

LETTERS FROM A FATHER TO HIS DAUGHTER: WAS NEHRU TRYING TO TEACH A FUTURE LEADER?

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Abstract

Letters from a Father to His Daughter is a series of 30 short letters written by Jawaharlal Nehru to his daughter Indira Gandhi in 1928 when the ten year old girl was in Mussoorie and he was busy working in Allahabad. He writes to his daughter on a wide range of topics including nature, early civilizations, religion, division of labour, patriarchy, racism, caste system etc. All these letters capture Nehru's love for people and nature and how he tried to imbue his personal and political beliefs in her at an early age to mold her into the woman she became. **Nehru follows a number of pedagogical principles in order to "teach and instruct! Therefore reading his letters from this angle is a rewarding exercise.**

Introduction

Jawaharlal Nehru was born to a family of Kashmiri Brahmans, noted for their administrative aptitude and scholarship, who had migrated to Delhi early in the 18th century. He was the son of Motilal Nehru, a renowned lawyer and leader of the Indian independence movement, who became Mahatma Gandhi's prominent associates.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a prominent statesman, leader, historian and a writer. In his literary career he produced some of the milestones like *A Discovery of India*, *Glimpses of World History*, *An Autobiography*, *Letters from a Father to his Daughter* etc. This article attempts an analysis of *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* from a pedagogical point of view in order to see how at an early age he tried to imbue his personal beliefs in her and shape her to become a leader of the masses. Indira Gandhi was born on 19 November 1917 and was the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. Indira Gandhi was an Indian politician and a central figure of the Indian National Congress. She was the first and, to date, only female Prime Minister of India. She served as prime minister from January 1966 to March 1977 and again from January 1980 until her assassination in October 1984.

Her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a leading figure in the movement for independence from British rule, and became the first Prime Minister of the Dominion (and later Republic) of India. She was the only child (she had a younger brother who died young), and grew up with her mother, Kamala Nehru, at the Anand Bhavan, a large family estate in Allahabad. She had a lonely and unhappy

childhood. Her father was often away, directing political activities or incarcerated, while her mother was frequently bedridden with illness, and later suffered an early death from tuberculosis. She had limited contact with her father, mostly through letters.

Pedagogy is method and practice of teaching especially as an academic subject or theoretical concept. His letters not only encapsulate some of the very important classical and modern pedagogical principles but also formulate Nehru's unique theory of knowledge. In the very first chapter, he states the aim of writing a series of letters. He knows it well that there is a physical distance between them and therefore relies on short accounts from time to time.

"When you and I are together, you often ask me things and I try to answer them. Now that you are at Mussoorie and I am in Allahabad we cannot have these talks. I am therefore going to write to you from time to time short accounts of the story of our earth and the many countries, great and small, into which it is divided. (Nehru, Pg-1)

This aroused a great deal of curiosity in Indira. Significant change occurred in her dealings with the world around. She began to take interest in objects and events around her. She later admitted that the letters aroused a feeling of concern for people and interest in the world around. They taught her to treat nature as a book. She spent hours together studying stones and plants, insects and heavenly bodies. In his first letter, "Book of Nature, he talks how India, despite being a larger country than the small island of England is a minuscule part of the earth's surface, thus highlighting the idea of universalism. In order to know more about this world, we need to look at it as an integrated whole by stepping outside cartographical boundaries and thinking about all countries and their inhabitants. (Nehru, Pg-2)

Nehru in his second letter tells her that their country is poor and is being governed by a foreign power. However, he instills confidence in her by saying that if they try hard, one day India will become independent by breaking the shackles of British colonialism, leading to the betterment of the poor and the development of India into a country like some of those in Europe.

In his letter "The Coming of Man,! he highlights the fact that man's psychological and emotional development creates a strong bond of love between him and his children. Nehru, talks of man as the highest animal and brings to light the fact that there is hardly any difference between an animal and a man who lacks intelligence. Thus he considers that it is the ability to think that makes a man different from other animals. In his letter "How Early History was Written,! he gives the example of a little *mahaut who controls a large elephant* just because of his ability to think. He wants to tell his daughter about the importance of human qualities like love, affection and tenderness. (Nehru, Pg-8)

In his letter "How Different Races were Formed,! Nehru dispels the fallacious belief that peoples'

complexion define their worthiness or beauty. According to him, the climate of a place is the foremost cause of colour and complexion. (Nehru, Pg-50) He thus completely disregards the irrational beliefs that lie in the heart of racism. While talking about how some people take pride in the fact that they depend on the hard work of others and take care of their complexions, he is trying to teach his daughter about the importance of self-reliance and hard work.

In his letter "The Races and Languages of Mankind! he mentions that the Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Americans and others think highly of themselves and believe that they were the first persons on earth. (Nehru, Pg-54) Likewise, they also consider their countries to be the best. Even a few Indians feel that their country is the greatest. He addresses the conceits of jingoism and the imminence of stereotyping – he reiterates the idea of universalism and brotherhood when he says that we all belong to a larger family of the world. In his letter "What is Civilization! he poses a rhetorical question – whether it is a civilized or sensible thing for people to kill each other. While relating the concept of civilization versus barbarism to the First World War, he says that in light of this issue many countries like England, Germany, and France etc. are not at all civilized. (Nehru, Pg-65) He shatters the stereotypical view of the civilized West but at the same time, urges his daughter to not disregard the good people in these countries. According to him, civilization finds its purest manifestation in a selfless man who works for the betterment of the society. In his letter "The Formation of Tribes, he talks about the importance of working together as a group which teaches us to cooperate, develop leadership qualities, increase productivity and improves our decision making capacity. (Nehru, Pg- 68)

In his letter on "Division of Labour, he talks about its immense importance in the contemporary economic system. Due to division of work, people get specific tasks to accomplish and they are not obliged to do all tasks themselves and can focus on one task, thus leading to better productivity. (Nehru, Pg-76)

In his letter "The Changes Brought about by Agriculture,! Nehru talks about surplus in agricultural production and links it to the invention of money. People started hoarding money and now the rich people are those who have plenty of this surplus. He mentions that the people who toil, rarely get a part of the surplus and it is mainly hoarded by those people who hardly work. According to him, it is this arrangement that has created a chasm between the rich and the poor. (Nehru, Pg-80)

In his letter "The Patriarch – How he Developed,! Nehru mentions that in the beginning, the Patriarch had the same share as any other member in the tribe and there was a collective ownership of resources. Gradually however, as his power increased he started considering the tribes' resources his own possessions. Thus it is the private ownership of resources that ultimately led to the development of patriarchy. (Nehru, Pg-88) In his letter "Patriarch becomes King! he talks about how

patriarchal authority and hereditary succession developed the notion of kingship. They were the most experienced people in the tribe and were chosen to serve the people of the tribe by organizing the distribution of the produce and other essentials. Over time, they became masters of their people and lorded over them. He also talks about the myth of the divinity of kingship and how kings had luxurious lives while the poor starved. He then brings out the strength of the common people by telling Indira how the people of England overthrew their monarch and how the French and the Russians ushered in new forms of governance in their countries. (Nehru, Pg-92)

In any form of governance, Nehru states, once the people in power feel that they are entitled to the power that has been entrusted to them, corruption will inevitably creep in. He gives examples of maharajas, rajas and nawabs from India who collect taxes from people and lead luxurious lives instead of using it for the welfare of the people. He also narrates the story –“The Midas Touch”, of a king who became consumed by avarice and soon met his doom. (Nehru, Pg-122) In doing so, Nehru instills a sense of morality In Indira, warning her of the evils of greed.

In his letter "Sea Voyages and Trade! he tries to teach her about the importance of self- reliance by advocating khaddar which is spun and woven in India rather than British textiles. (Nehru, Pg-120) This according to him would provide impetus to domestic industries and a source of income for the poor. Thus he is also trying to teach Indira to be considerate about the poor.

Nehru also talks about the importance of History and the important role it plays in the future. We must analyze historical facts and look at them realistically as ignorance and reluctance to learn history can lead to failure. He also tries to highlight the importance of itihasapurana tradition to imbibe pride and self-esteem in Indira by talking about The Ramayana and the Mahabharata in his last letter of the book. He portrays that his- tory is not a mere narration of bare events in a chronological order rather it nudges us forward towards what we want to be. In order to understand the complex personality of Indira Gandhi, Adler's theory on individual psychology is applied. According to Adler, the innate goal of all human beings is self- perfection. The major part of the development of the personality is during the childhood of an individual. Parents play a great role in the development of the child's personality. (Adler-Individual Psychology) (Pg-123-131).

As per Adler's theory, there is an inferiority complex which operates within an individual. A weak and helpless child possesses innate drive to overcome inferiority by mastering formidable environment. While healthy striving for superiority (perfection or significance) is guided by social interest and gives consideration to the welfare of others, selfish striving for dominance and personal glory is distorted and pathological. The inferiority becomes pathological condition only when sense of inadequacy overwhelms the individual making him depressed and incapable of development. This inferiority complex can occur as early as the second year of life. A child who renounces to an

inferiority complex sees possibilities of evading difficulties instead of attempting to overcome them. (Adler-Inferiority Complex. Pg-123-131)

A child's potential for social interests is brought to fruition by the mother. The first lesson is cooperation by nursing the baby at her breast which serves as the child's bridge to social life. According to Adler, maternal sense of contact is the largest part of human social feeling and along with the essential continuance of human civilisation. Thus, a clumsy, uncooperative or untrustworthy mother will cause the child to develop resistance to social interests instead of development. Father's role is to encourage feeling of self-reliance and stress the need for choosing a satisfying and worthwhile occupation. There exists a necessity of cooperation amongst the parents for the development of the child. (Adler's Theory on Individual Psychology, Pg-123-131)

In order to compensate for the problems within the family, parents make a mistake by pampering the child by showing excessive attention, protection and assistance to the child. This according to Adler, robs the children of their independence and initiative and shatters their self-confidence and creates the impression that the world owes them a living. The misguided belief that they suffer from the lack of ability than the lack of training, develops intense inferiority complex. The children never learn self-reliance. They learn to receive and not give, try to solve their problems by making unrealistic demands to people. They employ manipulative (unconscious) devices such as use of enuresis, nightmares or temper tantrums as for obtaining sympathy and attention. They expect to be admired and honored without having to put any effort and insist that everyone treat their wishes as laws. Their approach work and marriage is with selfish orientation than the spirit of cooperation. This thereby provokes criticism and rejections which intensifies inferiority complex and strengthening the need for more pampering. Adler also stated that "grown-up pampered children are perhaps the most dangerous class in our community". (Adler -The Education of Children", Pg-135-150)

On the other end of the spectrum, parents often times fail to provide sufficient care and nurturing. This creates an impression in the mind of the child that world is cold and unsympathetic. As a result, the child alien to love and cooperation. The child thereby makes up interpretation of life which does not include friendly forces and overrates difficulties of life and underrates his own capacities to meet them. The child expresses inferiority complex through suspiciousness, stubbornness and maliciousness.

Lastly, according to Adler, a child's position in the family is important. The Only child in the family has unrealistic expectations of always being the centre of attention. This results in the formation of exaggerated opinions of their own importance. Children often tend to be timid and dependent since parents who refuse to have more than one child are typically anxious or neurotic

and cannot help communicating their fears to the child. (Adler-*The Education of Children*”, Pg-135-150)

In the case of Indira, she was the only child in the house- hold then. Being the girl child, she was disregarded and despised by her grandmother. The contextualisation of the importance of the family in the Indian case becomes different especially with respect to joint families. Thus in the case of Indira Gandhi, she enjoyed being pampered and neglected by members of the family. Her grandfather and father showered her with pampering. This led to the feeling of the world is obliged to her once she entered the political front while assuming the role of the Prime Minister during the latter part of her tenure. The behaviour of a pampered child is strong in the case of Indira since she was the only child and thereby became the centre of attention in Anand Bhuvan. Pampered child may select goal of constantly receiving attention and Gandhi ensured the same when she entered into the forefront of politics. Following the death of her father, she became the prime candidate to con- test the elections and won the ticket which provided her the sense of entitlement. The height of being a pampered single child is evident when she declared the Emergency (1977) causing an absolute disdain for human rights, suspending the basic rights guaranteed under the Constitution of India just in order to ensure retention of power. The inner conflict of Indira was of constant inferiority- superiority complex due to the turning of events in her life.

At the same time, Indira Gandhi was also a victim of neglect at the hands of her family member and especially the female members who actively despised her and made her life miser- able. This furthered her inferiority complex causing her to develop a low self-esteem. Nehru himself was at the forefront during the Indian freedom struggle. During his time in jail, he had envisioned his ideal life and the freedoms and liberty Indian post independence must enjoy. The entire journey of Nehru has had a psychological effect on his decision making process which has resulted in his holding the values of democracy, equality and justice at the highest pedestal. This is due to Nehru's self actualisation which helped him achieve his true potential.

Indira Gandhi on the other hand emerged as a strong leader due to her policies and representation of assertive nationalism, not in the sense of patriotism but as an ideology to contain emerging masses. Indira Gandhi contrasted opposition concern over the threat to democracy with her concern over the threat to national unity, clearly implying that the latter was more important than the former. More explicitly, her son is reported to have said that national unity was more important than drinking water Indian nationalism excluding the alienated minorities- characterised by monolithic and populist tendencies is the most outstanding legacy of the era of Indira Gandhi. It was the crucial link between her urge for power and the power of the un- differentiated, unchannelized and uninstitutionalised impasses. (Puri, 1985, Pg-148-150)

This is due to the chaotic childhood of Gandhi which led to the development of certain sets of beliefs and values which she deemed appropriate given her upbringing. Unfortunately, this led to a chaos when she began implementing these beliefs while leading the nation. The field of political psychology thereby devices tools which helps in understanding and speculating human behaviour much more intimately than just historical contextualisation. It is necessary to have a psychological evaluation of an individual in order to understand if he is truly capable of leading the nation and it would be easier then to predict his policies which affect the entire country.

The need for political psychology in this dynamic, conflict driven world that we live in is necessary for emerging national-ism, understanding leadership and understanding of the public voting system and its politics. The field has a huge potential and being relatively underexplored provides endless possibilities for the future. (Adler - \$Theory of Political Psychology of Aga Moh. Khan Qajar, Pgs-7-50)

CONCLUSION

I feel that these are not merely letters as Nehru is trying to im- bue his personal and political beliefs in her at a tender age of ten. He treats her like a future leader when he lays the founda- tion for moral values. He tries to ensure that Indira develops a discerning eye for things by reading the book of nature and learns to question, analyze and take rational decisions. Howe- er, one of the most important questions his tone makes us ask is whether Indira will ever have the agency to choose who she wants to be? He goes into great details when he talks about the fact that power is just a privilege and not our inherited right which should be used judiciously to serve mankind rather than fulfilling our selfish pursuits; however his own identity as a politician who was very aware of the power he held leads us to ask if he upheld his own beliefs. I feel that these letters bring out the values which, according to Nehru an ideal leader must possess. Is he then carving out an identity for his daughter be- fore she can even choose one for herself? These questions are pertinent and while we can see he is trying to instill the qualities of a leader in his daughter Indira Gandhi, we must keep in mind the context and the motivations of the man who wrote the letters.

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