**Study material for 6th semester (Major) Paper 6.5 Indian English Literature**

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**The Importance of the National Idea**

 **By Jawaharlal Nehru**

This essay has been taken from Nehru’s *Discovery of India* which was published in the year 1946. It was written during his imprisonment at Ahmednagar fort in Maharashtra by the British. The book is considered to be an honour paid to the rich cultural heritage of India, its history and its philosophy. In this particular essay, Nehru speaks about the changes necessary in India which will enable its citizens to become the citizens of the world.

Summary of the text

According to Nehru, “Nationalism is essentially a group memory of past achievements, traditions, and experiences and nationalism is stronger today that it has ever been.”Even though many people thought that nationalism must give way to the ever growing international tendencies of the modern world , yet whenever a crises has arisen nationalism has dominated the scene and people has sought comfort in old tradition. This going back to national tradition has been most marked in the ranks of the labour and the proletarian elements. This can be seen in the case of Soviet Union where famous figures of national history have been revived and have become heroes of the Soviet people.

The writer next makes a study of the varying fortunes of the Communist Parties around the world. After the first flush of enthusiasm, the Communist parties faced resistance from organised Labour who viewed them as a foreign group who took orders from Russia. Nehru speaks about the fate of the Communist Party of India which he feels is completely divorced from the national traditions that fills the mind of the people. It has cut itself off from the past and speaks in a language which finds no echo in the hearts of the people. The Party has no real roots in the country

There are others still who has failed in this respect. The writer talks about people who live in large cities and talk glibly of modernism and modern spirit and the essence of western culture but are ignorant of their own culture. They are naïve and shallow and lead an artificial life and have no living contacts with the culture of their country.

Nehru feels that natural progress can be achieved when there is neither a repetition of the past nor in its denial. New patterns must be integrated with the old. Indian history is a continuous adaptation of old ideas to a changing environment, of old patterns to new. There is a reverence for the past but there is also a freedom and flexibility of the mind and a tolerance of the spirit. While in Western Europe there was no such freedom of the mind, China has shown greater flexibility of the mind than India. Despite its attachment to tradition, the Chinese mind never lost its flexibility and essential tolerance. Perhaps one of the great advantages that China has over other countries is her entire freedom from dogma, from the narrow and limited religious outlook and her reliance on reason and common sense.

Nehru also talks about our approach to knowledge in the past which was a synthetic one but gradually gave way to a more analytical one. But the need of the hour is to lay greater stress on the synthetic aspect and make the whole world our field of study and grow out of the narrow grooves of thought and action. This will help us to develop, in additions to our own national backgrounds and cultures, an appreciation of others and a capacity to understand and co-operate with the peoples of other countries. This will help us to build integrated personalities instead of the lop-sided individuals of to-today and we shall become, in Plato’s words “spectators of all time and all being”.

Nehru also talks about another change that is required in countries like India. He says that there is too much of the past in us and we have ignored the present. It is very necessary that we get rid of the narrowing religious outlook and our obsession with the supernatural and metaphysical speculations. We have to come to grips with the present as there is only one way traffic in Time. India must lessen its religiosity and turn to science. While the orthodox Hindu is more concerned with the rules and regulations of the kitchen, the Moslem too has his own narrow codes and ceremonials. Nehru also talks about caste as a symbol and embodiment of this exclusiveness among the Hindus. Caste has no place in a social organisation where merit is the only criteria as opportunity is thrown open to everybody. Caste was an aristocratic approach which was based on traditionalism and this outlook has to change completely since it is totally opposed to the democratic approach.

Nehru also talks about a new form of slavery which is against the spirit of equality. This new form of slavery is worse than the old. In the name of individual freedom, political and economic system exploits human beings and treats them as commodities. In this way a nation losses its freedom and becomes property of another nation. Radicalism has not only led to master nations but also master races. But the writer feels that the spirit of the age will triumph and we Indians must always aim at equality. We should be able to provide equal opportunities for all and there should be no political economic or social barrier in the way of any individual or group. We must realise that the backwardness or degradation of any group is not due to inherit failings in it but due to lack of opportunities or suppression by other groups. Hence special opportunities should be given to backward groups to catch up to those who are ahead of them. For this we need an economic system which will encourage equality. This economic change will happen when we will move in the direction of democratically planned collectivism. Nehru defines democratic collectivism as one which does not seek an abolition of private property but one where there is public ownership of basic and major industries. Apart from this, India should also have co-operatively controlled small and village industries. India should also aim at preventing unemployment by absorbing all the labour power of the nation in some activity or other. This will result in an equalisation of income and the vast differences that exist today will disappear completely.

Nehru also speaks of the revival of the self governing village which was destroyed under the British rule. It is very necessary to revive our villages which can very well be a governmental and electoral unit looking after the essential needs of the people. The village council itself, chosen by all the adult men and women of the village, will not only cater to the local needs but can also participate in bigger elections in an indirect manner. In addition to this territorial representation, there should be also direct representation of the collectives on the land and such arrangements will be in completely harmony with India’s past and present requirements.

Such a development in India will be in sync with political and economic internationalism. Under such circumstance the Indian people will grow in stature and lose their narrow nationalism and exclusiveness. Proud of their Indian heritage, they will become citizens of this world and will much forward with others just as their ancient forefathers did.