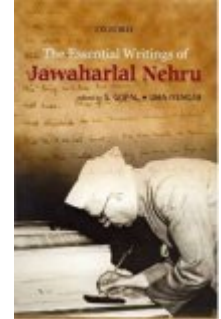


S. Gopal, ed., Uma Iyengar. *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. 741 pp. No price listed, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-565324-3.



Reviewed by Vivek Bhandari

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Jawaharlal Nehru's imprint on the history of postcolonial India has been extraordinary. The contingencies that put Nehru at the helm of India's fledgling polity after the departure of the British in 1947 ensured that the decisions he took on behalf of the Indian nation-state had far-reaching ramifications. Nehru's view of the historical possibilities available to India at the dawn of its independence were shaped by his understanding of the West's historical trajectory, in which he saw universal significance. At the heart of this view lay his belief that independent India's national state should direct economic development; but also construct a constitutional, secular government, build economic opportunities for its predominantly agrarian population, and maintain sovereignty in the international arena through a policy of "non-alignment" in the Cold War. That this vision was constantly forced to make adjustments and compromises in the face of political instability is now a moot point. What emerges from a perusal of Nehru's voluminous writings is a sense of how, as a political leader, he was forced

to be imaginative and creative with his world-view.

The two-volume collection entitled *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru* ed. Sarvepalli Gopal and Uma Iyengar is a significant contribution to our understanding of the intellectual history of twentieth century India. Gopal, one of the co-editors of the book, died in 2002, and will always be remembered for his rich interpretations of the life and writings of Jawaharlal Nehru (and his biographies of the English Viceroy Ripon and Irwin, as well as Gopal's father, the distinguished philosopher-statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan). Apart from writing the three volumes of *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, he was general editor of *The Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*; thirty one volumes in the first series and thirty in the second series. The latest, volume 31, came out in December 2002 after his death. He also edited *Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*, which was published in 1980. His collaborator in *The Essential Writings*, Uma Iyengar, has dedicated this feast of an anthology in two volumes to Gopal's memory.

The work was completed in his lifetime. Sadly, he did not live to see its publication.

Volume 2 of the anthology contains nearly five-hundred extracts from Nehru's writings, correspondence, and interviews, covering themes ranging from his views on Indian culture and polity to his thoughts on nature, science, and religion. The selections reflect his thinking on a range of topics, and perhaps most valuably, allow the reader to construct a composite picture of Nehru. Except for a few texts in the first section on "Polity and Governance" which are of more than individual significance, official statements of policy and documents that merely transmit his point of view have been largely set aside. Instead, the editors have compiled Nehru's more reflective pieces. The depth of Gopal's lifelong commitment to the study of Nehru's life and works is revealed in these selections. Ramachandra Guha, in a recent piece on Gopal's contributions and legacy has described this commitment in evocative detail.[1]

Although it is impossible to describe the contents of this rich collection in a review of this kind, some aspects are worth mentioning. The early writings included in this anthology are dominated by Nehru's experiments with articulating the ideological contours of nationalism (as in the essay "A National State"). These give way to essays describing his preoccupation with issues of nation-building, the idea of India as a nation-state, the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, and the pressures of nation-building. Nehru's commitment to socialist development and the imperatives of modernization are apparent from the excerpts in the section on "Polity and Governance" which is particularly rich. His description of what comprises the "essence of a democratic state" reveals his debt to Gandhi. Like Gandhi, with whom he was very close, Nehru contradicted himself frequently, which is hardly surprising since he often had to make adjustments to suit the vagaries of an unstable political environment. His fascination with India's past, evident from works like *The Discovery*

of India, and his letters to his daughter Indira Gandhi from prison, bear testimony to his own preoccupation with shaping the contours of India's future, and indeed what he perceived as his own legacy. He strongly advocated the development of science and technology, which he believed would propel India into the age of modernity. He also envisioned India's active role in international affairs. One of the most fascinating sections deals with Nehru's views on the place of science and technology in the development state. His advocacy of nuclear technology played a critical part in shaping India's nuclear program (a member of which is the President of India today), although it is clear from his speech "Pernicious Influence of Technology" that he was aware of the dangers of valorizing science and technology. Nehru's desire to promote the role of technology led to the foundation of many engineering and medical colleges, at the pinnacle of which are the Indian Institutes of Technology, many graduates of which are members of India's transnational intelligentsia preoccupied with the expansion of information technology.

Later sections on the book reveal Nehru's views on peace and disarmament, the need to move beyond facile dichotomies like the "orient and the occident," and the urgency of creating an international community free from the ideological divide at the heart of the Cold War. The sections on international affairs (entitled "India and Beyond," "India, Pakistan and Kashmir," and "War, Peace and Disarmament") present a nuanced view of Nehru's justifications for non-alignment. Discussions of the Kashmir issue are particularly poignant, revealing Nehru's deep concerns about the region's descent into political instability. In many of his pronouncements about the dangers of political extremism, he reveals himself to have been remarkably prescient. In addition to expounding on political matters, Nehru also wrote extensively on his love for nature, which is

evocatively captured in his musings on wildlife and the environment.

In the history of the Indian state, the period between 1947 and Nehru's death in 1964 witnessed the stabilization of the state following the turmoil of the Partition, and its emergence as an agent of development. Under Nehru's prime minister-ship, the Indian government attempted to penetrate many areas of social life while experimenting with democratic institutions and practices. These agendas, shaped by Nehru's socialist, democratic vision so poignantly outlined in his *Discovery of India* were implemented through processes of negotiation and adjustment. The second volume in this two part series demonstrates, with depth and rigor, the diverse ways in which historical contingency played a critical role in shaping Nehru's ideas, and the subtle ways in which in engaged with a diverse range of issues confronting his times. Comprehensive in scope, the volumes reveal Jawaharlal Nehru's complexity as a thinker and politician. Even though there have been many anthologies of Nehru's work, it is fair to say that taken together, the two volumes that make-up *The Essential Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* are an invaluable resource for those interested in the history of the challenges confronting not just contemporary India, but many postcolonial societies.

Notes

[1]. Ramachandra Guha, "Remembering Sarvepalli Gopal" in the newspaper *The Hindu*, April 27, 2003.

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