
UNIT 25 JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: LETTER TO INDIRA GANDHI - 'THE QUEST OF MAN'

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25.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this text, you will be able to

- outline Jawaharlal Nehru’s Life and Works;
- appreciate the distinctive style of his letter-writing;
- understand the essence of man’s quest for knowledge; and
- attempt a letter to a friend on a serious topic of your interest

25.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will familiarize you with another form of non-fictional prose—the letter. What is a letter? On the personal level, a letter is a spontaneous expression of one’s self and is often called an extension of the self. On the social level, letters hold up a mirror to the age in which they are written. Letters can exude warmth, intimacy, passion and romance, like the letters written by Napoleon Bonaparte to his lady-love Josephine. Or, they can be scurrilous and full of invective like Alexander Pope’s *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, a verse-letter in which each line comes whizzing like a poisoned dart to sink into its target. Letters can also be very informative, being at the same time very direct and informal, like Jawaharlal Nehru’s letter “The Quest of Man” that you are going to study in this unit.

25.2 LETTER WRITING – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Letter writing came to be recognized as a literary form in England during the Renaissance when critics came in touch with the works of Seneca, Cicero and Guevara. Early Renaissance letter writers include the Paston family whose

letters give us considerable insight into the social life of the age. Roger Ascham, another entertaining correspondent, achieved prose that is at once simple and straightforward in his *Two Hundred and Ninety-Five Letters*. Among the letter writers of the seventeenth century, Rachel Lady Russell's letters, that are as authentic an account of the times as the diaries and memoirs of the famous diarists Pepys and Evelyn, helped prepare the way along with diaries and memoirs for the rich blossoming of fiction during the seventeenth century.

The art of letter writing in the 18th century assumed an interesting form. It produced gossipy letters on things in general or political squibs. By means of this light, discursive literature, we have a steady flow of illuminating gossip on the life of the time, highly valuable to the social historian. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters, written to her daughter from Italy, are among her best. Her *Turkish Letters* dispelled a good deal of ignorance about the Turkish character; Philip Dormer Stanhope's literary fame rests upon the letters he wrote to his illegitimate son; Horace Walpole distinguished himself more as a letter writer than as a politician. His letters caught exquisitely the affectation and artificialities of his times. William Cowper, Lord Chesterfield, Gilbert White and Thomas Gray are some more famous letter writers of the 18th century. Many eminent novelists, both English and American, were great letter writers too. The letters of Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Henry James and many others are considered pieces of literature today. Henry James' letters are so delicately worded that Leon Edel calls them "the greatest glories" of literature.

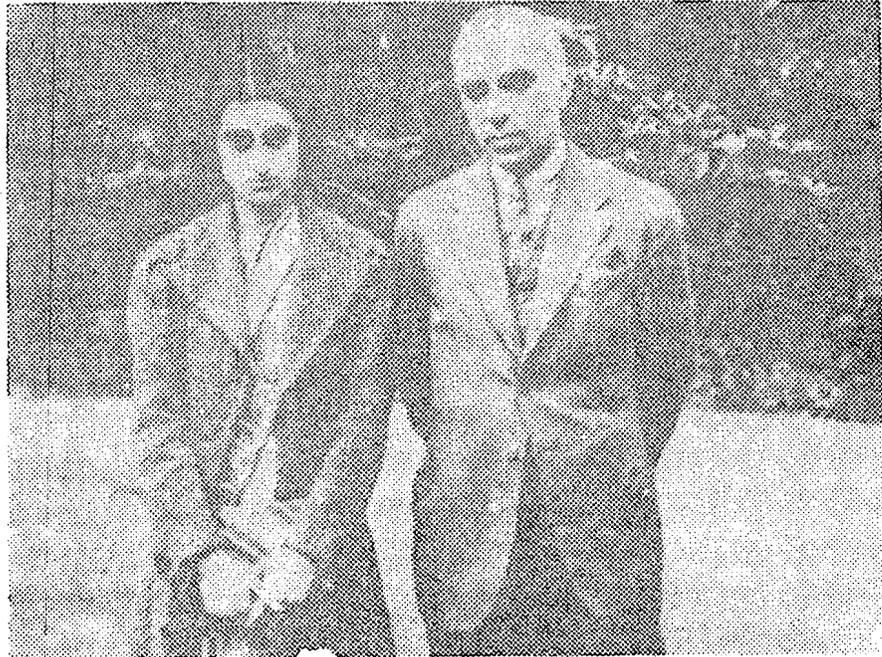
Though letters comprise non-fictional prose, they lend themselves very usefully to the writing of both fiction as well as poetry. Alexander Pope's philosophic poem "Essay On Man," consisting of four epistles, and his satirical verse-letter *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* are good examples of verse-letters. Letter as a form of expression in fiction was explored by Samuel Richardson in his epistolary novels *Clarissa* and *Pamela*. Thereafter, many English fiction writers incorporated letters in their novels to explain a situation or to advance a character. An abundant use of letters has been made by Jane Austen in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

A good public letter is a literary piece of work that explores an issue, idea, impression or interpretation. It has a focused point and has both informative value and aesthetic appeal. Among the eminent Indian letter writers, we have Vivekananda, Swami Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, whose letters not only reveal historical, political and religious thoughts but also provide a commentary on Indian culture and civilization. One such volume of letters is Jawaharlal Nehru's *Glimpses of World History* from which "The Quest of Man" has been selected for your study in this unit.

25.3 JAWAHARLAL NEHRU : A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jawaharlal Nehru was born in 1889 in Allahabad to Motilal Nehru, a highly successful lawyer of Kashmiri lineage. Jawaharlal was educated at home by a host of English governesses and private tutors until he was admitted to Harrow, a public school in England, at the age of sixteen. In 1907, he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, and then pursued the study of Law at the Inner Temple, London. He was called to the Bar in 1912. The same year, he

returned to India and came close to Mahatma Gandhi who had also returned to India as a lawyer, after fighting for political rights and equality for Indians in South Africa. Under Gandhi's magnetic influence, Nehru gave up his western style of living and joined Gandhi in the Civil Disobedience Movement. He remained in the forefront of the Indian Independence Movement for well over three and a half decades and was imprisoned seven times by the British rulers. His rise in Indian politics was meteoric. He was elected Congress President five times and became the first Prime Minister of Independent India, a post he held continuously till his death in 1964.



Nehru was a prolific writer with an enviable command over the English language which he used with the ease and facility of an Englishman. His language became poetic in describing a nature landscape; conversational in his personal letters and jail diaries; forceful, penetrating and occasionally scholastic in his addresses. Some of his major works like *The Discovery of India*, *Glimpses of World History*, *A Bunch of the Old Letters*, and *An Autobiography* are as thought-provoking in terms of their content as they are charming in their style.

Check Your Progress-I

- a. Name three important writers of the 18th century known mainly for their letters.
- b. Give the titles of two books written by Jawaharlal Nehru.
- c. Name two eminent Indians whose letters give an insight into Indian culture and civilization.

25.4 AN INTRODUCTION TO ‘THE QUEST OF MAN’

Nehru frequently interacted with his daughter, Indira Priyadarshini, through letters especially when he was serving a prison sentence during the British rule in India. The first set of letters were written in the summer of 1928, when the ten-year-old Indira was in the Himalayan hill station of Mussoorie and Nehru was in the plains. These were published in book form in 1929, with the title *Letters From a Father to his Daughter*, subtitled “Being a brief account of the early days of the world written for children.” Nehru points out in his preface to the original edition of *Glimpses of World History*. These early letters were subsequently published in book form and they had a generous reception. The idea of continuing them hovered in my mind. “The result was *Glimpses of World History* published in two volumes, 1934-1935, with the subtitle “Being further letters to his daughter written in prison, and containing a rambling account of history for young people”. All the 196 letters here, and his book *The Discovery of India*, were written in prison. The first such letter he wrote her was from the Central Prison in Naini, in 1930. The letter you are about to read was written two years later, in 1932, from Dehra Dun jail.

While in prison, cut off from active life and from his beloved daughter, Nehru decided to make use of the available time to write a brief and simple account of the history of the world. Nehru himself admits that he is not a historian but has attempted to put together facts and ideas he had culled from books. Very often, the facts of history are overrun by his own ideas and philosophic thinking.

“The Quest of Man”, the fifty-sixth in the series of letters in *Glimpses of World History* and the first that he wrote from the district jail of Dehra Dun, takes us back to the origins of human civilization that had been preceded by the Earth’s story for many thousands of years. The distinctive feature of human civilization is that it owes its existence and perpetuation to the genius of the human mind. It is the eternal curiosity of the human mind to find out and learn more and more about the world that started man on this quest. In this letter, Nehru goes beyond historical dates and facts to focus on man’s innate quest to know and understand the world around him.

25.4.1 Text

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU : ‘THE QUEST OF MAN’

June 10, 1932

Four days ago I wrote to you from Bareilly Gaol. That very evening I was told to gather up my belongings and to march out of the prison – not to be discharged, but to be transferred to another prison. So I bade bood-bye to my companions of the **barrack**, where I had lived for just four months, and I had a last look at the great twenty-four-foot wall under whose sheltering care I had sat for so long, and I marched out to see the outside world again for a while. There were two of us being transferred. They would not take us to Bareilly station lest people might see us, for we have become **purdahnashins**, and may not be seen! Fifty miles out they drove us by car to a little station in the **wilderness**. I felt thankful for this drive. It was delightful to feel the cool night air and to see the phantom trees and men and animals rush by in the semi-darkness, after many months of seclusion.

We were brought to Dehra Dun. Early in the morning we were again taken out of our train, before we had reached the end of our journey, and taken by car, lest **prying** eyes should see us.

And so here I sit in the little gaol of Dehra Dun, and it is better here than at Bareilly. It is not quite so hot, and the temperature does not rise to 112 degrees, as it did in Bareilly. And the walls surrounding us are lower and the trees that overlook them are greener. In the distance I can even see, over our wall, the top of a palm tree, and the sight delights me and makes me think of Ceylon and Malabar. Beyond the trees there lie the mountains, not many miles away, and, **perched** up on top of them, sits Mussoorie. I cannot see the mountains, for the trees hide them, but it is good to be near them and to imagine at night the lights of Mussoorie twinkling in the far distance.

Four years ago – or is it three? – I began writing these **series of letters** to you when you were at Mussoorie. What a lot has happened during these three or four years, and how you have grown! With fits and starts and after long gaps I have continued these letters, mostly from prison. But the more I write the less I like what I write; and a fear comes upon me that these letters may not interest you much, and may even become a burden for you. Why, then, should I continue to write them?

I should have liked to place vivid images of the past before you, one after another, to make you sense how this world of ours has changed, step by step, and developed and progressed, and sometimes apparently gone back; to make you see something of the old civilizations and how they have risen like the tide and then subsided; to make you realize how the river of history has run on from age to age, continuously, interminably, with its **eddies** and **whirlpools** and **backwaters**, and still rushes on to an unknown sea. I should have liked to take you on man's **trail** and follow it up from the early beginnings, when he was hardly a man, to to-day, when he prides himself so much, rather vainly and foolishly, on his great civilization. We did begin that way, you will remember, in the Mussoorie days, when we talked of the discovery of fire and of agriculture, and the settling down in towns, and the division of labour. But the farther we have advanced, the more we have got mixed up with empires and the like, and often we have lost sight of that trail. We have just skimmed over the surface of history. I have placed the **skeleton** of old happenings before you and I have wished that I had the power to cover it with flesh and blood, to make it living and vital for you.

But I am afraid I have not got that power, and you must rely upon your imagination to work the miracle. Why, then, should I write, when you can read about past history in many good books? Yet, through my doubts I have continued writing, and I suppose I shall still continue. I remember the promise I made to you, and I shall try to fulfil it. But more even than this is the joy that the thought of you gives me when I sit down to write and imagine that you are by me and we are talking to each other.

Of man's trail I have written above, since he emerged stumbling and **slouching** from the jungle. It has been a long trail of many thousands of years. And yet how short a time it is if you compare it to the earth's story and the ages and **aeons** to time before man came! But for us man is naturally more interesting than all the great animals that existed before him; he is interesting

because he brought a new thing with him which the others do not seem to have had. This was mind – curiosity – the desire to find out and learn. So from the earliest days began man’s quest. Observe a little baby, how it looks at the new and wonderful world about it; how it begins to recognize things and people; how it learns. Look at a little girl; if she is a healthy and wide-awake person she will ask so many questions about so many things. Even so, in the morning of history when man was young and the world was new and wonderful, and rather fearsome to him, he must have looked and stared all around him, and asked questions. Who was he to ask except himself? There was no one else to answer. But he had a wonderful little thing – a mind – and with the help of this, slowly and painfully, he went on storing his experiences and learning from them. So from the earliest times until to-day man’s quest has gone on, and he has found out many things, but many still remain, and as he advances on his trail, he discovers vast new tracts stretching out before him, which show to him how far he is still from the end of his quest – if there is such an end.

What has been this quest of man, and whither does he journey? For thousands of years men have tried to answer these questions. Religion and philosophy and science have all considered them, and given many answers. I shall not trouble you with these answers, for the sufficient reason that I do not know most of them. But, in the main, religion has attempted to give a complete and **dogmatic** answer, and has often cared little for the mind, but has sought to enforce obedience to its decisions in various ways. Science gives a doubting and hesitating reply, for it is of the nature of science not to dogmatize, but to experiment and reason and rely on the mind of man. I need hardly tell you that my preferences are all for science and the methods of science.

We may not be able to answer these questions about man’s quest with any assurance, but we can see that the quest itself has taken two lines. Man has looked outside himself as well as inside; he has tried to understand Nature, and he has also tried to understand himself. The quest is really one and the same, for man is part of Nature. “Know thyself”, said the old philosophers of India and Greece; and the *Upanishads* contain the record of the ceaseless and rather wonderful strivings after this knowledge by the old Aryan Indians. The other knowledge of Nature has been the special province of science, and our modern world is witness to the great progress made therein. Science, indeed, is spreading out its wings even farther now, and taking charge of both lines of this quest and co-ordinating them. It is looking up with confidence to the most distant stars, and it tells us also of the wonderful little things in continuous motion – the **electrons** and **protons** – of which all matter consists.

The mind of man has carried man a long way in his voyage of discovery. As he has learnt to understand Nature more he has **utilized** it and **harnessed** it to his own advantage, and thus he has won more power. But unhappily he has not always known how to use this new power, and he has often misused it. Science itself has been used by him chiefly to supply him with terrible weapons to kill his brother and destroy the very civilization that he has built up with so much labour.

25.4.2 Glossary

quest: the act of seeking or searching; an undertaking with the purpose of achieving or finding some definite object.

barrack:	A group of large buildings for soldiers to live in (here for the prisoners to be confined).
purdahnashins:	an Urdu word meaning people who live behind the veil.
wilderness:	an uninhabited place.
phantom:	ghost; any imagined thing.
prying:	inquiring with too much curiosity into other people's affairs.
perch:	to sit on something high and narrow.
series of letters:	he is referring to <i>Letters from a Father to his Daughter</i> .
eddy (eddies-plural):	a circular movement of water, air or dust.
whirlpools:	a place in a river or the sea where there are strong currents moving in circles.
backwaters:	a part of a river not reached by the current, where the water does not flow.
trail:	path to be followed for a particular purpose.
skeleton:	framework.
slouch:	to stand or sit in a lazy way, often not upright.
aeons:	a very long period; many thousands or millions of years.
dogmatic:	insisting that one's beliefs are right and that others should accept them.
electrons:	tiny pieces of matter with a negative electric charge present in all atoms.
protons:	tiny pieces of matter with a positive electric charge present in all atoms.
utilize:	to use for a practical purpose.
harness:	to control and use the force or strength of something to produce power or to achieve something.

25.5 THEME

The subject matter of this letter is philosophical but it has been rendered in a simple and elegant style. The writer makes it easy for the reader (here he had a

fourteen-year-old girl in mind) to understand a serious subject matter relating to human quest for knowledge. The paragraphs are linked to make the letter read like a story about human civilization.

Answer the following questions in your own words, in the space provided for the purpose, to comprehend the subject matter of the letter. Read the answers given by us only after you have written yours.

- 1) Summarise paragraphs 1-3

Paragraphs 1 to 3 describe the author's current place of imprisonment and the sense of joy he experiences on being close to the mountains and the greenery surrounding his prison. There is no bitterness on being confined to a solitary stay in a prison. On the contrary, the writer has the rare ability to find joy even in the cool night air and trees and mountains that he can view at a far off distance.

- 2) Is the author sceptical about the worth of his writings? Give a reasoned answer.

Paragraph 4 expresses the author's scepticism as to the worth and value of his writings. It is however, our good fortune that despite his scepticism he continued to write these letters that are a delight to read even today, after a long gap of over seventy years.

In paragraphs 5 and 6 the writer attempts to recreate the history of the world from pre-historic times to modern days. Nehru says that he started with the narration about discovery of fire and agriculture and extended his writings to cover facts of history about empires and different civilizations. He wonders whether midway he had lost sight of the biggest human challenge that sought to unravel the mystery of the universe. He has written about civilisations that have come and gone, but somewhere along the line he had missed to delve upon the human quest to understand the world that man journeys through.

Paragraph 7 traces the journey of man in his long quest to know about his world. It is his mind which is man's greatest asset that helps him in his quest. Once Nehru starts writing about the quest of man, his scepticism fades away. He feels close to his daughter when he writes, as if they were sitting together and talking.

- 3) What has helped man in his quest to know more about his world?

Paragraphs 8-10 describe the twin approaches to understand the world—through religion and through science. Nehru feels that religion seeks to impose its own views that are based on faith and spiritual beliefs while science seeks answers through experiment and reason. There cannot be any single answer to what man is seeking, as his quest has taken two distinct directions – one to understand himself and the other to understand Nature. Religion looks to the inner nature of man while science to the outer nature. Both are important. But Nehru prefers the scientific approach, because it is rational and open minded, not dogmatic like religion. However, man is misusing science instead of harnessing its power, almost to the point of destroying the very civilization that he has built up.

25.6 PROSE STYLE

This letter has been selected for your study as it shows what makes a letter interesting. As you read the text, you will recognize its direct and simple style that makes you as much an addressee as Indira to whom it was first addressed. As Nehru himself says, he felt the presence of his daughter by his side when he wrote his letters as though they were talking to each other. Likewise, it is as though the reader and the writer are in conversation. The writer seems to engage his reader in direct talk and, therefore, the letter uses the direct form of address. In short, the prose style in all his letters is personal, subjective, conversational and informal. Even though Nehru's letters, to begin with, were personal and meant only for his daughter, they form a well-knit series of world history for every reader to savour.

Check Your Progress-II

- a. From which prison was Nehru transferred to the prison at Dehra Dun?
- b. Pick up a sentence from the letter that shows Nehru's preference for science and its methods.
- c. Mention three features of Nehru's prose style in the letter 'The Quest of Man'.

25.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have:

- learnt something about Jawaharlal Nehru's life and writings;
- analysed one of his letters to his daughter in terms of its background, theme and prose style; and
- picked up some idea about how a letter on a complex topic like the quest of man, can be rendered in a fluent and easy style.

25.8 SUGGESTED READING

Jawaharlal Nehru: *Glimpses of World History; An Autobiography; Letters from a Father to his Daughter.*

C.D. Narasimhaiah: *Jawaharlal Nehru: The Statesman as Writer*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2001.

H.G. Wells: *Outline of History*

**Jawaharlal Nehru:
Letter to Indira
Gandhi – ‘The Quest
of Man’**

25.9 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-I

- a. Lady Montagu, Philip Stanhope and Horace Walpole.
- b. *Glimpses of World History. An Autobiography.*
- c. Swami Sri Vivekananda, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Check Your Progress-II

- a. Bareilly
- b. Para 8: “I need hardly tell you that my preferences are all for science and the methods of science.”
- c. Simple, direct, conversational.