

Nehru: A Political Life

By Judith M. Brown.

Yale University Press, 2004.

Writing a biography of Nehru, one of the most commented upon figures in Indian history, couldn't have been easy. "What's new" was the common refrain that Judith Brown was often confronted with. *Nehru- A Political Life*, it can be safely asserted, is a refreshing addition to Indian history writing. Its sources are new and original and its emphasis fundamentally different from existing works on Nehru.

As is well known, one of Brown's long-standing areas of interest is modern South Asian history, particularly the 20th Century in India. And in more ways than one, Jawaharlal Nehru, alongside Mahatma Gandhi, laid the foundations of modern India. So it was logical that following up on her earlier works on Gandhi, Brown would now venture into writing Nehru's life story. Her impressive work offers, as the dust jacket claims, an "insightful" analysis of Nehru's political life. The role that Nehru played in the freedom struggle and his role as the designer of modern India is the wide spectrum covered by Brown.

To its credit, *Nehru: A Political Life* is not a chronological narrative. Rather, the work is thematic, and its focus is primarily on Nehru's life in politics, which was, to follow Brown, his only passion after his return from a privileged education in England. Brown tries to understand what drove him into politics and what inspired his actions. In reading *Nehru-A Political life* therefore, the reader is exposed to the changing world of Indian politics in the 20th century, a relatively under-worked area in Indian history. In the five sections that the author has carefully divided the work into, she covers the multi-faceted personality of Nehru - the man, the intellectual, the humanist, the politician and the Prime Minister.

The strength of this biography stems from Brown's ability to draw on hitherto

inaccessible private papers. As she had emphasized in her keynote address at the British Association of South Asian Studies Conference at Oxford last year, these papers describe in detail Nehru's role as head of the Indian state after independence and the socialist/anti-colonial figure he presented on the international stage.

One reviewer has argued, "There is no doubt that Nehru, still, as in his lifetime, arouses passionate loyalty as well as hostility and criticism: no-one interested in India can escape this towering figure in the nation's history." It is from this premise that Brown has tried to understand the man. She sees him as "a man of integrity and vision, committed above all to creating a new India out of the debris of imperialism, an India, which would be an open and inclusive community, offering new opportunities to those who had previously been powerless or at the base of society." His vision, she tries to argue, is even more significant today than while he lived.

Any review of *Nehru-A Political Life* remains incomplete without referring to the photographs used in the book. The rationale behind the cover photograph becomes discernible when she describes the picture on the cover as "Nehru as an older man gazing rather pensively." The photos are integral to the work. As Brown points out, "I think it's very important for people to see him in imagery, because he used his image as a political tool. He was the person who understood the importance of the Press and of imagery, which he actually learnt from Gandhi, who knew how to project an image in the absence of television."

However, while emphasizing Nehru's relationship with the ghetto called "politics", Brown gives little attention to Nehru's emotional life, a major area of concern for scholars in the past. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that a fundamentally new

and fruitfully critical view of Nehru does emerge from Brown's account.

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