we can do by ending poverty, ignorance, disease, inequality of enjoying this newly opened opportunity. All these values have been enshrined in “Preamble to the Indian Constitution”.

The Spiritual Dimension:

In its substance the message here is spiritual. Nehru adheres to human values and declares that until the last man is made happy, the hard work will continue. This courage of conviction to work for the cause and care the whole people has a resonance of spirituality that we see in Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of *sarvodaya*. Inclusive development has been a central concern in M. K. Gandhi’s literary corpus. This edifice stands on Dignity of labour and universal equality. The principle of natural justice is an integral part of this speech. He painfully acknowledges

that since there are tears, there is suffering hence there is no option to hard work. This has been the dream of our motherland since times immemorial and we have the strength and resources at our disposal to realize it. Nehru transcends the connotation of nationalism when he remarks that the dream of India for the cause of the sufferers is also the dream of the whole humanity. The chief cause of suffering of people in the world has been described as “a disaster”. We cannot divide this disaster into small constituents, and if we venture to do that we will gain nothing. Peace, freedom, prosperity is perceived as a whole, we cannot split them into fragments, as they are the common property of the whole world. An integral vision is indispensable to see them in the right perspective. Making India a nation of peace and happiness for the masses is a “great adventure”. He calls upon the people to join hands with faith and confidence.

Consideration of the same issue from different angles is the distinguishing characteristic of Nehru’s attitude. Whether it is opportunity or crisis, he never fails to analyze its pros and cons. Needless to say, this quality of analyzing both sides of the subject is evident at this charged moment. He stands out as a prominent psychologist conscious of a host of other consequences of this prospect of freedom. Whatever Nehru said invariably bore emphasis on socialism and by the doctrine he meant something beyond the stereotype social and economic connotation; instead he embraces a broad idea of profound change. Bright describes it as “a change in our instincts, habits and desires. In short, it means a new civilization.” [8]. President Abraham Lincoln’s *Gettysberg Address* refers to the “birth of a new nation” that institutes “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. Nehru considers this approaching freedom as a first step and adds that even the first step assumes importance. In this context, Lincoln’s emphasis on “the unfinished work” reminds us of the kind of ideal for which people of all geographical areas, all races pursue in all ages. He rightly describes it as “the great task remaining before us”. He further reinforces this idea as “the government of the people, by the people, for the people, (which) shall not perish from the earth”.

The Universal Mission:

Underscoring the unity of all the people in the world Nehru categorically describes all nations as “one world”. Nehru, Lincoln and Jefferson integrate the idea of nationalism and that of universal brotherhood. The appeal here is universal as the freedom of every single individual is at stake. Therefore, it is the pledge to serve “India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.” According to him no matter where we live, there are certain universal ideals that connect us. Innumerable people, in the course of human history, struggled to for freedom, happiness and equality. For such ideals even today all over the world people lay

their lives down. To substantiate this Nehru points out that “those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world.” Thus, the well-being of the Indian people is also connected with the millions, who live in other parts of the world. Nehru is pretty conscious of the fact that no nation can progress in isolation. He surpassed the other intellectuals in that he expressed the truly global vision of peace, democracy and inclusive progress for the mankind. Nehru narrates this event in human history from universal standpoint: “It is a fateful moment for us in India, for all Asia and for the world”. Being the representative of the sovereign Indian people, it is important to mark Nehru’s (India’s) attitude to the rest of the world. “In finding the solution of our problem we shall have helped to solve the world problem as well. What India has been, the whole world is now.”

A note of caution:

Nehru is also aware of the fact that on such occasions people often indulge in criticizing and blaming others. Therefore, he warns people not to criticize anyone for whatever has happened in the past as it is simply waste of time. Instead, we need to respect the future which holds innumerable opportunities. In moments of exhilaration people often tend to be reckless and critical. He maintains that “narrow-mindedness” is a major obstacle in the mission of nation building. Instead, Broad-mindedness is the need of the hour. Therefore he narrates how on the strength of the principle of non-violence that “the greatest man of our generation”, Mahatma Gandhi endowed us led us to the luminous path of freedom. Thus, he reiterates his firm faith in non-violence. Implicitly, he conveys that he is sad over the partition that is dividing the people who fought together for this dream. So in this hour of “rejoice” the “clouds surround us” and there are a host of “difficult problems that encompass us”. He refers to the millions “who have been cut off from us by the political boundaries”. So he reminds that “freedom brings responsibilities” that we “disciplined people” must tackle in peaceful and non-violent ways. He not only makes us aware of this responsibility but also spells out the ways and means to worthily discharge it. It does imply that the destiny of India is not, in any way, different from that of the people living in the rest of the world. The relationship between them is reciprocal: whatever happens in India has impact in the lives of people living other parts of the world and the events taking place there also affect the life here in India. “He thinks of India with reference to world affairs and he thinks of the world with reference to the world politics” [9]. Nehru also means to say that India has an important role of leadership for the cause of the larger humanity. A tone of forgiveness, adherence to peaceful means, co-living and emphasis on nonviolent way of life figure up frequently in this speech. His sole intention is not that we must turn a blind eye to the past; the fact is he expresses a deep reverence to the history in terms of its inspirational and educational value.

Conclusion

Nehru's thrust till independence was more political. In the speeches that he delivered during the years of national movement for freedom, he reiterated India's need for political freedom. He also means that it is the absence of political independence the socio-economic progress of the Indians has been badly hampered. Thus the nature of the struggle up to independence was more political for he considered political freedom as the basis all round development of India. From this moment, the priority had a radical shift: the emphasis acquired social dimension. So the large part of the blueprint that he hands over to the Indians through this exhortation is a pledge for the upliftment of the masses.

Another striking feature of this document is its spontaneity. We can fairly conclude the scholarship that he had was beyond any doubt. Besides this, we must imagine the busy and hectic schedule that the first Prime Minister of India had had on that auspicious evening. Nehru must have contemplated on the content of the speech through that rapidly changing course of events through the evening of 14 August 1947. The spontaneity, naturalness, flow and conviction flows through it incessantly.

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