





## NATIONALISM AND NARRATIVE IN NEHRU'S SELECT LETTERS TO INDIRA (A STUDY OF LETTERS FROM A FATHER TO HIS DAUGHTER)

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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### Abstract

Jawaharlal Nehru constructs a vivid narrative of the nation through his epistolary work *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*. Addressed to his young daughter, Indira, these weave together themes of history, geography, society, culture and civilisational values to present an inclusive vision of India. The study focuses on select letters from the collection, analysing how Nehru narrates India's ancient past and shared cultural heritage through discussion on mythology, particularly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the reflections on societal structures and traditions. The research explores how these letters serve as ideological instruments in shaping national identity and fostering unity in diversity. Drawing on the theoretical framework of inclusive nationalism and Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity, the study employs qualitative methods of thematic and content analysis to investigate Nehru's vision, values, and ideological narrative. It underscores the significance of Nehru's epistolary discourse in cultivating historical consciousness and a sense of nationhood, positioning his letters as vital tools in the construction of Indian nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Epistolary discourse, Historical consciousness, Diversity, Hybridity

### Introduction

The late 1920s in colonial India were marked by heightened political awareness, growing dissatisfaction with British rule, and intensifying demands for self-governance. The rejection of the Simon Commission in 1927, due to its all-British composition, galvanized national protests and united diverse political voices. Indian leaders including Motilal Nehru, initiated efforts to articulate a constitutional vision that reflected indigenous aspirations, culminating in the Nehru Report of 1928. This period was also defined by sharp ideological debates on dominion status versus complete independence, the rights of minorities, and the future political identity of India. Leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhash Chandra Bose increasingly articulated distinct ideological stances.

It is in this political and ideological context that *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, written by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1928 during his imprisonment in Allahabad Jail, gain profound relevance. Initially intended as personal correspondence to his ten-year-old daughter Indira, these letters evolved into important cultural and political texts. It was first published in 1929 by the Allahabad Law Journal Press, later translated into Hindi by Munshi Premchand under the title *Pita ke Patra Putri ke Naam*, and into Spanish in 2014 by Rodolfo Zamora as *Cartas a mi hija Indira*.

Though Nehru's primary intent was to educate and emotionally connect with his daughter, these letters transcend private communication. They serve as narrative constructions of India's civilizational heritage, conveying Nehru's vision of a diverse yet unified nation. His reflections on mythology, history, geography, and culture reveal not just a pedagogical approach, but a deeper ideological project: the construction of Indian nationhood through storytelling.

This study draws on Janet Altman's theory of epistolarity and the concept of inclusive nationalism to analyze how Nehru's letters function as ideological tools. It argues that the epistolary form, marked by intimacy and immediacy, becomes a potent medium through which Nehru engages in nation-building. By contextualizing India's past within a narrative accessible to a young reader, Nehru fosters a historical consciousness rooted in unity amid diversity. The paper posits that these letters are not merely reflective of India's past but actively contribute to the discourse on nationalism and the making of national identity.

## Review of the Literature

This narrative literature review explores selected letters of Jawaharlal Nehru and their ideological contribution to nationalist discourse. It also engages with critical theories that contextualize the study's central themes including narration, nationhood, pedagogy, and epistolarity- providing deeper insight into Nehru's intellectual legacy and the evolving idea of nationalism in India.

Kanta Devi, in her article *Jawaharlal Nehru's Views on Nationalism and Internationalism* (2016), investigates Nehru's vision of nationalism as rooted in individual freedom and democratic ideals. She notes how Nehru's nationalism was not insular but cosmopolitan, blending patriotism with internationalism to promote a just and equitable society. Her work provides valuable context to understand how Nehru's ideological worldview shaped his vision of India.

S. Gopal, in his research article *The Formative Ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru* (1976), examines the ideological ambiguities in Nehru's thought, arguing that despite their complexities, Nehru was instrumental in constructing a unifying nationalist ideology. He rejected rigid dogma and instead developed an inclusive vision capable of bridging diverse social groups. This work situates Nehru's letters within the larger framework of Indian nationalist ideology before independence.

Amit Kumar Jha, in his research paper *A Comparative Study of Nehruvian Socialism and Rao's Socialism and their Impact* (2024), offers insight into the economic dimensions of Nehru's ideology. He highlights how Nehruvian socialism evolved from international influences and aimed at cooperative development and state planning. Jha's comparison contextualizes how Nehru's broader ideological commitments extended into post-independence policies, reinforcing the continuity of his nation-building vision.

Michele L. Langford, in her thesis *Deconstructing Glimpses of World History: An Analysis of Jawaharlal Nehru's Letters to His Daughter* (2005), focuses on Nehru's resistance to Eurocentric historical narratives. She shows how Nehru used history as a pedagogical and political tool, shaping a progressive, inclusive view of global history. Her emphasis on the ideological purpose behind Nehru's storytelling strengthens the argument that his letters were a narrative instrument for cultivating national consciousness.

D. S. Salunke's article *Father-Daughter Relationship in Nehru's Letters from a Father to His Daughter: A Pedagogical Perspective* (2019), discusses the educational intent behind Nehru's letters to his daughter, Indira. He underscores how Nehru's narrative approach, using personal anecdotes and simplified storytelling, enabled Indira to engage critically with historical and natural phenomena. This interpretation not only highlights Nehru's narrative strategy but also illustrates the emotional and intellectual formation of a future leader through epistolary dialogue.

The theoretical foundation of epistolarity is enriched by Rober Adams Day's paper *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1984), examines Janet Altman's contribution to understanding letter-based narratives. Day notes that Altman redefines letters not just as narrative devices, but as structural forms that shape meaning, a concept she terms "letterness". This perspective is significant for analyzing Nehru's letters as both personal and political texts.

Janet Altman in his work *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) frames the letter as a performative and dialogic medium. She emphasizes the reversible "I-You" structure, the role of the reader in co-creating meaning, and the genre's resistance to closure. Her concepts of narrative continuity, subjective expression, and ideological construction are critical in interpreting Nehru's letters not as static reflections but as dynamic engagements in national storytelling.

The reviewed scholarship demonstrates that Jawaharlal Nehru's contributions to nationalism were multidimensional spanning history, politics, pedagogy, and internationalism. However, most studies examine his broader works or political ideologies without a focused exploration of his *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*. This study addresses that gap by revisiting the narration of nationhood in these selected letters, revealing how Nehru's epistolary form becomes a vehicle for transmitting ideology, fostering historical consciousness, and constructing a vision of India rooted in unity, diversity, and progressive thought.

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing convenient sampling to select three letters from Jawaharlal Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*: "The Aryans Come to India," "What Were the Aryans in India Like?", and "The Ramayana and the Mahabharata." These letters have been selected for their thematic emphasis on India's cultural and historical narrative, conveyed through accessible storytelling. The research applies textual analysis, using close reading to examine how Nehru articulates concepts of nationalism, history, and cultural identity. In addition, content analysis is employed to interpret underlying meanings, uncovering recurring themes, symbols, and imagery that reflect nationalist ideologies. The theoretical framework integrates epistolary theory and theories of nationalism, analyzing how the letter form functions as a narrative and ideological medium for communicating nationalist thought.

### About the Author

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in 1889 in Allahabad, India, in the Kashmiri Brahmins family who had migrated to Delhi in the early 18th century. His father, Motilal Nehru, was a renowned lawyer and a key figure in the Indian independence movement, closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi. He was the eldest of four siblings, Nehru received his early education at home, studying Hindi and Sanskrit. His deep engagement with literature and history was cultivated during these formative years.

At the age of 16, Nehru travelled to England to further study. He attended Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, earned an honours degree in natural sciences. He then qualified as a barrister after studying at the Inner Temple in London. His time in England broadened his intellectual horizons and deepened his understanding of global political thought, preparing him for the pivotal role he would later play in India's struggle for independence.

Despite his legal training, Nehru showed little inclination toward practicing law, devoting himself instead to politics and writing. His works reflect what biographer Frank R. Moraes described as a "queer mixture of East and West." This duality of identity profoundly shaped his intellectual and literary output, influencing his views on nationalism, history, and global affairs.

Nehru's writings articulate a vision of India's past, present, and future, emphasising unity in diversity and the importance of historical consciousness. *The Discovery of India* (1946), written during his imprisonment from 1942 to 1945, delves into India's rich cultural and historical legacy, critiques colonialism, and outlines his vision for a unified nation, making it a cornerstone of Indian historiography. *Glimpses of World History* (1934), a collection of letters to his daughter Indira Gandhi, offers a sweeping yet accessible narrative of world history and its contemporary relevance. His *Autobiography (Toward Freedom, 1936)* provides a deeply introspective account of his political and ideological evolution, reflecting on themes of nationalism, socialism, and democracy.

On August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru became independent India's first Prime Minister, until his death in 1964. His passing marked the end of an era, but his legacy continues to shape India's political, cultural, and intellectual trajectory.

### About the Text

These letters *The Aryans Come to India*, *What Were the Aryans in India Like?*, and *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata* not only narrate historical developments but also integrate cultural memory and reflections, making them crucial to understanding Nehru's vision of nationalism. The titles of all three letters are simple and engaging, making them interesting for a ten-year-old child. In narrating the story through these personal letters, which later became public documents, Nehru reflects how intimate communication can also serve as a powerful tool for socio-cultural and political consciousness.

The first letter, *The Aryans Come to India*, introduces the migration and invasion of the Aryans, providing an engaging historical account for young readers. Nehru begins the letter by connecting it to the previous one, *Fossils and Ruins*, showing his thoughtful effort to maintain continuity and keep his daughter, Indira, engaged. He writes, "So far we have discussed very, very old times" (Nehru 143), drawing attention to their ongoing conversation.

The letter can be thematically divided into six distinct segments: Nehru introduces the transition from pre-history to history, discussing early human development. He talks about the Dravidian people, their culture, and their trade relations with early Egypt and Mesopotamia. Describes the Aryans' migration from Central Asia, passing through Persia and Greece, to eventually reach India. Nehru notes their crossing into India "over the mountains near Kashmir" (Nehru 144) and their gradual spread through northern India. Nehru introduces the Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, hinting at their importance as sources of knowledge and cultural history. He sparks curiosity with the phrase, "When you grow up you will know more" (Nehru 145). Discusses ancient geographical terms like Brahmavarta (Panjab and Afghanistan) and Aryavarta (northern India), which are significant in understanding Aryan migration. While Nehru emphasizes the achievements of Aryan civilization, he gives minimal attention to Dravidian contributions, presenting a somewhat biased view of Indian history.

Nehru employs simple and conversational language to introduce complex historical concepts, nurturing curiosity rather than imposing knowledge. He uses metaphors such as "wave after wave" (Nehru 144) to describe the Aryan migration, likening it to a powerful and continuous sea. His vivid descriptions of geographical features like 'thick forests' and 'banks of rivers' help readers visualize the Aryan movement and settlement.

The letter, while informative, reflects Nehru's Aryan-centric perspective of Indian civilization, which overlooks the richness of Dravidian contributions. Despite this, the letter highlights key themes such as migration, civilization, and cultural continuity. Nehru emphasizes the diversity of India by contrasting Dravidians in the south with Aryans in the north, reinforcing the idea of a unified India shaped by historical movement and integration. Through this, he champions the principle of cultural nationalism, where unity is achieved not through uniformity but through the integration of diverse identities.

In the second letter, *What Were the Aryans in India Like?*, Nehru continues his exploration of Aryan culture, structuring the letter around five thematic sections. Nehru describes the Aryans' migration as a gradual, determined process over centuries, emphasizing that they came not as tourists but to settle and fight for their survival. Nehru praises the Vedas as "perhaps the

oldest books in the world” (Nehru 148) and emphasizes the Aryans’ deep intellectual and artistic achievements. He highlights their oral traditions, where the Vedas were “learnt by heart and recited and chanted to others” (Nehru 148). Nehru discusses how Aryan’s laws, initially meant to preserve cultural purity, later evolved into the caste system, which continues to shape Indian society today. His views here reflect the historical understanding of caste at the time, though modern interpretations are more complex.

The final segment focuses on the Aryans’ reverence for nature, specifically rivers, cows, and bulls. Nehru notes how these symbols of nature were central to Aryan life and how their significance evolved over time.

Throughout the letter, Nehru uses vivid imagery to bring ancient history to life for young readers. He also draws a moral lesson by contrasting the courage of ancient Aryans with the subjugation of modern Indians, making the letter both educational and ideologically stimulating.

The third letter, *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*, is divided into five segments: Nehru discusses about the Vedic age and the transition to the Epic age, marking the emergence of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Nehru describes the story of Rama and Sita, highlighting their fight against Ravana. He provides a historical interpretation, suggesting that the *Ramayana* reflects Aryan conflicts with southern peoples, led by Ravana. Nehru compares the *Mahabharata* with the *Ramayana*, highlighting its philosophical depth, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he describes as “a jewel of a poem” (Nehru 153). Nehru reflects on the moral and literary significance of the epics, praising their enduring value and influence. Nehru emphasises the significance of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as cultural cornerstones of Indian identity, which continue to shape the nation’s values and collective memory.

In these letters, Nehru simplifies complex historical and cultural narratives while retaining their core significance. His aim is to make these stories accessible and meaningful for young readers, fostering a sense of national pride and unity. Nehru’s references to cultural and historical continuity reflect his vision of a united India, where diversity is embraced as a foundation for nation-building.

In *Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, Jawaharlal Nehru’s reflections on India’s culture, history, and traditions are not merely educational but serve as an ideological foundation for fostering national consciousness. These letters are a bridge between father and daughter, reflecting an intimate dialogue that simultaneously connects private and public spheres. Excerpted in printed form, the traditional elements of letter writing, such as salutations and closings, are omitted, focusing solely on the body of the letters, which function as vehicles for transmitting cultural memory.

Nehru adopts a gentle, didactic tone, aiming to mediate complex cultural and historical knowledge for a young audience. Through this epistolary form, Nehru invites his daughter Indira, and by extension the people of India, into an ongoing intellectual journey, emphasising India’s rich cultural heritage. The letters are not only a personal exchange between father and daughter but also a call for intellectual engagement, particularly with India’s vast spiritual, philosophical, and literary traditions. As Nehru states, “You must read them for yourself” (Nehru 153), making these letters an open invitation for active engagement with the nation’s history and culture.

These letters serve as historical documents but also as pedagogical tools, encouraging every Indian child to explore and appreciate the cultural richness of their nation. Nehru’s epistolary form becomes a tool for fostering emotional intimacy while stressing the physical distance between him and his daughter, thus nurturing an emotional connection with the reader.

The concept of *epistolary mediation* is evident in how Nehru balances personal and public discourses within these letters. His intellectual partnership with Indira transcends the father-daughter relationship and extends to the broader intellectual community. Nehru treats his daughter as an intellectual confidant, sharing evaluative insights on nationalism, critiques of caste, and an invitation to engage deeply with India’s cultural heritage. This epistolary bond, grounded in trust and affection, transforms these letters into more than just historical reflections; they become a pedagogical tool, urging the reader to reflect on the importance of cultural continuity in nation-building.

Nehru’s letters underscore the role of culture in India’s independence movement, celebrating the diversity of India’s spiritual and intellectual traditions while promoting the concept of national unity. He uses India’s historical and mythological past as a means of awakening national consciousness, urging his readers to consider the sacrifices made by their ancestors for liberty. Through his letters, Nehru extends the national narrative, embedding it in cultural symbols that transcend political boundaries.

These epistolary exchanges between Nehru and Indira serve to promote *unity in diversity*, highlighting the varied cultures within India while emphasizing their collective strength. Nehru’s letters weave together India’s intellectual and spiritual traditions, promoting the idea that national unity arises not solely from political identity but from a shared cultural heritage. His reflection on India’s past, including the Vedic knowledge and epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, reinforces the notion of a culturally unified nation, rich in diverse traditions and values.

Moreover, Nehru’s letters bring forth the idea of inclusive nationalism, a nationalism that celebrates India’s pluralistic nature. Drawing on the teachings of earlier reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, and Bal Gangadhar

Tilak, Nehru's vision aligns with their efforts to reconnect Indians with their cultural heritage. Nehru's messages resonate with those of the past, emphasizing the revival of Indian spiritual traditions and the promotion of cultural pride as essential components of the nation's liberation from colonial rule.

In his letters, Nehru poses critical questions that challenge the status quo of colonial rule, asking, "If our ancestors could die for honour and liberty, how can we accept foreign domination?" (Nehru 149). These letters do not merely recount history—they actively engage with it, inviting readers to join the intellectual struggle for national liberation and independence.

Nehru's writings were crafted during his time in prison, illustrating the resilience of the nationalist spirit even in the harshest conditions. The letters reflect his ongoing engagement with Indian philosophy and history, and they align with his other significant works like *Glimpses of World History* (1934) and *The Discovery of India* (1944), written during his imprisonment. These works were part of his broader mission to make Indian knowledge accessible to the masses and inspire a sense of shared national identity.

Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* have since become integral to the Indian school curriculum, offering both historical insight and philosophical depth. Arun Sharma's personal anecdote, gifting a copy of Nehru's letters to his granddaughter, further emphasizes the enduring relevance of these writings. Sharma observes how Nehru's nurturing tone creates an emotional connection, making it feel as though Nehru is physically present, sharing his knowledge with his daughter (Sharma).

Even as the printing press transformed communication, letters remained a significant medium for personal and political discourse in India. Nehru's letters exemplify the epistolary function of bridging personal experiences with public ideological narratives. These letters illustrate how intimate, handwritten correspondence could evolve into a public discourse, blending personal voice with broader socio-political themes.

Nehru's *Letters from a Father to His Daughter* emerge as a cultural testament, reflecting his vision for India as a diverse yet unified nation. Through these letters, Nehru promotes the values of cultural continuity, nationalism, and intellectual engagement in the minds of the young reader, Indira. His writings continue to inspire generations, demonstrating the enduring power of culture in the construction of national identity. The letters function as both a pedagogical tool and a reflection of Nehru's broader vision for India, a nation grounded in its cultural heritage and poised for a future of unity and freedom.

## Conclusion

In light of the arguments presented, it is evident that Nehru's selected letters surpass the realm of private correspondence between a father and daughter. They serve as active instruments in the construction of an inclusive and unifying vision of Indian nationalism. Through these letters, Nehru presents nationalism not as an exclusionary or aggressive force, but as a compassionate and reasoned principle, deeply rooted in India's historical consciousness and cultural diversity.

These letters reveal a Nehruvian vision of nationalism, which embraces the diversity inherent in India's history, politics, and culture. The ideological dimensions of Nehru's thought are reflected in the way he integrates historical narratives, cultural memory, and personal reflection, cultivating both a personal and political awakening in Indira. This intellectual journey, initiated within the intimate space of father-daughter correspondence, gradually spreads to influence the broader Indian public.

Ultimately, Nehru's letters serve as tools for education and nation-building. They communicate democratic ideals, secular values, and the vision of an equal society. By nurturing an inclusive and pluralistic form of nationalism, Nehru's letters not only shaped Indira's consciousness but also contributed to the broader discourse on Indian nationalism, reinforcing the importance of unity in diversity and offering a foundation for the construction of an egalitarian and democratic India.

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