# UNIT 7: JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: "ANIMALS IN PRISON"

## UNIT STRUCTURE


7.1 Learning Objectives

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## 7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- give a detailed summary of the prose piece "Animals in Prison"
- describe the major thematic concerns of the prose piece
- discuss the style and language employed by the writer

## 7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is a continuation of the previous unit where we have discussed the life and works of Nehru, as well as the context of the prose piece titled "Animals in Prison". The essay "Animals in Prison" illustrates Nehru's love for nature and his skill as an essayist. In this unit, we will deal in details with this prose piece. Besides, explaining the text, the unit shall also deal with the major concerns of Nehru as a prose writer as reflected in this text. When you read the prose piece, you will notice that your attention is drawn to his keen observation and his great love for animals. Thereby, it becomes necessary to throw light on Nehru's prose style and his use of language, through which he describes in minute detail his life at the jail and his closeness with the objects of nature.

## 7.3 EXPLANATION OF THE PROSE PIECE

"Animals in Prison" an example of Jawaharlal Nehru's excellent prose. In simple yet evocative language, Nehru describes his stay of fourteen and a half months at his little cell at Dehra Dun Gaol. His term in prison was so long that by the end of it he had gathered a rich treasure trove of experience that he could share with the world.

Nehru gives a detailed account of how he passed his time in the confinement of the cell, waiting eagerly for the evening when he was allowed the luxury of a brief stroll near the prison gate. This was the time when he could have a glimpse of the majestic Himalayas which formed the skyline of the Dehra Dun Gaol. He also describes how several insects, birds, small animals and even snakes had at times made his cell a home or had come in like a casual visitor. He says that instead of being afraid or repulsed he was glad of the diversion that their presence provided. Nehru's love for nature and for animals also finds description in the passage.

At the very beginning of the passage, Nehru mentions that he had become familiar with the dent and mark on the walls of the prison cell. Though he was in solitary confinement he did not feel alone, because several insects and lizards paid regular visits to his cell– some even making it their home at different periods of time. Nehru spent fourteen and a half months in the cell, and in those months variety of thoughts and impressions had passed through his mind. The pangs of loneliness assailed his mind at times but the appearance of little tufts of grass, newly grown and the pervading green would be enough to cheer him up. He makes special mention of the many lizards and colonies of hornets and wasps that lived in and around his cell. The lizards would remain hidden behind the rafters for most part of the day, coming out in the evenings to prey on the small flying insects and, sometimes, though rarely, even on hornets and wasps.

Nehru seems to have been particularly happy in the Dehra Dun Gaol, as he mentions, despite the rather poor living conditions. This happiness was due to the proximity of the Himalayan ranges, and the spectacular view that he could observe in the course of his brief evening

walks. These evening walks seem to have been the high point of Nehru's stay at the Dehra Dun Goal. He mentions that since the cells were very small, with hardly any walking place, most of the prisoners were allowed to take a stroll near the prison gates in the evening. This was the time when Nehru had the pleasure of observing the serene beauty of the Himalayas, and observe the changing hues of the mountain range at different times of the year. This time of the evening was deemed very precious by Nehru.

In the essay, Nehru also points out the disparity between the living condition of the native and the European inmates of the prison. He states that the living quarters of the European inmates were without an enclosing wall and thus they could have an unobstructed view of the mountains as well as the public road outside the prison.

Nehru goes on to mention the psychological effects of long and solitary confinement and also speaks of the immense value that an outdoor walk can have under such circumstances. So much did he love these outings that he did not refrain from going out even during the monsoons even when the relentless downpour of rains compelled him to walk in ankle-deep water.

Nehru quotes a verse from the poet, Li Tai Po, where the poet expresses his companionship with the mountains. Though not in full agreement with the quoted lines yet Nehru agrees that the closeness of the mountains gave him a great sense of comfort and security. For him, the mountains seemed to stand for an eternal spring of wisdom, from which he could draw inspiration and comfort whenever he was distressed or he felt that hope was shrinking in his heart.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 1:** How long did Nehru stay at Dehradun gaol?

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**Q 2:** Why was Nehru happy during his confinement despite the poor living condition?

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During his stay at Dehra, Nehru also experienced the oncoming of the spring season, perhaps the most pleasant time of the year at Dehra. He goes on to give a vivid sketch of the peculiar beauty of the trees that have shed their leaves and now stand bare awaiting new spring leaves to sprout. Nehru also goes on to describe the ecstasy of the sprouting of new leaves as once again the trees are blessed by spring with a new deluge of tender green leaves. Nehru's acute observation is to be noted here as he makes a special mention of the different hues that the leaves of a mango tree has, turning from a reddish-brown, to russet and finally to green as it reaches full maturity.

Nehru then goes on to describe the monsoon season, which brings a welcome respite from the stifling summer heat. But the rains also bring in their wake ankle-deep water and mud. He remarks that it was very uncomfortable to be cooped up within the confines of the cell during such weather.

From his description of spring and summer at Dehra Dun as well as of the rains, Nehru proceeds to describe the winter. This is the season of intense cold that leaves one with yearning for the warmth and comfort of home. It would become even more uncomfortable when sometimes it rained in winter. There would be hailstorms too with hail as large as a marble pelting down, making a tremendous din on the roof.

Nehru draws a vivid picture of the Christmas Day that he had spent at the jail. He remembers the 24$^{th}$ of December, 1932, as a day of incessant rain and thunder. But the next day that was the 25$^{th}$ happened to be exactly the opposite. The day was clear and the snow laden mountain tops were clearly visible to the inmates of the jail. This was clearly a picture postcard view for Nehru.

During the winters, particularly when it rained, the prisoners were compelled to remain indoors at all times. At such times, Nehru remarks, man's observation of nature becomes even more acute. Being confined to his cell for long periods Nehru was made to watch his surroundings more carefully and it was thus that he discovered various creatures of all shapes and sizes- flying creatures, creeping or crawling creatures, all living together

in a mature co-habitation and without disturbing him in any way. Nehru too decided to leave them in peace. So there lived man and nature-peacefully, and in harmony.

The only creature to which Nehru took a dislike was the bat. And unfortunately there were quite a number of bats, big and small, that flew by, nearly touching his face, at times.

Sometimes Nehru would while away his time watching the numerous colonies of ants that lived in the vicinity. Sometimes he watched the lizards as they darted about the cell in search of prey. He seemed to be particularly fascinated by the squirrels. He mentions particular instances when, misled by his stillness as he sat reading in his cell, a squirrel would climb on to his knee and settle there for a while, scampering away as soon as it realized with fright that Nehru was a living thing. He also mentions how a fellow inmate had adopted three baby squirrels which had to be fed initially with the filler of a fountain pen. All these examples not only show Nehru's interest in Nature but also the great love and compassion that he carried in his heart for all living things whether they belonged to the plant or the animal world.

This love and compassion was not a common feature in all men. Nehru goes on to show with specific examples how man's greed tends to disrupt this peaceful co-existence between men and animals, or men and plants.

Nehru had observed the animal life at every jail that he was sent to. He finds that certain creatures are to be commonly found at different jails. The most common among them, according to Nehru, are the pigeons. He also mentions how certain gaol officials would shoot these birds down without a thought, and enjoy them in their meal. Another bird found often was the maina. Nehru remembers a time when he had made a habit of feeding a pair of mainas from his leftovers and how at any delay they would chirp loudly demanding that they be fed.

Nehru goes on to describe his experiences at Naini Prison too. Here, he had the company of a large number of parrots and he took great pleasure in watching their antics and hearing their crackle. Nehru's observation of

birds was not restricted to the Naini gaol alone because in Dehra Dun too, he had the opportunity to see and hear a variety of birds, small ones like the Koel and the brain fever birds, as well as the majestic kite and eagle.

Nehru shares a rather humorous experience that he once had in the gaol at Barrielly which had a large number of monkeys all around. Here Nehru had witnessed several instances of man-animal conflict of which he cites a particular instance of how a baby monkey was rescued from the clutches of some of Nehru's fellow inmates by another larger monkey.

As Nehru himself remarks, not all visitors were welcome specially the snakes or centipedes were not at all welcome. Nehru seemed to have a special dislike for the centipede; it is not only a dislike but also a fear of the snake in particular. To his acute discomfort Nehru had snakes as visitors to his cell at different jails, quite a few times. Sometimes such accidental visits also found their way into Newspaper headlines, and quite a hue and cry was caused by about such visitations.

Not all the animals that Nehru saw during his terms were known to him. Some of them were new and one such animal which he saw at Dehra Dun was the Pangolin. Nehru describes this strange, rather, uncouth animal as a cross between a lizard and a crocodile but with scales covering its body. It is known as "Bo" in the local dialect. Nehru tells us, that the Pangolin is eaten by the forest dwellers.

Visits by stray animals and birds are welcomed by most prisoners who find a welcome distraction in them in their lonesome life in cells. At times, as Nehru informs us, certain prisoners also developed an emotional bond with or dependence on such stray animals keeping them as pets and doting upon them and feeding them out of their own share of food. Nehru shows a few of his own experiences where he had looked after sick animals at the different prisons where he served his terms. He mentions that here he had more time to be with animals or to observe them than he had in the outside world where other work kept him pre-occupied.

Pandit Nehru concludes his writing on animals by a reference to the different animals chosen by different countries as their National animal. He thus refers to the Eagle of USA and German, the lion and Bull dog of England,

the fighting Cock of France and the Bear of Russia. He remarks that the adoption of these animals could perhaps be responsible for the violent and greedy streak in the citizens of these countries while the adoption of the meek and docile 'cow' as National animal could perhaps explain the non-violent and tolerant nature of the Indians.



### LET US KNOW

The two-volume collection entitled *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*, edited by Sarvepalli Gopal and Uma Iyenger is a significant contribution of the intellectual history of twentieth century India.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 3:** How, according to Nehru, did winter season provide more opportunities to observe nature?

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**Q 4:** Describe Nehru's encounter with various birds at different jails.

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**Q 5:** What kind of strange animals did Nehru come across during his stay at prison?

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**Q 6:** Briefly describe Nehru's strange experience with squirrels at Lucknow Gaol.

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## 7.4 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Pandit Nehru is an iconic figure in the realm of Indian English prose writing. Nehru's writing's, particularly his books *Glimpses of World History, Letters from a Father to his Daughter*, and the autobiography *Toward*

*Freedom*, show Nehru's mastery in English prose and depth of ideas besides also highlighting his world view. His autobiography highlights his pre-occupations with nation building, the idea of India as a nation-state, his views on India and on being Indian as well as his personal experiences during and after freedom struggle. But Nehru's achievement as a writer commands equal respect, if not more , as his contribution as a statesman.

Nehru's prose style is perhaps among the best in the world, with its innate simplicity, honesty and eye for evocative detail.

Though Nehru did not claim for himself the title of a write, it is evident from his voluminous writings that he lost no opportunity to write. His writing did full justice to the grace and rhythm of the English language. His powers of observation were commendable, and this is very much in evidence in the prescribed prose piece "Animals in Prison". Frank Moraes, one of his best biographers writes that, at its best, Nehru's style shows a vigour and clarity pleasing and compelling to the ear as to the mind. In terms of his writing he stands together with Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore who were also good writers of prose. Though not a professional writer, Pandit Nehru played a considerable role in shaping the birth and development of English prose in India leaving behind a legacy for which the world will always hold him in esteem. What is more striking about the style in "Animals in Prison" is its utter lucidity. Nehru uses a simple, easily comprehendible language which is so deftly used as to give a vivid picture of the objects he describes.



## 7.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit discusses Nehru's essay, ''Animals in Prison'', an extract from his autobiography *Toward Freedom.* It reflects Nehru's extraordinary gift as a writer with his mastery over the English language and highlights his insight into life that includes the world of a good number of animals, birds and insects in Dehradun and Naini jails where he had to spend many months as political prisoner. He is a compassionate observer of the animal behaviour and shares a bond of affection with the animals. His style and

technique is another important highlight of the discussion in this unit. After having finished reading the unit, you have gathered an idea regarding the prose piece in a detailed manner as well as the important themes that are being reflected through it. Through the prose piece, Nehru symbolically draws the attention of the readers to the non-violent and tolerant nature of the Indians in a way.



## 7.6 FURTHER READING

1. Gopal, S. (2003). *The Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1961). *Towards Freedom: An Autobiography.* Boston: Beacon Press.
3. Rao Chalapathi, M. (1973). *Jawaharlal Nehru.* Publication divisions, Govt. of India.



## 7.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q No 1:** Fourteen and a half months in the cell.

**Ans to Q No 2:** His happiness was due to the proximity of the Himalayan ranges, and the spectacular view that he could observe in the course of his brief evening walks at the jail. Since the cells were very small, with hardly any walking place, most of the prisoners were allowed to take a stroll near the prison gates in the evening. This was the time when Nehru had the pleasure of observing the serene beauty of the Himalayas, and observe the changing hues of the mountain range at different times of the year.

**Ans to Q No 3:** During the winters, particularly when it rained, the prisoners were compelled to remain indoors at all times. At such times, Nehru remarks, the man's observation of nature becomes even more acute.Being confined to his cell for long periods Nehru was made to watch his surroundings more carefully and it was thus that he discovered various creatures of all shapes and sizes- flying creatures,

creeping or crawling creatures, all living together in a mature co-habitation and without disturbing him in any way.

**Ans to Q No 4:** Refer to section 7.3

**Ans to Q No 5:** One strange animal which he saw at Dehra Dun was the Pangolin. Nehru describes this strange, rather, uncouth animal as a cross between a lizard and a crocodile but with scales covering its body.

**Ans to Q No 6:** He mentions a particular instances when, misled by his stillness as he sat reading in his cell, a squirrel would climb on to his knee and settle there for a while, scampering away as soon as he realized with fright that Nehru was a living thing.



## 7.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1:** Give a brief description of the time that Nehru spent at Dehra Dun Gaol with reference to the animals that he came across there?

**Q2:** How does Nehru describe the changing seasons and landscape that he witnessed during his stay at Dehra Dun Gaol?

**Q3:** Describe in brief Nehru experiences with snakes and centipedes during his time in prison.

**Q4:** What is the Pangolin? Give a description of the pangolin from your reading of "Animals in Prison".

**Q5:** *Worship and kindliness do not often go together.* Comment on the idea contained in this expression.

**Q6:** Describe Nehru's little tiff with the wasps.

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