

Chapter-I

PERCEPTION OF WOMEN BY JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

A great French idealist, Charles Fourier¹ once said: “One could judge the civilization of a country by the social and political position of its women.” And if we are to judge India today, we shall have to judge her by her women. The future that we build up will also be judged by the position of Indian women,”

Jawaharlal Nehru²

Jawaharlal Nehru was often seen quoting Charles Fourier in most of his writings and speeches which shows the considerable importance he gave to women of India, on the basis of which his understanding of women can be analyzed and studied. Today the study of Nehru has not only been confined in relation to history, economics, political science but the study also unfolds itself in various interdisciplinary areas like women studies, caste studies, peace studies, etc. In the historiography of women, it can be seen the study of Nehru leads to the formulation of a new aspect of Nehru as a feminist, as he was constantly seen highlighting the status of women in India and strongly advocated for equality between sexes, women emancipation, economic content of women rights and obligations that can add a new perspective on Nehru’s understanding of women. His approach towards women was based on more ‘realistic and practical considerations’³. Since he had high respect for women and looked upon them as superior beings, he believed that women could be good judges and think about the nation and hence wanted them to participate in the nation building process. And this was possible only if women were given due dignity and place in the society. This new

study of Nehru have cropped up on account of his multi-faceted and dynamic personality and his contributions to various aspect of human life-social, cultural, political and economic.

Nehru believed that the subjugation of women was not merely an abstract moral condition but a social and historical experience requiring sober appraisal. ⁴ Nehru's great concern for the womenfolk and the redressal of their problems can be well understood in the statement made by his biographer S. Gopal at the conclusion of the Nehru centenary year where he stated that

“Nehru himself would have wanted to be judged by what he had secured for the women in India. Way back in 1928 he asserted that a test of a civilization is the way it treats its women. And in 1964, a few months before his death, he acknowledged that, looking back on his life, what gave him the greatest satisfaction was not, as one would have thought, the opportunity he had provided for the Indian people to govern themselves, but what he had been able to do to better the status of Indian women.” ⁵

Nehru's deep involvement for the concern and improvement of the status of the womenfolk of India has made me to add one chapter on the perception of women by Nehru. Based on his understanding of the status and position of women from time immemorial, he constructed and reconstructed his ideas on women. Before formulating the ideas of Nehru on women it would be pertinent to study firstly, the influences which moulded Nehru's view on women. Nehru was of the firm belief that education and economic independence would lead to the emancipation of women which in turn would lead to the progress of the society and nation. In doing so, with a perceptive mind, Nehru figures out the various handicaps that women were facing and suggests various ways to resolve the problems affecting women's position which had led to the

degradation of their status in the society. It was this concern for improving and raising the status of women and his persistent efforts to make them co-partners with men in every field of life that Nehru can be studied not only as a political leader or a freedom fighter, or an internationalist but also as a crusader of women emancipation and women's rights. Therefore Jawaharlal Nehru can also be studied in the light of feminist perspective. The perception of women by Nehru have unveiled some of the prejudices at work in the traditional outlook of women.

Influences Which Moulded Nehru's View On Women

Before going into analyzing the perception of women by Nehru, it would be important to point out some of the factors which were instrumental in moulding the thought and ideology of Nehru that played an important role in the germination, sprouting and blossoming of his ideas on women. His idea of women was deeply influenced by the kind of upbringing and cultural backgrounds to which he had been exposed. As a pampered child, Nehru had been brought up under the loving care and affection of his mother Swarup Rani, who was able to inculcate in him strong traditional values which left a deep impact in his mind. He followed these values even when he was away from his home for studies in England and also throughout his life. This is evident from the numerous correspondences that was exchanged between mother and son where Swarup Rani used to constantly pour out her feelings of insecurity and fear that Nehru might not respect her after he would come back from England. But Nehru had high respect for his mother and making her feel his everlasting respect assured her in a letter written from London on 24 June 1910 that

“You asked me in your previous letter if I would treat you with respect after my return to India. I was really surprised to read that. What do you think of me that you ask me such a question? If an illiterate man does not respect his mother, people have a very low opinion of him. So if I, who have a little education, behave so badly, it would be still worse. What is the use of a man being educated if he does not know how to behave towards his parents?”⁶

This clearly shows that the respect which he had towards his mother was naturally reflected in his respectful attitude towards women in general.

It is likely that Nehru’s broad outlook of women was the outcome of the broad environment at home in which he grew up. Motilal Nehru had been able to keep his family well knit together and he was extremely proud of his family. Swarup Rani though very traditional and conservative was respected and held in high esteem by Motilal Nehru. Though she could not speak English yet she ably discharged her duties as hostess at Western style parties and she also used to accompany Motilal at invitations to English homes.⁷ The widowed sister of Swarup Rani, Bibi Amma was well integrated into the family. It is seen that sometimes the entire family used to travel to distant towns to attend the marriage function of relative and close friends. In this way the women stayed away from home for several weeks and it also provided scope for the girls of marriageable age to meet eligible bachelors as there was no purdah among the Kashmiris, and boys and girls met and mixed freely with one another.⁸ Nehru’s sisters Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Krishna Hutheesing were educated and trained by Western governesses and they were given great deal of freedom by Motilal. Such was the degree of freedom that women enjoyed in Nehru’s home. Moreover the younger women of Nehru’s family, his cousins, were forward looking women for those days. “Most of them spoke English and were interested in various activities outside the home.”⁹ The

existence of such an environment, where women were free, outgoing and were held in high esteem, was likely to have had moulded him in such a fashion that he looked upon women as an independent entity and his perception of women was developed and formulated in this background.

Next Western education had exposed him to the new horizons of sciences, which turned him into a rationalist. All this helped him in the shaping of his entire approach and outlook towards life¹⁰, which was now deeply rooted in modernity, science and technology and this aspect was reflected in his ideas and perception on, of and about woman which truly reflects his feminist spirit. Nehru deeply desired and wanted to revive, awaken, enthuse, liberate and revolutionize the thoughts and deeds of his people who had been steeped in centuries of social and intellectual inactivity. Therefore he wanted to draw out the Indian women from the age of ignorance, economic bondage, liberate them and also change the attitude of people at large towards women. His vision of a nation rooted in modernity, technology and progress contributed to the development of a broad minded mentality and attitude towards women. For Nehru, Western modernity and technology was the way to achieving gender equality.

Jawaharlal Nehru during his early days in England had come under the strong influence of various emancipation movements in Europe which reinforced his ideas on women exploitation and inequality in the society and he analyzed Indian problem from that point of view. He himself writes in his Autobiography, that while he was in London he was “vaguely attracted to the Fabians and socialistic ideas, and interested in the political movements of the day. Ireland and the woman suffrage movement interested

me especially,”¹¹ writing further, he says “how, during a visit to Ireland in the summer of 1910, the early beginnings of Sinn Fein had attracted me.”¹² Study of Marx and Lenin also made a powerful effect on Nehru’s mind which helped him to see history and current affairs in a new light.¹³ This reinforced his humanist spirit further and strengthened “his ideas and convictions in an egalitarian world view.”¹⁴

It may be noted here that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, a landmark in women’s emancipation in Russia which granted women equal political and economic rights with men had a tremendous impact in Nehru’s mind. Writing about the Revolution Nehru says, “.....the Soviet Revolution had advanced human society by a great leap and had lit a bright flame which could not be smothered, and that it had laid the foundations for the new civilization towards which the world could advance.”¹⁵ During his first visit to Soviet Union in 1927 he wrote in a series of articles “whatever other failings, the Russian woman of today may have, she is certainly not a chattel or plaything of man. She is independent, aggressively so, and refuses to play second fiddle to man.”¹⁶ He further remarked

“I was present for a while at women’s conference in Moscow. Krupskaya, the widow of Lenin, was there and Madame Sun Yat -sen, and the aged Clara Zetkin, and a large number of women from foreign countries. And all the women from the other countries of Europe who spoke, envied their Russian sisters for the social and economic freedom they had won.”¹⁷

Therefore his early contact with all political and emancipation movements in Europe and Soviet Russia left a deep imprint in his mind and this fully made him to realize that women rights problems was a universal problem and the women in India who also faced similar problems could also rise up like their European counterpart and improve their status and position.

It can be seen that Nehru described himself as a man of action and this may be clear from the statement that he made in his *Discovery of India* where he mentioned that while he was imprisoned in Ahmadnagar fort, the thought of action always filled his mind and he had a great yearning for action. Writing further he said:

“This urge to action, this desire to experience life through action has influenced all my thought and activity. Even sustained thinking, apart from being itself a kind of action, becomes part of the action to come. It is not something entirely abstract, in the void, unrelated to action and life. The past becomes something that leads up to the present, the moment of action, the future something that flows from it; and all three are inextricably intertwined and interrelated.”¹⁸

This clearly shows that Nehru was passionate about action and his life was in fact, full of eventful activities. It seems likely that this strong urge for action also guided him for the cause of women of India. He could not remain a silent spectator of women’s sufferings and sorrows and constantly insisted them to fight for their rights. He constantly reminded the women that, “you will have to bear the whole burden of the struggle for women’s emancipation yourself.”¹⁹ He devoted himself full-fledgedly to the improvement of the status of women in the society and tried to bring them at par with men. The fact that Nehru looked upon both men and women as equal can be made out from the speech which he gave on the first Independence Day:

“Each one of us, man or woman, young and old, must therefore, toil and work... We did not win our freedom so that we might rest afterwards but in order to work harder to hold and strengthen then that freedom.... Our labours as free men and women will lay the foundations for a great future and our labour of love for the cause of India and our people will endure; so will the fact that we are building brick by brick, the great mansion of free India. There is joy in such work.”²⁰

Nehru's Ideal of Womanhood and Condemnation of Social Evils

As far as the Indian woman is concerned, Nehru held that there were two views on the position of women in the society, which he felt are far from truth and put forward his own opinion in sometimes condemning their position and sometimes in justifying it with examples.²¹ One was the traditional viewpoint propounded by Mahatma Gandhi, according to whom Sita, Savitiri, Damayanti were ideals of Indian womanhood who were embodiments of purity, faithfulness, devotion and submissiveness to their husbands, and constantly exhorted women of India to emulate their examples. The other view, mostly found in the western countries was that Indian women were backward and suppressed class and treated almost like a chattel.²²

But Nehru refused to identify women with the ancient Indian ideal of womanhood and disliked the idea of looking into the past too much as Gandhi did, and in this regard he said:

“We are too much in the habit of looking back and praising the past. We are entitled to do that, because there are many things in our past history and culture which are praiseworthy and for which we can take legitimate pride. But that is a bad habit, all the same to be looking back all the time.”²³

Nehru showed his strong disagreement with Gandhi's constant exhortation of women to uphold the values of ancient heroines and expressing his deep dissatisfaction at the lot of the Indian woman while addressing the students of Mahila Vidyapeeth said:

“We hear a good deal about Sita and Savitri. They are revered names in India and rightly so. But I have a feeling that these echoes from the past are raised chiefly to hide our present deficiencies and to prevent us from attacking the root causes of women's degradation in India today.”²⁴

Questioning further on this outdated and traditional social model for Indian women as outlined by Gandhi, Nehru stated that:

“ Sita and Savitiri are mentioned as ideals for the women. I do not seem to remember men being reminded in the same manner of Ramchandra and Satyavan and urged to behave like them. It is only the women who have to behave like Sita and Savitiri, the men may behave as they like. I do not know whether Indian men are supposed to be perfect, or incapable of any further improvement.”²⁵

It is no doubt, that Nehru held Sita, Savitri in high esteem and acknowledged the fact that “they had played an important role in the context of the times in which they lived”²⁶, but Nehru did not want the women to live on the reputation acquired by these traditional heroines since he was of the view that these examples could not be applied to modern conditions as conditions have changed. It was illogical to look into the outdated icons of the times in the present-day modern world of science and technology. Adding further he said, “While we may take inspiration from the good qualities that the ancient heroes and heroines possessed, we cannot exactly copy everything that might have been done in those times because times have changed.”²⁷ So he did not want to see the trait of silent suffering of Sita in women.²⁸

On the other hand, Nehru’s perception of women was that of an outwardly, outgoing rebellious woman who would identify herself equally with men in all spheres of life, and would rebel against the tyrannical and unjust social customs and carve out a strong position for themselves in the society and contribute for the cause of the society and nation. It is likely that Kamala Nehru, his wife, who was an ardent feminist and a strong nationalist, by her activities and her support to him, acted as a strong force in

reinforcing his ideas on women further. As a feminist, Kamala fought many battles for the rights of women. She was a high spirited and courageous lady who played an important part in the country's struggle for independence. Nehru also observed the independent spirit in her since she wanted to play her own part in the national struggle and did not want to depend on her husband or live in his glory. She wanted to carve out an independent identity of her own. Nehru saw the image of Chitrangada²⁹ in Kamala as he could read the message in her eyes saying to him:

“I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self.”³⁰

It can be said that Nehru wanted women to adorn the same role of Chitrangada as exemplified by Kamala and not be the silent suffering woman of Sita tradition. It is likely that he wanted to see this ideal of womanhood in the women of India which would integrate woman's sexuality and her identity as man's equal partner in the sphere outside home.³¹ The dynamism which was shown by women including his women family members by taking part in the civil disobedience movement alongside with men was what appealed to Nehru very much as this was the kind of role he perceived for women. He wrote in his Autobiography

“Women had always been there of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British Government but their own men-folk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle-classes, leading sheltered lives in their homes- peasant women, working-class women, rich women- pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi. It was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power, they showed.”³²

It is likely that Kamala was a source of inspiration and a guiding force in helping Nehru to perceive women from a perspective different from that of Gandhi. Kamala herself became symbolic of the epitome of womanhood which got engraved in his mind, the reflection of which he wanted to see in the women of India. Moreover Nehru had also seen foreign women comrades like Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Edwina Mountbatten who were equal partners with their husbands and worked shoulder to shoulder with their husbands in their political activities. Not only this, they also acted as a guiding force to Nehru in his political activities in various ways. So this must have again made Nehru to perceive women not as submissive and docile entity but as strong, independent and spirited beings and equal partners along with men.

As Nehru mentions in his *Discovery of India* that he looked upon people as individuals rather than vague groups³³, each individual worthy of attention and women who were also individuals and constituted the masses drew the notice of Nehru to the various disabilities and handicaps from which the Indian women suffered from. He was averse to the idea that women's place was in the home and her ideal should be that of a devoted wife and nothing more and that her chief delight should be in skillfully rearing her children and serving her revered elders. This according to him meant that:

“woman has one profession and one only, that is the profession of marriage and it is our chief business to train her for this profession. Even in this profession her lot is to be one of secondary importance. She is always to be the devoted help-mate, the follower and the obedient slave of her husband and others.”³⁴

According to Nehru, in India women had to fight many social evils, had to break many an inherited custom that enchains them and drags them down.³⁵ Emphasizing on the disabilities suffered by women, Nehru said

“.....We have purdah and child-marriage and denial of rights to women in so many fields. Go to any country and you will see bright-faced boys and girls playing and growing strong in mind and body. Here children of the same age are kept in purdah locked up in cages almost and denied in a large measure all freedom. They are married just when they should be growing physically and intellectually and are thus stunted and made miserable for life.”³⁶

Therefore the social evils like purdah, early marriage, untouchability and illiteracy had greatly undermined the position of the women in the society, and according to him if women were to forge ahead, then these evil customs had to be wiped away. Nehru held men responsible for the deterioration of the position of women in the society. According to him the civilization, customs and laws have been made by man and whereas he has taken good care to place himself in a superior position, on the other hand they treated women as a chattel and a plaything and exploited them for his own advantage and amusement. Therefore, “under this continuous pressure women has been unable to grow and to develop her capacities to her fullest, and then man has blamed her for her backwardness.”³⁷ So Nehru vehemently attacked this aspect of difference between man and woman, where the former held a dominant position, and refused to identify themselves equally with women in the society and also in personal relations. Kamala Nehru also “spoke of women’s struggle for freedom against man-made laws and customs and urged the women not to be too submissive to their menfolk.” It is inevitable that Kamala’s feminist voice and her active struggle for giving women their rightful place in the society apparently left a deep impress on Nehru’s

mind and acted as a moral force upon him to be assertive in his fight for the rights of women.

Nehru particularly abhorred the purdah system and according to him the main reason for cause of India's decay in the past centuries had been the purdah or the seclusion of women. The women members of Nehru's family did not observe purdah nor did they face seclusion at home. Having lived in an environment where his women family members enjoyed freedom, where they were independent and outgoing and identified themselves as equal partners with the menfolk, so this might have influenced his mind to see women of India and elsewhere also at the same level. On the evil practice of purdah he said: "Whenever I think of women in purdah, cut off from the outside world, I invariably think of a prison or a zoo! How can a nation go ahead if half of its population is kept hidden away in a kind of prison?"³⁸

Nehru referred to the women as "the depressed classes in India and the world....economically and otherwise depressed.... We have to remove these bars and give equal opportunity and equal privilege to all of them before we can have an advanced nation."³⁹ But again Nehru also realized that each woman had great potential for building themselves and making themselves strong enough to withstand the onslaught of the social evils which had been affecting their position for ages and carve out a niche for themselves in the society. Therefore, Nehru also urged and encouraged the womenfolk to themselves take up the lead to fight against the evil practices like purdah, child marriage which stood in their progress to improve their status in the society and contribute to the nation building. Nehru was aware that women themselves

who were leading a sheltered life knew that they were suffering from “many repressions and customs produced by society dominated to his advantage by man.”⁴⁰ So when there was an exhortation to fight for freedom, it had a double meaning for them and Nehru felt proud of the enthusiasm shown by the womenfolk in not only fighting against the British rule, but also displaying their intense “desire to rid themselves of domestic slavery also.”⁴¹

As Nehru said, “I am partial to the women of India, and the more I have wandered about this great country the more I have felt a certain pride in our womenfolk”⁴², so he also perceived women from a different perspective. Disagreeing with Manu, the ancient lawgiver, according to whom the legal position of women in ancient India was bad, he argued saying, “judged from modern standards it was far better than in ancient Greece and Rome, in early Christianity, in the Canon Law of medieval Europe, and indeed right up to comparatively modern times at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”⁴³

It can be seen that while on the one hand, Nehru figured out the various problems which undermined her position in the society, on the other hand he also glorified her position in the society. He expressed his satisfaction and happiness when he witnessed the women of India who were ‘gentle and yet brave and indomitable’⁴⁴, proudly marching ahead in the course of the freedom struggle and gradually tearing away with the barbarous practice of purdah. He also observed that:

“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 household, in the village or in the larger community that, has moulded the nation.”⁴⁵

Nehru while trying to counter the low opinion on women held by the West argued:

“In northern India, where the purdah system has prevailed and many other evil customs of seclusion, the 1930 civil disobedience movement played an extraordinary and astounding part in putting an end to that system of seclusion of women. They came out from their houses when their menfolk were in prison; they took the lead in the great movement; they played their part; they showed quite extraordinary power of organization, discipline and enterprise. That kind of thing sent up our womenfolk in the estimation of not only our country at large, but of other people in other parts of the world who had been in the habit of saying that Indian women were slaves and incapable of doing anything. They were surprised and astounded at the change that they saw.”⁴⁶

Nehru had great faith and confidence in the abilities of women and said: “I think if anybody can truly represent the spirit of India, the women can do it and not the men.”⁴⁷ He saw women as powerful potential force who could mould and build the destiny of the family, society and nation. Speaking in this direction he said, “Women play an important role in the development of a country..... Indian women particularly will have to play a dominant role if the country is to achieve any glory.”⁴⁸

Nehru’s Views on Women’s Education and Economic Independence

Jawaharlal Nehru was very well aware of the fact that, unless women were emancipated, the country could not progress and women emancipation was possible only if the women were educated and economically self-reliant. Looking back into the past he had seen “wherever girl’s education was encouraged in India, there was progress.”⁴⁹ He held the view that “girl’s education is not an end in itself but is

intimately connected with the social fabric and with advance along other lines, too.”⁵⁰
Therefore the key to the progress of the society and nation was women’s education.

The idea that women should remain confined within the kitchen or household did not appeal to him. Women had a much wider role to play since they exerted great influence on the society. Since children who are the citizens of tomorrow were likely to imitate their mothers till they become mature beings and are able to think for themselves, so here therefore women had a tremendous responsibility for which they had to prepare themselves with great care while they were students. Only education could prepare the women for this kind of a role.

So women’s education was crucial since it would really help and build the future of the coming generation who in turn would be responsible for the building of the future of the country and therefore highlighting the importance and impact of women’s education Nehru said:

“While it may be possible to neglect men’s education it is not possible or desirable to neglect women’s education. The reasons are obvious. If you educate the women, probably men will also be affected thereby, and in any event children will be affected. For every educationist knows that the formative years of a person’s life are the first seven or eight years. We talk about schools, and colleges which are no doubt important, but a person is more or less made in the first ten years of his or her life. Obviously, in that period, it is the mother who counts most of all. Therefore the mother who has been well trained in various ways becomes essential to education.”⁵¹

In 1928 Nehru came down heavily at the report of the Mahila Vidyapith, Allahabad on the special instruction given to women wherein:

“it was laid down that while man was the bread winner, woman’s place was in the home and her ideal should be that of a devoted wife and nothing more. Her chief delight should be in skillfully rearing her children and serving her revered elders.”⁵²

Nehru strongly disagreeing with this ideal of woman's life or education, interpreted it to mean that

“woman has one profession and one only, that is the profession of marriage and it is our chief business to train her for this profession. Even in this profession her lot is to be one of secondary importance. She is always to be the devoted help-mate, the follower and the obedient slave of her husband and others.”⁵³

But Nehru's views on women's education was much wider. He believed “that women should be given the best of education in every department of human activity and be trained to play an effective part in all professions and spheres.”⁵⁴ Explaining the nature of women's education he said:

“By education I mean education not merely learning to be ladylike. Learning to be lady like may be good in itself but it is not education as such. Education has mainly two aspects, the cultural aspect which makes a person grow, and the productive aspect which makes a person do things. Both are essential. Everybody should be a producer as well as a good citizen and not a sponge on another person even though the other person may be one's own husband or wife”⁵⁵

Apart from this he also held the view that women education is essential so they can participate in national tasks in whichever way they can and benefit themselves as well as the nation.⁵⁶

Economic freedom was another important condition for women emancipation. Women could be strong and would be able to move forward only if they were economically free and stable and Nehru was a great champion of the economic emancipation of women. Indian women had suffered because of economic bondage so Nehru wanted that all energies should be directed to the removal of this liability. Again

education was the only key to the path of economic independence. Nehru discarded the practice

“of looking upon marriage as a profession almost and as the sole economic refuge for woman will have to go before woman can have any freedom. Freedom depends on economic conditions even more than political and if woman is not economically free and self-earning she will have to depend on her husband or someone else, and dependents are never free. The association of man and woman should be of perfect freedom and perfect comradeship with no dependence of one on the other.”⁵⁷

Nehru was of the view that the children could not grow into self-reliant and efficient citizens unless the mothers themselves were self-reliant and efficient. Children, who are the citizens of tomorrow cannot develop into full citizens unless they have the guidance of able mothers.⁵⁸ Therefore it was imperative that women had to be economically independent and self-sufficient so that they could also contribute to the building of the society and the nation. Therefore his speeches reiterated his faith that for women, without economic freedom and mental freedom through education, other aspects of gender equality would prove superficial.⁵⁹ This perception of women by Nehru reflects the crucial importance he gave to the issue of women emancipation and his constant effort to make the women conscious and realize their worth and importance, thereby urging them to make themselves self-reliant for the progress and future of the family, society and nation. This clearly shows that Nehru greatly supported the equality of both man and woman and gave equal importance to their services.

Nehru’s Views on Marriage, Divorce, Prostitution and Property Rights

Nehru a great humanist and as well as a rationalist viewed the Indian society from a wider perspective and had a broad attitude towards every aspect of human life

and society. This can be seen in the light of his views he held on marriage, divorce, prostitution and women's property rights. Based on the studies of the law, custom, history and cultural developments of the country, Nehru had build up his own conception of the Hindu society. He pictured the Hindu society to be essentially dynamic, not static and unchangeable.⁶⁰ In order to get a better understanding of the Hindu society, Nehru asked the people to strike off some of the rigid enactments of the Law of Manu and look at the society from a wider perspective since better glimpses of the social life of India has been described in the Mrichchakatika. He was highly touched by the tender humanity and the highly cultured society found in the play. From it, he conceived of a society composing of individuals not having rigid puritanical attitudes, and a human approach to the difficult problems of life. Elaborating this point, he observed that

“..... The test of an individual is how he treats his wife, his son or his neighbor. How he behaves towards another, how he functions in a social relationship- that is the test of the individual. If this test is applied, our people in those days appear to have been amazingly advanced and tolerant and generous in outlook.”⁶¹

This broader perspective of society given by Nehru wherein he talks about a cultured society can also be looked in the context of his radical and humanistic approach he had towards the issue of marriage and divorce. Nehru was of the firm belief that the Hindu law in India was never rigid. Infact the essential quality of Hindu law in the old times was the certain dynamic element in it which was its strength. The Hindu law “did not change by decree or statute, but by allowing changes to creep in.”⁶² Therefore his views on marriage, divorce, prostitution and women property rights were formulated in the light of the dynamic quality of Hindu law and also practicalities of life

and he wanted to bring about marked changes in the existing system for the welfare of the women of India.

Nehru held reservations on certain traditional practices governing marriage. His outright criticism of child marriage can be seen when Nehru while studying in Cambridge, showed his reaction to his mother when she was trying to fix up a young girl for him. He wrote to his mother, “Why do you want me to get engaged to a small girl of ten? I do not want child to play with.”⁶³ Similarly when his father Motilal Nehru wrote to him about a twelve year old ‘Delhi girl’ for his marriage, Nehru commented by saying:

“As regards the Delhi girl surely she is too young for me. I am nearly ten years her senior and that is a rather big difference. I could not possibly marry her until she was eighteen or nineteen and that in six or seven years hence. I would not mind waiting as I am not in a matrimonial state of mind at present.”⁶⁴

Nehru was also in favour of inter-caste and intra-community marriage as he himself believed that an idealized marriage should be based on a degree of mutual understanding, not caste or community. Though he did not show any direct resistance to his parent’s insistence on his marriage, but he expressed certain views on it since he did not want to just follow the society’s traditional norm for the sake of the society. His views on marriage can be seen in a letter he wrote to his mother where he said:

“Would you like me to marry a girl whom I may not like for the rest of my life and who may not like me? Rather than marry in that way, I would greatly prefer to remain unmarried. After all, I have to spend my whole life with my wife. Is it surprising, then, if I wish to marry a girl whom I like? I am not obliged to like a girl of a good family, nor is it to be taken for granted that every educated girl would come up to my expectations. I accept that any girl selected by you and father would be good in all respects, but still, I may not be able to get along well with her. In my opinion, unless there is a degree of mutual understanding, marriage should not take place. I think it is unjust and cruel that a life should be wasted merely in producing children.”⁶⁵

Therefore trying to convince his mother that a lasting marriage should be based on a degree of mutual understanding, he was also in a way showing his concern for the welfare of the women. By forcing himself into marriage he also did not want to spoil the life of a woman and treat her as a commodity to merely produce children. Since as discussed above, women had wider role to play in different spheres of life, marriage should not become a constraint to her progress and development. This clearly reflected his respectful and empathetic attitude towards the womenfolk.

Nehru also did not show any kinds of resentment or unhappiness when his sisters Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Krishna Hutheesing and many of his cousins married outside their community. Even when his daughter Indira got married to a young Parsee man Feroz Gandhi in 1942 and there was a huge storm of controversy on the marriage, Nehru expressed his view point on the matter in a press statement stating:

“A marriage is a personal and domestic matter, affecting chiefly the two parties concerned and their families..... I have long held the view that though parents may and should advise in the matter, the choice and ultimate decision must lie with the two parties concerned.”⁶⁶

Nehru was of the strong belief that the laws and customs of the society fell heavily on the womenfolk. Since he showed great concern for the women and was vocal and articulate about woman's rights, Nehru while discussing the Divorce bill appealed the House to take a larger view on the issue. Rejecting the argument of the orthodox people who believed that divorce would make the custom of marriage fragile, Nehru argued saying that:

“If that is so, I say the marriage itself has become a cloak. It is not a real marriage of minds or bodies. If you compel and force people in this way, it will just be an enforced thing which has no value left in ethics and morality.”⁶⁷

He argued that divorce could be granted to either of the parties if all attempts to bring about reconciliation had failed. Therefore by doing this Nehru did not want different standards of morality to be applied to men and women but wanted a certain measure of equality between them.⁶⁸ Arguing further on the issue of divorce, Nehru was of the firm opinion that, women should not be denied the right to divorce on the basis of rigid application of religious sanctions and laws, laid down by Manu or Yajnavalkya, which were suitable in social conditions existing one or two thousand years ago.⁶⁹

Giving an ethical interpretation of samskara or sacrament, Nehru argued:

I think all human relationships should have an element of the sacrament in them. More so the intimate relationships of husband and wife..... If people have no compatibility, if they are compelled to carry on together, they begin to hate each other and their life becomes bitter. The whole foundations of their existence becomes bitter. Surely that is not sacrament.”⁷⁰

For Nehru, the right of both the parties to seek divorce by legal means to end an unhappy marriage also reflected the test of a civilized society. While speaking on the Divorce Clause Bill he argued saying:

“In the national sphere, we try to settle problems peacefully. In the same way, in the domestic sphere, in the husband-and-wife sphere, cultured society avoids the rod of the policeman, that is, of the law coming down and punishing. It is a sign of the culture of a society or a nation to do away with the use of violence. If that is so in other spheres, much more so is it in this intimate, domestic sphere of the family.”⁷¹

Since Nehru respected women he also developed his own personal judgement on the issue of prostitution. As he personally seemed to honour prostitution, he did not look

down upon women and he criticized men more than women on the practice of prostitution, which is clearly evident from the views he held about prostitution. Nehru was of the view that prostitution was largely due to two factors- “the economic and the human”⁷² Nehru said that instead of bye-laws prostitution could be lessened if the status of women was improved and honourable careers were afforded to them. The other way which would solve the problem was providing them with the opportunities which would lead to their social betterment and bring about equality between sexes. Holding the men responsible for the menace of prostitution Nehru said:

“We are scandalized at the residence of prostitutes in our midst. But prostitutes do not carry on their ancient trade by themselves. They are only one party to the transaction. I seldom hear anything against the other party, the man who exploits the poor woman and casts all the blame on her. The proper way to deal with the question of prostitution is to make it as dishonourable for a man as for a woman to help in it.”⁷³

In 1925, when Nehru was the President of the Municipal Committee of Allahabad, on one occasion, he reacted sharply at the proposal of some members to prevent prostitutes from residing in most of the residential or business quarters of the city and his arguments was that:

“The segregation of prostitutes, even if possible, would be objectionable precisely as the segregation of criminals would be objectionable. I do not believe in issuing a fiat that prostitutes must not live in any part of the city of Allahabad except a remote corner. If this is done I would think it equally reasonable to reserve another part of Allahabad for the men who exploit women and because of whom prostitution flourishes.”⁷⁴

Nehru suggested socio-economic measures to deal with the social problem related to prostitution like encouraging homes for widows and other women and teaching them useful trade, by carrying educative propaganda about harmfulness of

veneral diseases and raising the age of consent and by imposing extreme penalties on person exploiting young girls and living on their earnings.⁷⁵ This was a rational approach shown by Nehru in denouncing the evil act of man who was actually responsible for perpetuating the sexual exploitation of women in various phases of socio-economic development in India. In this way, the high regard Nehru showed for the people of India at large made him the true leader of the masses.

Another area in which Nehru viewed that women should be at par with men was in the realm of property rights. Nehru was of the conviction that giving equal rights of property to women with men in the family would remove her economic disability and lead to the marked improvement in the social status of Indian women. It could also be seen that Nehru put into action what he had perceived for the property rights for women and firstly, this was reflected at his home front when after the death of his father, how he considered his youngest sister Krishna Nehru and his mother as inheritors of Motilal's property. This can be made out from the letter he wrote to Krishna on 21 February 1931 where he said:

“Technically, in law, I suppose, I am the heir of his property. But my own inclination is against inheriting property or at any rate living on inherited property or unearthened increment..... However, I can only consider myself as a joint sharer in father's property, the other sharers being mother and you. I am not including Nan as she stands in no need of money. I would like you, therefore, to consider yourself as an equal sharer with mother and me of father's property. Indeed, mother and you are the real sharers. I am a trustee for the family property.”⁷⁶

Nehru had seen how his own sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit had suffered when her husband Ranjit Pandit died without leaving any will and the property passed on to his brother. Nehru had been highly perturbed to see the plight of his sister then. After

that, he became even more firm and convinced to secure the property rights for women and his prolonged efforts culminated in the enactment of the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 which would be discussed in detail in the sixth chapter. Therefore sense of rationalism and humanism marked Nehru's attitude towards women in all aspects.

By and large, it can be seen that Nehru's receptive open mind made him to understand the difficulties and aspirations of the Indian women at large. His high regard and respect for the women of India, made him to view the women problem from a larger framework and wider perspective and also reinforced his belief that women should not "occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men"⁷⁷, but could take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents. With this deep conviction, he strongly attacked the various social evils prevalent in the society which had undermined their position and status and came up with his own perception of Indian women as strong, spirited dignified human beings equal to that of men, whose existence would lead to the overall progress of the society and the nation at large. Nehru, by giving due dignity and status to women also wanted to involve women in the nation building process. Such was the perception and attitude of Nehru towards women upon which the edifice of his Indian womanhood was to be built.

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