
Role of Women with Special Reference to Swarup Rani and Kamala Nehru in the Political Life of Jawaharlal Nehru

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ABSTRACT

As it is a well known fact that Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the first Prime Minister of independent India was an outstanding leader both within and outside the country and a great statesman. He played a leading role in India's freedom struggle and in the building of modern India. Behind every successful man there is a woman and in this light, this paper would attempt to highlight the role of women with special reference to his mother Swarup Rani and his wife Kamala Nehru who played a very important role in shaping, moulding and influencing the political and national activities of Nehru which led to the emergence of Nehru as a great freedom fighter and a powerful leader not only of India but also of the world.

Keywords: Jawaharlal Nehru, Swarup Rani, Kamala Nehru, National, Statesman.

INTRODUCTION

Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the key figures of the twentieth century and symbolized some of the major forces which have transformed our age.¹ He was a high-minded, luminous and pleasing personality, an extraordinary scholar, a great freedom fighter, a politician, a nation builder par excellence and a strong advocate of women rights. Jawaharlal Nehru the only son of the illustrious Motilal Nehru and Swarup Rani was born and brought up in luxury and bred in affluence. However it is quite intriguing to know that though Nehru came from an aristocratic background and did not know what crisis was all about, was ultimately drawn into the country's freedom struggle and dedicated himself whole-heartedly for the cause of the nation. Incidentally, though Mahatma Gandhi played an instrumental role in inspiring him to join the freedom struggle, yet one cannot overlook the part women family members played in influencing Nehru in his political activities and in this context, the study of the role of his mother Swarup Rani and wife Kamala Nehru would be relevant to understand how they played a vital and notable role in influencing Nehru's life and acted as a guiding force in his political struggle for freedom.

Swarup Rani and Kamala Nehru's Influence on the Political Life of Jawaharlal Nehru

It is a well known fact that in the upbringing of the child, mother plays an important role and as a young boy, Nehru's mother Swarup Rani's influence was paramount and he "grew up in the ambience of motherly indulgence." The way he perceived his mother can be made out from his Autobiography wherein he writes: "Though my admiration and affection for him (his father) remained as strong as ever, fear formed part of them. Not so with my mother. I had no fear of her, for I knew that she would condone everything I did, and because of her excessive and indiscriminating love for me, I tried to dominate over her a little. I saw much more of her than I did of father."² In this way, it can be seen that Nehru looked upon his mother as a pillar of strength and confidence and he confided upon her. Moreover his mother also instilled in him traditional and cultural values which got deeply ingrained in

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his mind. While as a child, Nehru often used to hear the stories of the Indian epics-Ramayana and Mahabharata from his mother and aunt which became a living element in his life which pointed towards the path of endeavour and right living, even though according to him the ideals appeared to be far off and difficult to reach.³ But later when Nehru was to lead the nation’s freedom struggle, he emulated the similar role of Rama and Arjuna of Ramayana and Mahabharata, who had been embodiments of righteousness and fought against evil, and in a similar way he fought against the evil British rule for the freedom of his motherland.

While Nehru was in London for his studies, his parents had already looked for a suitable bride for him to get married. After he came back to India after completing his studies in 1912, his marriage was solemnized on the Vasant Panchami day in 1916 with Kamala Nehru who in course of time, was to play a very significant role in the life of Jawaharlal Nehru. Kamala had been only seventeen when she got married with Nehru and barely educated. She came from a traditional and orthodox family background and was not placed socially like the Nehrus. In fact Motilal Nehru trained his future daughter-in-law before her marriage with his son. However gradually a shy and undistinguished Kamala turned out to be a brave, spirited and politically active woman and a great source of strength, inspiration and support to her husband.

By and large, the political activities of Jawaharlal Nehru began after his marriage. The emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the national leader in the political horizon of India kindled the nationalist flame and spirit in Nehru who now, also wanted to join the political struggle against the British rule. But since Motilal Nehru foresaw hardships that would follow with Jawaharlal joining the movement, he did not allow him to enter the political movement. This often led to differences of opinion and friction between father and son. This was time of great domestic strain in the family. Swarup Rani felt acutely miserable and deeply disturbed at the serious situation that developed between her husband and her son.³ Under such difficult situation, it was Kamala Nehru who stood by Nehru’s side and greatly influenced him to join the freedom movement. She remained the silent but potent influence throughout Nehru’s life. Incidentally, since Kamala herself had come under the strong influence of Gandhi’s principles and philosophy even more, perhaps than Nehru. “She took Gandhi’s call for self-sacrifice seriously, encouraged Jawahar in his radicalism and urged him to change his way of life.”⁴ Nehru who had so far been living a comfortable and aristocratic life, now changed his lifestyle from luxury to simple and austere life and this was to the liking of Kamala, who herself professed and followed simplicity. Therefore Kamala’s support and confidence in Nehru which came at the right moment proved a turning point in his political career, after which he reached the pinnacle of glory in his life.

Indira Gandhi, Daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and Kamala Nehru while Pointing to her Mother’s Influence on her Father Stated:

“Many people know the part played by my grandfather on my father. But in my opinion a more important part was played by my mother. When my father wanted to join Gandhiji and to change the whole way of life, to change our luxurious living, to give up his practice, the whole family was against it. It was only my mother’s courageous and persistent support and encouragement which enabled him to take this big step which made such a difference not only to our family but to the history of modern India.”⁵

Nehru participated actively in the Satyagraha or non-violent non co-operation movement launched by Gandhi for which he was arrested along with his father on December 6, 1921. This was the first time that they were arrested and sent to jail. Narrating about the stress and uncertainty experienced by the members of the Nehru household, Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, Jawaharlal Nehru’s sister wrote:

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“We did not know what hardships were in store for them. It was hardest of all for my mother to whom the past few months of constant change had been a sort of nightmare she had not quite fathomed. But she was a brave wife and a still more brave mother. On no account would she allow the others to see how wretched she felt at that moment.”⁶

Such was the strong spirit displayed by Nehru’s mother in the face of such tumultuous situation and in spite of the great domestic strain she gracefully and courageously accepted her son’s heroic participation in the movement and both Swarup Rani and Kamala Nehru fought back their tears and proudly bade Jawaharlal and Motilal goodbye whenever they went to prison. Such a strong attitude shown by Swarup Rani and Kamala at the face of most difficult moment must have given a sense of courage and encouragement to Nehru to face any crisis easily.

But on the other hand, Nehru’s pre-occupation in the freedom struggle, failed to give Kamala the due comradeship which she needed from Nehru. His constant engagement with the political activities and frequent imprisonment kept him away from Kamala. But this did not weaken Kamala’s spirits, but instead she herself wanted to be Nehru’s political comrade and “she wanted to play her own part in the national struggle and not merely a hanger-on and a shadow of her husband.”⁷ Whenever Nehru was in prison, she used to go to the villages on her own and make speeches and in this way kept herself actively involved in national activities. Moreover she valued the wonderful mission of her husband more than her personal happiness. She never grieved not grumbled at her difficulties. It may be pointed out here in this connection that in September 1934, when Kamala’s health was deteriorating, the government offered to release Nehru if he gave assurance to refrain from political activity after his release. He refused the offer, though at that point of time Nehru’s presence would have strengthened Kamala. And Nehru also knew that Kamala herself would strongly disapprove of her giving any undertaking and even if he did, it would have shocked her and harmed her.⁸ Later when he was released for a brief period to visit his wife, Kamala who was in a very weak condition then, garnered enough strength to whisper to her husband: “What is this about you giving assurance to Government? Do not give it.”⁹ This showed how Kamala in spite of her ill-health, stood like a pillar of courage, strength and support to her husband which strengthened the nationalist spirit in Nehru and made him realize his duty for the cause of the nation and never to bow down for her sake.

The strength, firmness of spirit and determination and constant support and encouragement was likely to have had a positive impact on Nehru’s mind which motivated him to fight against the British rule no matter what the eventualities would lead to and in this connection Krishna Nehru Hutheesing also stated:

“Kamala was a source of comfort to Jawahar and never let him know how ill she had become and how much she needed him. She was always optimistic, and whenever she was near Jawahar, she soothed him and infused new courage into him at moment of anxiety and disillusionment.”¹⁰

Kamala Nehru’s engagement for the nationalist cause despite her ill-health and her unflinching support to Nehru on his political activities made it easier for him to pursue his national goals single-mindedly and with whole hearted devotion. Had Kamala not been Nehru’s constant strength and support, perhaps it would have been difficult for him to undertake the hardships which he faced in the course of fighting for the nation’s freedom struggle and long years he had to spend in jail. Nehru himself acknowledging the importance of his wife in his life remarked:

“If I was away for a number of days the thought of her cooled my mind and I looked forward eagerly to my return home. What indeed could I have done if she has not been there to comfort me and give me strength, and thus enable me to recharge the exhausted battery of my mind and body?”¹¹

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While Nehru and other menfolk was in prison, he would often get the news of women’s active participation, including his mother, sisters and wife in the freedom movement which also served to inspire him further for the cause of his nation. During the 1930s when the country was ablaze with Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience Movement, Nehru who was then serving his imprisonment got stirring news of the movement. He was greatly moved to hear about his old and frail mother and his sisters too, standing under the hot sun during the summers and picketing before foreign cloth shops. Kamala too threw herself into the movement in Allahabad city and district with great energy and enthusiasm which amazed Nehru.¹² Again on January 1, 1932, Nehru was very pleased to get the news of Kamala’s arrest and to hear her bold statement to the press where she said: “I am happy beyond measure and proud to follow in the footsteps of my husband. I hope the people will keep the flag flying.”¹³ These activities of his mother, wife and sisters must have certainly boosted up his morale and further kindled the nationalist spirit in him and made him determined to fight against the British rule till the goal of independence was achieved.

CONCLUSION

Therefore in the light of the discussion above, it can be inferred that Swarup Rani and Kamala Nehru played a very important and significant role in guiding and influencing the political and national activities of Jawaharlal Nehru. It is no doubt that the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the national movement inspired Nehru to fight for the cause of his motherland against the British. But the strong support, motivation and encouragement he received from his mother and wife and also their active participation in the national movement certainly acted as a potent force in shaping, guiding and influencing his nationalist activities and contributed to the making of a great leader in Jawaharlal Nehru who not only played a notable in the freedom movement against British rule, but also steered the destiny of the newly born nation after independence as India’s first Prime Minister.

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