

Deconstructing the Rhetoric Behind Jawaharlal Nehru's Tryst with Destiny

Jawaharlal Nehru's speech, *A Tryst with Destiny*, marked the beginning of a new era in India as British colonial rule ended. The speech given at midnight, the night before the day India officially gained independence was the country's first inaugural address as a united country. Nehru speaks about his hopes for the country, the people's apprehension about what is to come, the country's past, and the country's future in a speech haunted by exigence. The use of ethos to characterize the new nation of India and its people when paired with the exigence of the speech and his strong use of pathos makes this a speech that marked its place in India's history. The speech's style and strong use of language help it acknowledge the emotions behind the moment when paired with Nehru's arrangement of the ideas in the speech (with some ideas repeating and others appearing as brief thoughts about India's colonial past). I will be using the speech's transcript as provided by the *International Relations and Security Network* to analyze the arrangement, style, and methods of persuasion Nehru used to steady the emotions of a newborn nation.

Understanding the rhetorical situation behind the speech is particularly essential in analyzing the choices Nehru made in this speech. The purpose behind the speech is relatively self-explanatory. However, the speech's exigence is only truly understood when the reader gains full perspective on the context behind the speech, the speaker, and the audience. Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the key players in India's struggle towards independence (particularly the non-violent movement) and worked closely with other prominent figures such as Mahatma Gandhi. This is particularly relevant when one considers the audience of the speech, as India had previously been a series of smaller princely states that were hastily joined together (some were yet to be convinced to become a part

of the country), and the country was being split into two—India, Pakistan, and East Pakistan (which is now called Bangladesh)—based on the religious majority in each area. Therefore, the identity of the speaker was essential in the inaugural address. Besides the fact that Jawaharlal Nehru was India's first Prime Minister, his identity as someone who had been involved in India's freedom struggle made him a figure who was both trusted and familiar.

Furthermore, the context behind the speech adds to its exigence—or, as Bitzer states, the “imperfection marked by urgency” (6)—as the chaos and violence of India's independence and the partition of the two countries along with the fact that this was a major shift in the way in which the country was governed (a united state governed by a federal government as compared to the previous princely states governed by kings) must have led to a great deal of apprehension. This means that the imperfection (in this case, the apprehension) made it necessary for a trusted figure to rise at that moment, to reassure the country, and to chart a course forward.

The style of the speech helps us gauge Nehru's awareness of the emotions that followed in the wake of India's independence. The style remains firmly in the middle style where the language of the speech is not targeted towards an expert audience. Rather, the style maintains a ceremonial tone but remains simple enough for the general audience to understand. The first line is a brilliant example of this:

“Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.” (Nehru 1)

Here, we see the powerful use of pathos as his words are aimed to instill a sense of pride in the audience, as well as of relief after a battle that has finally been won when he states that “India will awake to life and freedom.” The concept of a “tryst with destiny” is also particularly striking as the rich language used speaks to an ancient promise that has been partially fulfilled by India’s independence from the British Raj (thus marking the moment as a historic one). While the language used here is quite rich and could plausibly be considered high speech, the structuring of the sentence pulls it closer to the middle style as it renders the language more accessible to the general public. The structuring of this first line also pulls the idea of freedom and independence to the forefront as Nehru skillfully manipulates both style (with his use of diction) and arrangement (both of sentences and of ideas) to pull certain ideas and themes to the forefront of his address (namely, freedom and equality) as he establishes his hopes for the country’s future.

Nehru’s arrangement of the speech is fascinating, as it meets the exigence of the speech head-on by addressing the two main questions on everyone’s minds. The first, is whether the audience is “brave enough and wise enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future?” (Nehru 1), thereby acknowledging the daunting responsibility to preserve and maintain the fragile peace that has been achieved after nearly a century. However, his use of the words “brave enough” and “wise enough” associates future choices with positive attributes, presenting the moment of India’s independence as an opportunity rather than a point of apprehension by leaving the country’s future to the hands of its constituents.

The placement of this question is intriguing as it addresses the members of the assembly (who were in the room when he gave this address) rather than the people of India at large. This, he specifies in the sentence directly after the first question as he states that “the responsibility rests upon *this assembly*” (Nehru 1) to ensure that the country meets its full potential (and their “tryst with destiny” is finally “redeem[ed] in full measure”). The arrangement of the rest of this section of the speech supports this idea as he presents his hopes for the nation as an amalgamation of past, present, and future. This is particularly evident in this section of the speech:

Freedom and power bring responsibility. The responsibility rests upon this Assembly, a sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India. Before the birth of freedom, we have endured all the pains of labour and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow. Some of those pains continue even now. Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons us now.

That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfill the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. The service of India means, the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and poverty and disease and inequality of opportunity. The ambition of the greatest men of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye. That may be beyond us, but as long as there are tears and suffering, so long our work will not be over.

(Nehru 1)

Here, Nehru expertly weaves together the past, present, and future by referring to the period “before the birth of freedom,” dismissing the past (“nevertheless, the past is over...”) after a brief period of speaking about the current state of the country (“ some pains continue even now”). This arrangement allows him to acknowledge the doubts brought about by the past, that there is much work to be done, and then dismiss both by stating that the future presents an opportunity to move past India’s colonial history and heal the pain that haunts the country’s present.

Nehru also segues into his use of *ethos* here as he begins to build upon his characterization of India. The repeated use of the word “sovereign” when he states that the assembly is a “sovereign body representing the sovereign people of India” pulls the newfound freedom of the country into the spotlight which builds upon his earlier image of India as a nation on an “unending quest” (Nehru 1). His assertion that those in the assembly will work towards “the ending of poverty and ignorance and poverty and disease and inequality of opportunity” further characterizes both the country and the assembly as one that perseveres towards equality.

Nehru carries these ideas forth into the second part of his speech which is addressed “to the people of India” (Nehru 1). Here, Nehru pivots towards a rhetorical approach that combines pathos and ethos to reassure the people of India by using his characterization of the spirit of India to instill feelings of national pride and hope in his audience. He speaks of India as “A new star [that] rises, the star of freedom in the East, [and that] a new hope comes into being, a vision long cherished materializes” (Nehru 2) and asserts that the people of India “ shall never allow that torch of freedom to be blown out, however high the wind or stormy the tempest” (Nehru 2). This leaves the image of a nation that is rising in his description of India as a rising star (and even the “torch

of freedom” as flames rise), and will continue to persevere through hardship through his use of the phrase “however high the wind or stormy the tempest.”

While he maintains his use of pathos and ethos throughout this part of the speech, he also acknowledges the solemnity of the moment by thinking of “the unknown volunteers and soldiers of freedom who, without praise or reward, have served India even unto death” (Nehru 2) and “ of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries and who unhappily cannot share at present in the freedom that has come” (Nehru 2). Both acknowledge the duality of emotions that must have been experienced by the people of India on the eve of its independence (enjoying freedom as a sovereign nation, while having sacrificed so much in the fight to reach that point) and help the speech meet its exigence by addressing the emotional needs of his audience (by allowing them to mourn both the people they lost and the country they knew).

The arrangement of this section is particularly interesting, as while the first question was placed nearer the beginning of the first half of the speech, the second is placed nearer the end of the speech and is used to move the speech towards its conclusion. The second question, “Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavor?”, is used to set Nehru’s characterization of the people of India in place as he addresses both the assembly and the people of India. His answer to this question states that:

[The people of India go] to bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman.

(Nehru 2)

This meets the needs of the speech due to its rhetorical situation by providing an answer to the lingering question of India's future and brings the speech to a hopeful conclusion as he ends his speech with a pledge to the global community to “ [further] peace, freedom and democracy” (Nehru 2) and the renewal of a pledge to India as he and his audience “ bind [themselves] afresh to her service” (Nehru 2).

While some debate has been held as to whether Nehru's tryst with destiny was ever fulfilled, or whether India's perseverance towards equality and freedom has stalled in its efforts, his inaugural speech still holds a great deal of historical significance. In part, due to his ability to seize the opportunity to present his characterization of India through his use of ethos, and his ability to meet the unique needs of the rhetorical situation by balancing the opportunity to chart the road ahead with his awareness of the people's emotion. His execution of both tasks is largely reliant on rhetoric as his arrangement of the speech and use of *ethos* and *pathos* greatly influenced his ability to meet the speech's exigence. Even now, the people of India continue to look to *A Tryst with Destiny* to remind themselves of the country's original ideals, suggesting that Jawaharlal Nehru managed to exceed the speech's exigencies in some ways by creating a rhetorical piece that transcended time.

