

Constitutional Inheritance to women and Nehru

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“To awaken the people, it is the women who must awaken. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”.

Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru's biographer Sarvepalli Gopal claims: 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 civilisation 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.

This explanation given by Gopal tells the importance Pt. Nehru put in emancipating the women and breaking the shackles of the past that made their status lower than men. He was known as a social reformer with socio-economic vision towards women.

United Nations has defined the women's empowerment in five components- generating women's sense of self-worth; women's right to have and to determine their choices; women's right to have access to equal opportunities and all kinds of resources; women's right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives, within and outside the home; and women's ability to contribute in creating a more just social and economic order.

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Before the United Nations could formulate the above given components, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru & The Indian National Congress stirred the movement of freedom struggle in such a way that it would result in breaking the chains of age old exploitations of Indian women.

In the freedom struggle of India, Congress awakened the civil and political consciousness among Indian women and promoted them to participate actively in the freedom struggle and eradicate the social evils which were obstacles in the women's emancipation.

Pt. Nehru was the longest serving PM of India, serving from 1947-1964, and took a lot of steps and decisions to bring about the parity between the two genders. From the time of his election to the Vice President of Constituent Assembly, he constantly took a feminist look into things. For a matter of fact, he also mentioned women rights in Objective Resolutions before the Constituent Assembly. He also mentioned those in his Lahore Speech, proving that he considered Women Empowerment, one of the most important issues in the contemporary times.

Being a personality with global aura, Pt. Nehru also had his influence over the global world. He was the torchbearer of the philosophy of "Panchsheel" and "Non-Alignment Movement". His global view was inspired by the philosophies which were gender par and treated both men and women equally. For e.g. he was deeply inspired by Second Brussels Congress meeting and its emphasis on socio-economic and political development of women. He was a avid reader and read multiple authors of that time, which included some of the women oriented writers. This made him a huge supporter of women movement which was taking steam at that time.

One more thing which proves his approach towards Women Empowerment is the structure he gave to his cabinet. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was selected as the first Health Minister, in a time when no other country, except a few, gave even voting rights to women. His emphasis on making women politically involved and his focus on women representation in politics give a clue about his political thinking.

Nehru as PM and Steps Taken for Women Empowerment

The issue of women empowerment was discussed in Constituent Assembly and several articles were added to the Constitution of India reflecting the government's opinion on the issue.

The Fundamental Rights clearly mention that no discrimination would be done only on the basis of sex by the State. Article 15(3) gives the opportunity to the State to take steps for making special provisions for women and children.

Directive Principles of state policy have some articles for prevention of concentration of wealth and means of production, distribution of ownership and control of material resources of the community for the common good, protection of childhood and youth against exploitation and abandonment, the right to work, right to an adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work, just and humane conditions of work, maternity benefits etc.

Art 325 provides for Universal Adult Franchise in India and prohibited exclusion on the basis of religion, race or sex.

Under the Pt. Nehru regime, several laws were made for benefiting and empowering the women. Some of these laws faced fierce criticism but Pt. Nehru kept upfront on his decisions. For e.g. The Hindu Succession Act, 1955, received a lot of criticism and even led to the resignation of great leaders from the Cabinet but still the decision was made to give succession rights to women.

Similarly Maternity Benefits Act, 1961 was enacted to benefit pregnant and lactating mothers in security of livelihood and employment. The Minimum Wages Act, also provided for parity in men and women at workplaces.

The Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Hindu Succession Act (1956), the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), and the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), improved Hindu women's legal status substantially.

As Chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board in 1923, Nehru condemned the type of treatment that were meted out to the prostitutes working in Red Light Area. He condemned the behavior stating it misogynist. He wanted to emancipate the status of these women by "educationally and economically" empowering them.

Taking this forward he enacted Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1961 reflecting the view of the Constitution under Article 24. Similarly he brought Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 to prohibit dowry and make both party responsible for giving and taking dowry.

Pt. Nehru also placed immense efforts in improving employment and livelihood conditions of women. He emphasized on Women Education and Skill Development of women. Along with Mahatma Gandhi, he also propagated the view that women needed to come out of four walls of their houses and sharpen their skills contributing to the growth and development of the Nation.

Criticism:

Many critics blame Nehru for failure of major legislations that were put in place for women empowerment. This was because they believe that his approach was not secular and he targeted only “Hindu” laws and neglected the plight or condition of “Muslim” or “Christian” women. He is also criticized for putting the issue of women empowerment behind the shadows of the issues of “security” and “global engagement”. He is also criticized for poor allocation of funds by the critics which led to downfall of major schemes by GoI for women empowerment. Pt. Nehru also failed on the front of upliftment of women from SCs and STs. The “economic emancipation” which Nehru emphasized in his speeches could not come on the ground reality.

Pt. Nehru also receives a lot of flak and hate for his personal life. Many writers like Khushwant Singh, M.O.Mathai etc. sarcastically calls him “Charmer” and claims that he had many love relationships with women. The fact that he led his life as a widower from 1936, made these allegations more strong from the critic side. His close relationship with Edwina Mountbatten was seen as one of the hot issues of that time and even in contemporary times. These issues made Pt. Nehru a “villain” in the story of women empowerment and freedom struggle.

Despite all of these issues, criticisms, hate and debates around, no one can deny the contribution Pt. Nehru had in the empowerment of women in India. He had a progressive sense and approach towards the issue and inculcated this in his conduct as the PM of India. He played important role in socio-economic and political upliftment of women.

According to Pt. Nehru “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at status of its women”. Hence, he encouraged them out of seclusion and established a foundation for the empowerment of women and further movement around this issue. It is for his contribution that India witnessed its first lady PM as early as 1967, whereas a progressive country like US is yet to see its first women president.

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