

WOMEN IN THE LIVES OF THE NATIONAL LEADERS OF INDIA: (A STUDY ON PANDIT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU)

INTRODUCTION

The thesis *Women in the Lives of the National Leaders of India: (A Study on Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru)* has attempted to focus on the part played by women in shaping, moulding and influencing the life, and activities of a great leader Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the modern society, though we talk about equality and freedom, it is a fact that most of the women are marginalized and deprived of basic human rights. The so constructed patriarchal society has constrained the growth of women in every respect, though there are exception in certain cases where woman has also reached the heights of its success. The debate on the question of position of women is a never ending process. The social status and position of women in India from ancient to the present times has been much the focus of writing and in this respect, many outstanding works have been and being done on various aspects of women which has been a point of discourse among the academicians, social scientist, feminists and so on. While some writers have idealized and glorified the position of women in different times and places, others have focused upon their continuous exploitation and oppression. In the ancient period, women, in general enjoyed some degree of freedom in social, political, educational and religious activities. The wife was treated as the queen of the family in the Rigvedic times. There is abundant evidence in the Rig Veda which point to the fact that women were fully the equals of men as regards access to and capacity for the

highest knowledge.¹ In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (vi 4, 17 or 18) there was a ritual which was supposed to ensure the birth of a pandita or learned daughter² and the Samyutta Nikaya (III, 2,6) stated that a talented daughter was of greater value than a son.³ The achievements of intellectual feats by women revealed a healthy tradition of imparting training to daughters. Women enjoyed parity of status and prestige in society. The position of women was said to be good during the Vedic times, as they had considerable freedom in terms of marriage, could move freely, could participate in religious rites along with their husband, and were regarded as joint owners of the household and property along with the husband. Incidentally, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that: "In many respects she (woman) was honoured and respected and had a fair measure of freedom taking part in social and cultural activities. Indian history is full of the names of famous women, including thinkers and philosophers, rulers and warriors."⁴

However with the gradual passage of time, the position of woman began to deteriorate and her position in the patriarchal Indian society became miserable eventually. Female chastity, pre-puberty and strict monogamous marriage came to be emphasized in the later period. "The decline in women's education, practice of pre-puberty marriage and a whole lot of other institutional and conceptual influences of the period cumulatively established the supremacy of the male over female and pushed Indian women into dependency and subjugation."⁵ The growing decline of Indian women is evident from the Law of Manu where he states that "When young she (woman) depends on her father, when married on her husband and when old on her sons."⁶ Sati system also began to take deep roots and the plight of the widows became miserable.

The position of women saw further decline with the advent of the Muslims. They brought with them the obnoxious and negative practice of purdah which secluded the women further. In this respect, one may quote Jawaharlal Nehru who observed that Arab women did not observe purdah initially, he writes: “success made the Arabs imitate more and more the customs of the two old empires on either side of them- the Eastern Roman and the Persian. They had defeated the former and put an end to the latter, but they themselves succumbed to many an evil habit of these empires... Gradually the harem system begins, and men and women meet each other less and less socially. Unhappily this seclusion of women became a feature of Islamic society and India also learnt it from them when the Muslims came here.”⁷ A.S. Altekar also opines that it is likely that the purdah system was unknown in ancient India.⁸ According to Altekar, its general adoption took place subsequent to the advent of Muslim rule in India.⁹ Moreover polygamy and unilateral right of divorce for men became common practice during the Muslim period.

Therefore social evils like child-marriage, female infanticide, sati system, prohibition of women remarriage, polygamy, denial of education to women etc, became a recurrent feature of the society which adversely affected the position of women. This kind of pathetic and deplorable condition of the women had drawn the attention of the few intellectuals of 19th Century India, especially Bengal and their socio-religious movement led to the rethinking of India society with respect to women and their social dignity. They began to question the shastric injunctions which had belittled the dignity and position of women and ultimately a reawakening started in India with reference to the question of women issue. In this respect Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra

Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule and of course Gandhi actually pushed up the society to a direction which has perhaps rather, led to the path of emancipation as well as empowerment of women in the later period. In this respect Geraldine Forbes talking about woman question also pointed out that: “It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the foreign rulers had focussed their attention on this particular aspect of society. Enamored with their ‘civilizing mission’ influential British writers condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women.”¹⁰

We see that feminists have always projected woman as a suppressed lot who had and have no voice and therefore understood to having no power in the male-dominated society. The social reconstruction of women has been largely guided by patriarchal ideologies. In these so-called modern societies women are still, not only living a marginalized and deprived life but also their contribution in the development of human society is being ignored and most of the time unrecorded. In recent past, many critical and feminist theorists identified the marginalization of women and their contributions in past and present societies, and their major focus has always been on women empowerment. They argue that woman has had and is still sharing the world equally with men. However the experiences, activities and achievements of men is always being highlighted more than of women, whose experiences are also in fact wide and varied. It has been argued that women were also history makers just like men but, they had been left out of the narrative most of the time.¹¹ In the recent time Subaltern historians have given importance to women in their studies. However woman’s history is yet to emerge

in a full fledged form. Gerda Lerner¹² remark on the treatment of women in the history of the United States is well applicable to Indian history. She states that:

“the striking fact about the historiography of women is the general neglect of the subject by historians. As long as historians held to the traditional view that only the transmission and exercise of power were worthy of their interest, women were of necessity ignored. There was little room in political, diplomatic and military history for American women, who were, longer than any other single group in the population, outside the power structure.”¹³

This is true for the history of any country. In the context of India, women contributed in the process of making history by their incessant participation in the Indian freedom struggle and in the process of nation building after independence.

However our present study is not on that line of thinking. It will not talk about the debate and the question of woman status and position in the society and its marginalization. It is true that the activities of men have been considered significant to historical development and women have been left out from the narratives. Nevertheless, women though, living a restricted life, have played significant role in bringing about changes in the society since past. Women possessed and still have the capability to influence the family as well as society.¹⁴ There are many ways in which women’s contribution in the development of human society and civilization can be analyzed. One way, definitely, is to highlight contribution of some women in different field of life. In this context it would be worthwhile to consider Nehru’s observation about women when he remarked:

“I am partial to the women of India, and the more I have wondered about this great country the more I have felt a certain pride in our womenfolk. Women in India have played an important part in our social life and in our history. They have played this part in every branch of national activity, from high learning to valour on the battlefield. But it is their unobtrusive work in the village or in the larger community, that has moulded the nation.”¹⁵

Therefore the focus of my study would be to understand the contribution of women in the development of human society, to analyze the influence of women on the life of great man who had brought notable changes in different facets of his life. It goes in line with the famous quote “Behind every successful man there is a woman”. In this connection this study will try to see that aspect of woman in the form of mother, wife, sister, friend who consciously or unconsciously are always a source of strength, support and contribute directly or indirectly in making of a man, hence in developing and strengthening different aspect of human life. In fact the historical literature have emphasized and variously projected the political life and activities of Nehru but whether women had a hand in influencing his plan and course of action are yet to be explored and a matter of interrogation. Though there are many studies that highlight the influence of different personality on different great leaders of India, however they focus on seeing influence of man over man, and influence of women are generally ignored in such study as well. Very few works have been done to find out the role played by women in moulding and influencing the mind-set, temperament, mental make-up, policy making of any political thinker. It has not sufficiently thrown light on how a woman may be relevant or important to influence the mindset and thinking of a national leader. Very less attention is given to the various ways in which women have played significant role in the lives of men. A closer look and an indepth study would unfold that women have always played an important and significant role in moulding and building the lives of men and in our history. For instance Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged: “If you notice any purity in me, I have inherited it from my mother, and not my father... The only impression she ever left on my mind is that of saintliness.”¹⁶

Moreover Gandhi himself admitted that he learnt the truth of non-violence from his wife Kasturba Gandhi, who had been a victim of torture and sufferings under Gandhi. Gandhi's vision and attitude towards women was greatly influenced by his mother and his wife and many of his close women associates like Annie Beasant, Millie Graham Pollock, Margaret Cousins, Madeline Slade, Sarojini Naidu, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi Chattopadhy, Sushila Nayar and many more also contributed to a certain extent in framing his perception of women. Again Mohammed Ali Jinnah's wife Ruttie Jinnah also played a very important role in Jinnah's life. Though their marriage did not last long yet, she remained a strong political companion of her husband and her political life revolved round her husband. She regularly accompanied him to important political functions. Jinnah also acknowledged that she was the only human being he ever came close to.¹⁷ Jatindra Mohan Sengupta's British wife Nellie Sengupta became a dedicated life-partner who fought alongside with her husband against the colonial rulers of their motherland. In this way the national leaders of India came under the influence of women in various capacities as mother, sister, friends, comrades who influenced and guided their lives.

The present project is undertaken to rather to pick up these issues about the great personality i.e. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. It is a fact that Nehru was a nation builder par excellence. He was not only a nationalist and led the country to freedom, but being the first Prime Minister of India he had certain responsibilities and obligations to build the nation because India had been under the British colonial rule for a long period of time and before that many outsiders had ruled India. So there was a need of reconstructing and restructuring India as a nation and naturally being the first Prime Minister, he had

the obligation to materialize this responsibility or national duty of nation building. In our study it appears that Nehru had the opportunity to be associated with women not only in India but also of the Western as well as Asian countries and if someone scans his life and his way of thinking then one can say that, right from his childhood he was influenced by some way or the other by his mother, sisters, wife and daughter and after when he emerged as a full- fledged leader of India, he in came in touch with great and extraordinary women personalities of his time. In this attempt we would like to focus here some of the remarkable personalities he met from his childhood down to the period he became Prime Minister and through analysis we will see that Nehru was not only a Prime Minister but he was a nationalist, a nation builder, an international figure and also a great advocate of women's rights and women empowerment. Thus this study would be a unique work since it would highlight the role of different women in shaping Nehru's life and thought that ultimately shaped modern India.

The whole thesis has been organized into Seven Chapters excluding the Introduction.

In Chapter I, an attempt has been made to study the perception of women by Jawaharlal Nehru in the light of women. The chapter discusses how Nehru held a certain attitude towards women and women also played a significant role to influence his mind and this in turn influenced his views and perception on women.

Chapter II deals with the guiding spirit of women in the life of Nehru. It unfolds how women acted as a motivating and guiding force in the mental make-up,

temperament and the overall development of personality of Nehru and this in turn led to the emergence of Nehru as a great man and as a great leader

Chapter III highlights the leadership charisma of Nehru and its appeal to women. It is no doubt true that Nehru was influenced by women, but this chapter intends to show that women were in turn also captivated, fascinated and drawn by the multi-faceted personality and leadership charisma of Nehru that they gave their whole hearted devotion and commitment on Nehru's call to join the freedom movement, fight for equality of status and participate in the nation building process.

The role of women in moulding and guiding the nationalist orientation of Jawaharlal Nehru forms the theme of Chapter IV of the thesis. It is well known that Nehru was a great national leader and a nationalist, but here this chapter traces how women played a vital and significant role in making of the nationalist in Nehru which in turn contributed to the emergence of Nehru as a leading figures of the Indian freedom movement.

Chapter V focuses on the imagining of modern India by Nehru and how in the process of building the newly formed Indian nation, many women personalities including his women family members came in different capacities and helped him in the process of imagining, structuring and forging the nation.

Chapter VI shows how Nehru an ardent supporter of women rights and equality of both men and women under his leadership strived hard to give women the best of opportunities in all spheres of life in order to empower them so that, they could be an asset to the nation and contribute in all ways for the development of the nation.

The observations and overview of the research work connected with the preceding chapters are summed up in the Conclusion which forms Chapter VII of the thesis.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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⁸ Cited in Vinod Tagra, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

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¹⁰ Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India: Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1999 (Reprint), p.12.

¹¹ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine and Historiography*, DC Publishers, New Delhi, 2005, p.1.

¹² An American pioneer in the field of women's history

¹³ ' Re-reading History: Unveiling Women' an article by Kiran Datar in Madhu Lal & Sukrita P.Kumar (eds.). *Women's studies in India: Contours of Change*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2002. p. 169

¹⁴ 'Qualities That Make Women Distinct', an article by Sobha Naidu in Ashok S. Kolaskar & Motilal Dash (eds). *Women and Society: The Road to Change*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2012. p. 141.

¹⁵ Jawaharlal Nehru, Foreword to *Women of India* in Tara Ali Baig *op.cit.*, p.v.

¹⁶ Cited in Anup Taneja, *Gandhi, Women and the National Movement, 1920-47*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2005, p. 59.

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