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## Incredible Contradiction between Liminality and Communitas in Nehru's *An Autobiography*

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### ABSTRACT

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*This paper examines An Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru focusing on the performativity of his liminality at Harrow and Cambridge in England from 1905 to 1912. Being separated from his family and nation, he got a higher education there. The concepts of liminality and communitas by Turner and the idea of the 'rites of passage' by van Gennep are used as theoretical bases for analyzing the autobiographical*

*narrative. The analysis of the textual evidence responds to how Nehru, the icon of Indian political and economic modernity, performs in a liminal space of a foreign land and explores how and why the organicity between liminality and communitas as theoretically claimed does not work in the cases of his life-writing. The discussion then finally identifies the distinct economic status, multiple references to politics, diverse family legacy, and lack of 'we feeling' among the group members responsible for breaking the organic union between liminality and communitas and promoting an incredible contradiction. Fundamentally, this study supports perceiving the notions regarding the performance of the person in a liminal space. At the same time, it also assists in spotting the obstructive aspects behind the organic relation between the generally inseparable concepts of liminality and communitas in the customary rites of passage.*

**Keywords:** An Autobiography, communitas, liminality, Nehru, rites of passage

## INTRODUCTION

Intimate people, particularly with South Asian politics and literature, recall Nehru as a democratic leader and prolific writer. In his life, the different prisons in India became a site for self-formation for revisiting his personal and political life. There, he wrote *An Autobiography* from June 1934 to February 1935 and first published it in 1936 from London. Khilnani (2017) considers the autobiography as one of the finest pieces of English literature on the independent struggle of India that glued the personal and political life of the author as an inevitable text of the twentieth century particularly about the Indian context (p. xii). Even in the problematic and captive situation, Nehru felt freedom and expressed his vision and experience in the form of autobiographical writing converting the prison into a home. In this context, Majeed (2007) believes, “Nehru is most at home in prison because that is where his autobiographical project is conceived and developed as a traveling autobiography” (p. 108) as Kakoti (2016) extended the meaning of home that can be enlarged beyond the confines of a physical structure by taking into account different spatial dimensions, such as the individual, the body, the community, the country, the city, and the world, as well as the significance of movement or travel (p. 201). In the same fashion, life-writing in the form of autobiographical writing enlarges the space of the home to the prison house and even across national borders. Thus, jail becomes a site for his contemplation as romantic poets recall powerful feelings of tranquility.

The autobiography of Nehru documents both the personal and political journey of his life in specific and of Indian and global politics in general. In the words of Gokhale (1978), “From 1924 to 1964 Nehru dominated the Indian National Congress as its principal spokesman (next in importance only to Gandhi) on nationalism and internationalism” (p. 313) as he was pervasively visible in national and international politics. His extended attitude towards religion and culture has supported his extensive visibility inside and outside the Indian sub-continent. Guha (2004) observes that Nehru was in rites of separation where he was continuing to study and aiming to pursue his roots after getting an education in Britain (p. 344). Actually, Nehru was in ‘the rites of passage’ and Britain was one of his vital routes of the enlightening journey. Although, actually in the words of van Gennep (1960), “a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes pre-liminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and post-liminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated” (p. 11). In the case of Nehru, he was in transition in the universities of England with the plan to reintegrate into Indian society after the completion of the mission.

In Britain, he got higher education at Harrow and Cambridge from 1905 to 1912 in different subjects. More than this, he developed the habit of self-study concerning literature and philosophy (Nehru, 2004, p. 22). Consequently, he became familiar with the Western system. However, he did not think about remaining there. In earlier days, he thought about joining the Indian bureaucracy but became a full-time politician following the imprints of family, especially of his father. political Indian. In this sense, he was in in-betweenness.

Such in-betweenness of Nehru is liminality in the understanding of Turner (2008) as “unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (p. 90). The collective liminality in the form of communitas represents secular and unstructured space and the people who are in liminality enjoy the space jointly together. Similarly, regarding the essential nature of communitas, Rubenstein (1992) remarks:

The most common modality of social organization that takes place within liminality is communitas. As opposed to *societas*, or structure, communitas is characterized by equality, immediacy, and the lack of social ranks and roles. A leveling process brings about the dissolution of structure, the absence of social distinctions, a homogenization of roles, the disappearance of political allegiance, and the breakdown of regular borders and barriers. (p. 251)

Rank and files are strictly prohibited in communitas and homogeneities are dominant over the diversities and distinctions. Rather than living as ‘I’, people live as ‘we’ in actual communitas as all are identical in liminality sharing common characteristics.

In this context, the study on the autobiography of Nehru explores how his period at Harrow and Cambridge resembles liminality without the feeling of communitas against the theoretical idea which believes that the people who are in liminality enjoy communitas together. In this way, the study posits the body of Nehru in liminal space and also shows how the body is derailed from communitas which is not theoretically expected as liminality and communitas are conceptualized as organically associated concepts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Jawaharlal Nehru was the first as well as longest-serving prime minister of independent India. Including these, he was a good writer and his writings in the English language deserve the quality to be called English Literature. Edgar Snow finds Nehru's Autobiographical writing, primarily published in 1936, so astonishing and recommends that it is not only “indispensable

to any student of Asia, it is among the treasures of the English literature” (qtd. in Lal, 1990, p. 21). Nehru was one of the busiest political leaders in India. In this context, nowhere except prison could be an appropriate place for his contemplative writings as wilderness for romantic poets in the process of collecting amusing and entertaining anecdotes. However, his thinking mechanism was set by his higher education in Harrow and Cambridge separately from his family.

According to Turner (2008), such a phase of time is defined as a liminal period that exists between separation and reincorporation of ‘the rites of passage’ as conceptualized by van Gennep where a person lives with few or none of the ascriptions of the past and the future (p. 89). Similarly, in the case of the autobiography of Nehru, when he was just fifteen, he sailed for England (Nehru, 2004, p. 18). Furthermore, van Gennep (1960) elucidates his analogy between the physical act of crossing a threshold and the shift in a rite of passage and claims:

The passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage, such as the entrance into a village or a house, the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of the streets and squares. This identification explains why the passage from one group to another is so often ritually expressed by passage under a portal, or by an ‘opening of the doors’. (p. 192)

The Indian border and childhood were somehow like thresholds in the life of Nehru in terms of entering into an isolated life in Britain. Nonetheless, the separation came as a window of opportunity in his journey to becoming in Britain as the virtual self-exile.

Nehru sounds different while describing the emotions of exile and intrusive desires as Pandya (2001) observes that Nehru “narrates a story of the self that is different from his modernization narrative and exists in a space ‘in-between nation’” (p. 220). The birth of the nationalist movement and the end of imperialism are not limited to the national boundary, the national and international political environment contributes to that. Moreover, Nehru was imprisoned term after term, and writing was his primary “occupation and amusement” (Meston, 1938, p. 133). He had also written multiple texts in imprisonment. Among them, his autobiography was one of the prison narratives exploring the evolutionary process of Nehru’s mental and political character to a global audience. Nehru (2004) accepts that his early days in Harrow and Cambridge were a “vague kind of Cyrenaicism” (p. 22) at the beginning but Gokhale (1978) perceives that “the rational pursuit of happiness in life was soon overlaid with the influence of Marxism” (p. 313) as his long-term political ideology in the form of democratic socialism. As he was influenced by Marxism, socialism became the guiding economic policy

of the Indian National Congress. It was based on the economic program rather than on making political strategies and party organizational structures.

Contradiction is common in the life and writings of Nehru. For instance, there appears a discrepancy while reading his autobiography relating to ecocritical perspectives. A study by Keerthy (2013) on Nehru's autobiography finds a contradictory image of Nehru where he presented himself as a lover of nature and believed in coexistence, especially in his imprisoned days, observing insects and birds in the wilderness. Still, he did not prioritize ecology and the environment when he was at the highest policy-making level for a long time in Indian history (p. 379). Keerthy seems to signal the big projects of Nehru, particularly the dams that displace ethnic people from their roots. Loss of biodiversity was also a sensitive issue. Keerthy (2013) acknowledges Nehru for respecting animals, birds, and insects in his private life but blames him for constructing huge industries, big dams, and motorways, as well as establishing massive mining projects because this pollution gradually began to appear in India (p. 379). Nehru seems extremely eco-freak in prison in the form of virtual exile but he appears inconsistently contributing to ecocide in terms of making policies for big projects in the name of modernization at home. Most notably, Nehru studied natural sciences like botany and geology at Cambridge University (Rathore, 1985, p. 463). Certainly, the anthropocentric nature of modernization that was adopted by Nehru has taken him to the contrary when development was in priority and conservation was virtually disregarded in the mid-twentieth century.

The progressive thought of Nehru was sowed at Cambridge University. Rathore (1985) explains that he attended lectures by progressive intellectuals such as George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, and J.M. Keynes there. As a result, Nehru developed certain socialistic ideas in academic form. Though, during his teens, what was ambiguous, romantic, and academic, became important elements of his intellectual life later (p. 466). Such schooling remains a stigma and reveals the philosophical assumptions in his political career. His origin led him to a certain degree of duality too. The dual bequest of Nehru generally stands between the East and the West. The state of being everywhere leads to nowhere too. In this regard, Brown (2003) asserts that the autobiography of Nehru discloses the Nehruvian dichotomy where "he felt he was a curious blend of East and West, and therefore out of place everywhere and at home nowhere" (p. 109). The condition of being everywhere outside the home and being nowhere inside the home mostly occurs in the case of immigrants who live in the diaspora. Surprisingly, Nehru becomes an in-betweener in his homeland because of his political standpoints on global and Indian politics.

The contradictions and dualism observed in Nehru's life were studied by various researchers. However, no prior studies have shown the inconsistency in terms of rites of passage particularly related to liminality and *communitas* which are theoretically understood as promoting each other in performance studies. In this context, this study observes the performativity of Nehru along with other members of the Indian community at Harrow and Cambridge showing the unusual contradiction.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Nehru's *An Autobiography* was written in an Indian prison and published in 1936 by the British press. The study is a constructivist reading of the text and in the words of Creswell (2013), the researcher "seek[s] understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 24) generating subjective meaning regarding the selected text. The concepts of liminality and *communitas* as posited by Turner, and the notions of 'the rites of passage' as defined by van Gennep are considered as theoretical bases for the textual analysis process. Through the eye of Turner (1967), liminality is described as a "period of reflection" where "neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them" (p. 105). Primarily, the textual analysis method describes and interprets the chosen text for understanding or meaning-making.

In compliance with Durant and Fabb (2015), the textual analysis method supports as a measure that clears "what markers mean by a 'good' answer is typically one which is focused on the question or topic; one which is supported with textual evidence or other relevant illustration; and one which is coherently argued and written" (p. 30). Thus, the analysis process finally contributes to the argumentation. Mostly, the study concentrates on the activities and activism of Nehru while he was abroad studying at Harrow and Cambridge. Those days at the institutes are interpreted as a liminal space of his life as theoretically defined by Turner. In this stage, he was separated from his childhood setting sail to England in the beginning and ultimately reagggregates to a pro-active political life back in India. The chosen theoretical concepts are appropriate to discuss the issues in the study as Turner (1967) recognizes people in the liminal state to be 'secluded, darkened, hidden, without rank or insignia' or 'invisible' (p. 234) as generally experienced by Nehru in England. Moreover, Boland (2013) appreciates the concept of Turner (1969) which enjoys "widespread popularity, especially amongst theorists who celebrate the freedom, creativity, and potentially subversive or transformative powers of liminality" (p. 231). In like manner, Nehru had lived in England for seven years for his study

as a liminal stage of the rites of passage. After that, he returned to India with knowledge and hope that represents the reincorporation phase completing the liminality in the foreign nation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Separating oneself from earlier existence is one of the major necessary conditions for liminality. In May 1905, Nehru left India and started to live in England for his studies when he was just fifteen (Nehru, 2004, pp. 18-19). The separation of Nehru from the mother's body can be understood as from the biological mother as well as from the body of the nation as Taylor (2001) identifies liminality as, "when the child has left the mother's body" (p. 42) but not reunited. Correspondingly, as stated by van Gennep (1960) in either the case of an individual or group, "life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change room and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross" (p. 189). Among such thresholds, liminality represents an unstructured transition that begins with separation and goes up to reintegration. In this sense, the separation of Nehru was not necessarily the departure forever.

Living hometown for further study in a foreign nation seems like self-exile for a child. In a deeper sense, exile is considered a state of perpetual search. Separation as a form of exile for study became an epistemic quest for Nehru. Said (2003) also believes that "exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost" (p. 185). Based on this, exile represents undesired space that could be both (m)other lands, but the perpetual search for love, home, and mobility is fundamental to it. While living life itself as a rite of passage leaving the homely land in virtual exile, one enters into transition through separation as a single gateway for liminality. Regarding the situation, Nehru (2004) narrates, "Never before I had been left among strangers all by myself and I felt lonely and homesick" (p. 19) in England at Harrow and Cambridge. It is difficult to respond whether Nehru changed himself or the environment changed him. Furthermore, according to Lamming (2003), "We are made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can't alter, and whose future is always beyond us" (p. 12). Within this frame of reference, exile is a liminal space for the person with the feeling of insignificance and insufficiency in their society which is guided by one's past. Instantly, Nehru (2004) was able to console himself and his life became "a vague kind of Cyrenaicism" (p. 22). He learned to live in exile, in liminality. In this sense, Zeleza



(2005) identifies “exile as an essential and epistemological condition, as a spatial and temporal state of being, belonging, and becoming, and its material and metaphorical contexts” (p. 2). On this basis, the people in exile seem to transform the adversities into adaptation converting exile into home.

Certainly, there are painful psychological effects of being among strangers in foreign geography. The pain represents the consequence of separation and it naturally happens at the beginning of the transition as Turner (1969) identifies the acceptance of pain and suffering as one of the indicators of living in liminality (p. 106). Both the past and future are disregarded and one naturally indulges in the present in the stage. Normally, in such a transition, anonymity dominantly performs against the universal system of nomenclature. Depicting the condition, Turner (2008) clears that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (p. 89). In this way, a person is no longer in his/her origin and destination has not been achieved yet. So, experiencing loneliness and homesickness is common in the lives of inbetweeners. Yet, the strangers have not remained unknown for a long time and the pain has become power with the pace of time in the life of Nehru.

Rather than being, the journey in the liminal space is the stage of becoming. A dream develops hope in the lives of people who share liminal space. Recalling the lonely days at Harrow, Nehru (2004) writes, “Always I had a feeling that I was not one of them, and the others must have felt the same way about me” (p. 19). He was feeling lonely at that time after the separation but he was not alone there. The multilayered exile encompasses the life spent eternally seeking parental love and approval for the comforts of belonging and the living hammered by the dislocations of perpetual departs, arrivals, returns, and journeys as the consequences of these territorial, philosophical, and temporal displacements (Zeleva, 2005, p. 3). Even in such dialectical in-betweenness of contradictions, there is a hope of reunion. In other words, there seems a community but not appropriate communication. Philosophically, a community should be “unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals” (Turner, 2008, p. 90) assembled for transformation tolerating transitions. Nehru was one of the members of such a group in England.

Nehru gradually felt optimistic about the social relationships at Harrow and Cambridge. However, the reality was different. For instance, Nehru (2004) recalls the misfitting environment as the eldest son of Maharaja of Kapurthala, Paramjit Singh, was hopeless and could not



blend himself with the other fellows who used to make fun of him for his behavior (p. 20). Consequently, "this irritated him greatly, and sometimes he used to tell them what he would do to them if they came to Kapurthala" (Nehru, 2004, p. 20). There, the pride of position and system of nomenclature appears to blur the anonymity as desired in communitas in different directions in that liminal foreign land. Moreover, in the above case, the son of Singh could not come out of the structural hierarchy of the pre-liminal stage even after the separation. So, he sounds misfit for the sharing culture where a member is expected to be released "from structure revitalized by the experience of communitas" (Turner, 1969, p. 130). To achieve it, one should suspend the family legacy or kinship. The culture of sharing and establishing intimacy is not developed in the above case and they seem failure to experience liminality collectively in an unstructured manner.

Reporting on the political activism of Indian students in England, Nehru (2004) explains that many of his contemporaries at Cambridge played a prominent role in Congress politics in their later days (p. 25). It indicates that the persons who share liminality seem to engage in similar activities after reintegration into society, as explained by Turner (2008), "It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (p. 90). Their involvement in politics appears to support them in gaining power in a foreign land and enduring the pain of separation. Ultimately, the struggle seems to bring individuals together and take their reintegration process in a similar field.

Regarding life after the reintegration, Nehru recalls the early Cambridge days and connects it to the death of J.M. Sen-Gupta under Indian detention in 1933. In this context, Nehru (2004) continues:

He [Sen-Gupta] had been made a State-prisoner on his return from Europe early in 1932, while he was yet on board ship in Bombay. Since then, he had been a prisoner or a detenu, and his health had deteriorated. Various facilities were given to him by the Government, but evidently, they could not check the course of the disease. His funeral in Calcutta was the occasion for a remarkable mass demonstration and tribute; it seemed that the long pent-up suffering soul of Bengal had found an outlet for a while at least. (p. 412)

The comradeship that could not be fully sensed in the rites of transition in Cambridge was empathically felt in the rites of incorporation as both of them were in the same field of politics. It also shows that there are multiple liminalities in the life of individuals. Moreover, the above

case of experiencing mental and physical wounds of prison life together in different settings brings them on the same route of liminality creating ground for *communitas* many years after the earlier liminality.

In *communitas*, the behavior of the members sounds “normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint” (Turner, 2008, p. 90). However, the majority of the students are observed spoiling the basic norms of *communitas*. They are neither modest nor submissive. Moreover, they feel no threat of punishment, rather they threaten others to take revenge in such a liminal stage forgetting the culture of *communitas* (Nehru, 2004, p. 20). That makes someone a misfit and creates problems in mixing with others and working in a group. More specifically, it is expected to be the absence of property or the distinction of wealth in liminality (Turner, 1969, p. 106). However, Nehru (2004) narrates, “I come across some Harrow friends and developed expensive habits in their company. Often, I exceeded the handsome allowances that father made me and he was greatly worried on my accounts, fearing that I was rapidly going to the devil” (pp. 28-29). The availability of different expense levels from the parents seems to create class, structure, and heterogeneity rather than equality following the crux of *communitas* among friends in this academia. Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as not being in the stage of complete separation because they were frequently connected to their parents through various means.

In liminal space, one is neither here nor there but in-between. Regarding this, Nehru (2004) shares, “During my stay at Cambridge the question had arisen as to what career I should take up. For a little while the Indian Civil Service was contemplated; there was a glamour about it still in those days” (p. 27). That resembles the earlier uncertainty in the life of the person who is in the rites of passage. Moreover, it looks like the “generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (Turner, 2008, p. 90). Thus, the perpetual dream of a future career of the youth weakens liminality and blurs the beauty of *communitas*.

Western universities were not only academic institutions for Indian youths but also political sites for them. In Cambridge, students from India formed a society named “*Majlis*” and they used to utter thrilling language while discussing Indian politics (Nehru, 2004, p. 24). The students appeared outspoken in those academic *communitas*. Generally, there is no doubt that people who are in liminality enjoy *communitas* but in the name of exaggerating “*communitas* in certain religious or political movements of leveling type may be speedily followed by disposition, over bureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification”

(Turner, 1969, p. 130). Thus, it is claimed that wherever politics and religion are referred to, it is challenging or usually impossible to get an absence of status, rank, and unselfishness consequently, hindering the actual culture of communitas.

## CONCLUSION

Through the above discussion, it is observed that Nehru and other Indians at Harrow and Cambridge in England are in their liminality but they are not largely enjoying communitas together as generally and theoretically assumed. However, most of them were on the same mission. It is inferred from the discussion that there appeared incredible contradictions between liminality and communitas in this phase of the rites of passage because of diverse economic status, hierarchical political identities, perpetual individual competitions, and different family legacies among them. All these reasons seem to weaken the true essence and strength of liminality. In due course, the study supports exploring the ideas concerning the performing bodies in liminality. Moreover, it also reveals the hindering factors behind the generally understood organic union between liminality and communitas in the rites of passage of individuals.

## IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The study has sociological, anthropological, and political implications including literary implications as it draws on different symbolic stages of someone's life. It supports understanding and evaluating the situations when people can collaborate with others who are also sharing environments and fail to feel the spirit of community due to various socio-political contingencies. Moreover, the study also helps to comprehend the behavior of individuals who are in a transitional phase of their lives. It particularly examines the liminal stage of a single statesman in a foreign nation where he has remained for his study for seven years. It is suggested to reflect on the political imprisonment or exile of multiple popular politicians from different nations to search intersections and variations considering detention as liminality in their rites of passage. Beyond rereading the literary texts, auto-ethnographical interviews can also be taken for an expanded understanding.

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