

COLONIALISM AND CONSCIOUSNESS: AN ANALYSIS OF NEHRU'S VIEWS ON BRITISH RULE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Jawaharlal Nehru's perception of British rule in India, tracing the evolution of his views from early admiration of Western liberal ideas to a trenchant critique of imperial domination and finally to a constructive program for post-colonial nation-building. Using Nehru's own writings and speeches as primary evidence (notably *Toward Freedom*, *The Discovery of India*, *Glimpses of World History*, and letters and speeches), and situating them alongside major secondary studies, the paper argues that Nehru's attitude toward the British combined moral and political condemnation of imperialism with pragmatic engagement with Western institutions and ideas. This dual orientation shaped his anti-colonial rhetoric, his constitutional strategy, and the ideological foundations of independent India.

Keywords: Discovery of India, Glimpses of World History etc.

INTRODUCTION

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) stands among the most complex political thinkers in modern Indian history. His long public life—student in Britain, political prisoner, Congress leader, and first Prime Minister of independent India—gave him repeated and varied encounters with British rule. Understanding Nehru's perception of the British is essential both to grasp the rhetoric and strategy of Indian nationalism and to evaluate the political choices India made after independence. Nehru's view was neither static nor purely personal: it was shaped by intellectual influences (liberalism, socialism, and scientific humanism), personal experience in Britain, and the political exigencies of anti-colonial struggle and state-building. This paper analyses the contours of that perception and its implications.

Sources and Methodology

The analysis relies primarily on Nehru's autobiographical and reflective works (especially *Toward Freedom* and *The Discovery of India*), his historical sketches (*Glimpses of World History*), as well as selected speeches and letters. Secondary interpretations by modern biographers and scholars are used to contextualize and test readings of Nehru's texts. The approach is textual and interpretive: it traces recurring themes, identifies shifts over time, and correlates Nehru's ideas with political action.

Early Impressions: Britain as a Model and a Contradiction

Nehru's formative years included an education in England and a prolonged intellectual engagement with Western thought. He admired many features of British civilization—its scientific temper, parliamentary institutions, legal principles, and cultural achievements—and credited Britain with advances that had universal value. Such admiration was tempered, however, by the experience of racial arrogance, imperial inequality, and the evidence of political repression in the colonial context. This ambivalence is important. Unlike some anti-colonial leaders who rejected Western modernity wholesale, Nehru retained confidence in the Enlightenment legacy—reason, science, secularism—

while insisting that the British had violated the very principles they claimed to embody by ruling India without consent and by privileging racist and exploitative structures.

Moral and Political Critique of Imperialism

By the 1920s and 1930s, Nehru's stance hardened into a principled critique of imperial domination. He denounced the economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and cultural patronizing that accompanied British rule. But Nehru's critique was not merely moralistic; it was political and programmatic. He emphasized popular mobilization, the need for mass education and economic modernization, and constitutional struggle to dismantle colonial structures.

Intellectual Influences Shaping Nehru's Judgment

Nehru's perception of British rule cannot be separated from the intellectual currents that informed him. His early exposure to Western liberal thought—Mill, Rousseau, and 19th-century historiography—gave him vocabulary to criticize empire. Simultaneously, socialist and Fabian thinking (on state-led development and social justice) influenced his program for India's future. He believed that British rule had blocked India's socio-economic modernization; thus independence had to be accompanied by planned development, land reform, and a scientific temper.

Constitutionalism and Legal Critique

Nehru's training and early engagement with parliamentary politics made constitutionalism central to his critique. He argued that legitimate political authority required consent and representative institutions—both denied by colonial rule. Nehru's insistence on constitutional methods should therefore be read not as endorsement of British constitutionalism, but as strategic insistence on legal and political legitimacy as tools to delegitimize imperial rule.

The Rhetoric of Condemnation and the Pragmatics of Governance

Nehru's public speech often featured strong language against imperialism and the British Raj. Yet as Prime Minister he maintained diplomatic relations with Britain and retained functional continuities—civil services, legal codes, and many institutional personnel—from the colonial period. This apparent contradiction is better understood as pragmatic: dismantling empire required stable administration; Nehru prioritized orderly transfer of power and nation-building over vindictive rupture.

Contradictions and Criticisms

Critics have pointed to tensions in Nehru's attitude. Some argue he retained an elitist faith in technocratic governance and Western experts that replicated colonial hierarchies. Others claim his policies sometimes privileged state control in ways that limited grassroots democratic energies.

Legacy: Perception Translated into Policy and Public Memory

Nehru's nuanced perception of British rule—combining condemnation with selective appropriation—shaped independent India's character. The retention of parliamentary democracy, legal protections, and administrative structures reflected the institutional continuity he thought necessary; the commitment to planned economic development, secularism, and non-alignment reflected his break with imperial priorities.

CONCLUSION

Jawaharlal Nehru's perception of British rule was complex and historically situated. It evolved from early appreciation of aspects of British civilization to a systematic critique of imperial domination, and

finally to a pragmatic strategy of nation-building that retained useful institutional legacies while pursuing radical social and economic transformation.

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