

## AN UNFULFILLED OR A BLURRED VISION?\*

### Jawaharlal Nehru and Indian Women

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Writing at the conclusion of the Nehru centenary year his devoted<sup>1</sup> biographer Sarvepalli Gopal states:

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.<sup>2</sup>

But, writing in 1989, Gopal, the historian and contemporary observer of Indian society is compelled to add a Postscript:

But this was an incomplete achievement, leaving Muslim women outside the pale of his reform acts. Not lack of political will, as in the case of faltering land reforms, or shortfalls in awareness which led to a neglect of population control, but, very much worse, an excessive concern for Muslim conservatism, resulted in a major act of social reform being left incomplete. And here again, for lack of proper social environment and the dominance of reason in the collective sensibility, even the legislative achievement weakened on the ground and we still have with us the horrors of Sati and Dowry murder.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the postscript, as a member of the generation which had 'idolised' this great patriot, and one who has never joined the ranks of those who would see in him only the founder of a dynasty rather than a nation-builder, I must still disagree with Gopal. My attempts in the last quarter of a century to unravel the complex relationship between the processes of nation building and changes in women's status has driven me to the conclusion that *Jawaharlal, along with most other Indian nationalists - of the right, centre or left, men or women, - never understood the political significance of gender equality in India's nation building process.* Had he done so, his determination after independence to give first priority to the 'security and stability of India'<sup>4</sup> would have extended to include at least a study of the role of women's status in 'national integration',<sup>5</sup> let alone in the economic development and reorganisation of Indian society, the guiding principles for which he himself wrote into the Preamble to the Indian Constitution. Instead, he participated in, and in some ways, initiated the "*process that allowed the women's question to disappear from the public political arena*"<sup>6</sup> virtually till the celebration of his centenary.

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\* *This is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at an international seminar during the Nehru Centenary, at the University of Sydney in 1989.*

The credit for bringing it back, with a vengeance, as a sword of Damocles threatening the future of the same nation has to be given to Nehru's grandson, whose professed commitment to the women's cause unfortunately rested on still less understanding of the real issues than his grandfather's. But the grandson had no pretension to be a student of Indian society or its history. Jawaharlal did make an effort to understand this complex entity and the processes through which it had evolved. Tragically, he missed all the clues that were available to him to examine the political significance of the subordination of women, or the long-term political implications of the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931 (again drafted by him), to provide the basic foundations of the new political system of which he was to be the chief architect.

Examining the various interpretations of Nehru's actual contribution to the shaping of the Indian political system Rajeev Dhavan highlights the vision and the faith:

He saw in India a capacity to build something together. It would not happen easily. There were not just great controversies to be resolved; but great struggles in the offing - over land and power and the very institutions of state which Nehru had summoned and appropriated to his cause. We may call him a simpleton, but, eventually many of the decisions he had to make were simple. We may call him a dreamer, but, what, then, is left when the dreaming has to stop? His first task was to purchase peace - not at any cost, but within the dignity that gives individuals and nations the pride to believe in themselves and carry on. He had to speak to all religions and repose in them the trust that even if Indian history was torn with strife, it was also replete with the sort of confidences - less known but no less tangible - that made a nation. There were also horizontal divisions which separated society into classes; and the differences between them were colossal and seemed unbridgeable. Any promise that these differences would disappear with the stroke of a socialist pen was hypocritical. And, no such promises were made. *But a goal was set amidst criticism that it was a farce and against the opposition that it was undesirable.* Operating within the osmosis of elected democracy, the state could be strengthened and, then - redistribute power, wealth, and opportunity consistent with just savings. Democracy, too, needed protection from itself. The task was so stupendous. It was the task of not one person, but many. Yet we blame one person so much more easily than we blame ourselves. But, we argue out that blame, we need to be a little more consciously aware, that we are rethinking our own history; and, we should be free to do so with verve and candour.<sup>7</sup>

Since I agree with the substance of Dhavan's assessment, my earlier criticism may sound unfair, when even after nearly two decades of concentrated study and struggle by many to bring the debate on the women's question back to centre stage in Indian politics, only a handful have begun to see its significance. But our expectations from Jawaharlal (like that of Gopal) was always much greater. "His very achievements demand that he be judged by standards which one would not apply to the ordinary run of Prime Ministers; and disappointment stems from the force of our expectations".<sup>8</sup>

Nor am I trying to exonerate the rest of my generation, and the women's movement in particular, for its failure to articulate the significance. To that extent, all of us share the burden of this guilt - of indifference, ignorance, and failure. As a senior

and well-known woman political activist (from the left) told me, “What is the good of blaming the party? We too slept for twenty years”.<sup>9</sup>

To be fair, it is important to define what I and some others understand as the political significance of women’s subordination or its opposite women’s equality in the Indian context. It is also necessary to list what clues were available to Jawaharlal during his life time, to understand it - at least at the abstract level if not in detail. As Gopal says, Nehru’s strength lay in ideas, reading, thinking and listening as well as in posing questions, “He took a broad view of events, noted historical parallels and looked for deeper explanations... He knew what India required and how it could be achieved. He was a visionary as well as a planner; and the combination imbued his vision with realism and gave a wide sweep of perspective to his planning”.<sup>10</sup>

It is the contention of this paper that these qualities of Jawaharlal Nehru’s mind were never extended to understand the complexities of the women’s question, even though he was fully aware of the barriers to building a democratic and egalitarian society on the foundations that he had inherited. He perceived these as (a) the ‘Daedalian social and cultural structure’ with divisive religious, linguistic, regional, caste and tribal allegiances; (b) the hierarchy of Indian society, which posed an even greater barrier to national cohesiveness, driving him to exclaim : “We have no sense of equality”, and (c) the need to assure Muslims of their full rights in secular India.<sup>11</sup> *It is amazing that he did not associate the issues of women’s status with any of these problems.*

Could the issue of gender equality or the rights of women be separated from any of these issues? Granted that the results of later scholarship, that tend to link the subordination of women in India with increasing stratification and hierarchy of the social organisation,<sup>12</sup> with elements of ethnicity, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, occupational compartmentalisation and status differentiation, as well as the inequality of wealth and power as its dominant elements might not have been available to Jawaharlal the voracious reader. But how could he have missed *the political imperatives behind the 1931 resolution - adopted at a time when the communal divide, the problem of untouchability, and the emergence of peasant unrest provided the background for his attempts to move the Congress in the direction of democracy and socialism?*

Two years before, he had identified ‘economic bondage’, bondage to the family, and other customs and traditions, such as purdah, early marriage, untouchability and illiteracy as the basic causes of women’s subordination.<sup>13</sup> How then could he have ignored the political strategy that identified women’s emancipation from these bondages with the creation of a democratic and socialist India that had become his primary vision? I have been raising two questions important to historians of the freedom struggle for sometime:

- a. What transformed an issue of social reform, for limited improvement of women’s status within the family, to a political issue of women’s right to

equality in all spheres - political, social and economic? In other words, *what were the political imperatives behind the 1931 resolution?*

- b. Why did Gandhi call Gopal Krishna Gokhale his 'political guru' rather than any other?

Nineteenth century reformers, being primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class, had concentrated all their concerns for women with the problems experienced by women of this class. The image of the suppressed, subjugated and secluded Indian woman - Hindu or Muslim - that preoccupied the Indian literati and its counterparts in the west took no note of the millions of Indian women who formed the back-bone of the Indian economy, and who were far greater victims of the colonial transformation of the economy than even the men in their family.<sup>14</sup>

Just in the province of Bengal, 30 lakhs of women, who formed 1/5th of the women population of the province, earned their livelihood from hand spinning of cotton yarn in late 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, their numbers had dwindled. A similar process hit women in the silk textile industry, and other village industries in different regions of India. As early as 1920, a local women's organisation in Surat was identifying the disappearance of village industries as the basic reason for decline in women's economic and general status. The women who formed nearly 50% of the work force in the jute industry at the turn of the century were rejected from rural society - single women who had to come into town in search of a livelihood. The tribal women who provided the major section of plantation labour and in the coal mines had all been uprooted from agriculture or rural industries. In all the peasant movements that erupted in different parts of the country during the 19th and 20th centuries, women played militant roles. It is surprising that their problems remained outside the concern of most reformers. It is even more surprising that historians who have applauded women's participation in the freedom movement as one of the achievements of Mahatma Gandhi have never gone beyond his charisma to provide an explanation for women's participation. It is still more surprising that chroniclers of peasant and labour movements of this period have paid so little and sometimes no attention to the role of women in these struggles.<sup>15</sup>

While the revival of the women's movement and the emergence of women's studies from the seventies has led to some recent research on women's role in peasant and labour movements of that time, and later, the basic question remains unanswered. And, if Jawaharlal, the moving spirit behind the 1931 resolution did *not see the political value - of devising an instrument that could unite half the population, cutting across all the divisions, of class, caste, community, region or religion - in a new identity that they would then pass on to their children - then one cannot really blame later chroniclers.*

My second question is related and follows from this analysis. Many studies of the Indian freedom struggle have been stultified by the scholars' inability to free

themselves from the categories in which the British Raj classified nationalists - as 'extremists' and 'moderates'. Condemned as a 'moderate', Gokhale's views about the political foundations for an Indian nation have received only scanty attention. He was among the first to plead for giving the 'depressed classes' 'a stake' in the future, if they were to *identify* themselves with the Indian nation. If we can eliminate the misunderstandings and confusion created by Gandhi's opposition to these groups being regarded as non-Hindus, and examine the political logic behind the rejection of untouchability, the analogy with the rejection of women's subordinated status emerges far more sharply.

The power relations that helped to perpetuate monopolistic control of political, economic and knowledge power by a small minority, thereby making the hierarchy of Indian society virtually impregnable,<sup>16</sup> also perpetuated certain role models, myths and mystification about women's social, economic and political roles that created many false notions about Indian women's roles and exploitations by an intellectual purdah, influencing most national leaders - social reformers or nationalist political leaders. Nehru's views about the majority of women remained restricted by the same purdah of invisibility. As *Towards Equality* commented:

The inequalities inherent in our traditional social structure, based on caste, community, and class have a very significant influence on the status of women in different spheres. Socially accepted rights and expected roles of women, norms governing their behaviour and of others towards them vary among different groups and regions. They are closely affected by the stage and methods of development, and the position held by the group in the social hierarchy. All this makes broad generalisations - regarding women's status unrealistic.<sup>17</sup>

The report further pointed that traditional India had seen a woman only as a member of the family or a group - as daughters, wives and mothers - and not as an individual with an identity or right of her own. The radicalism of the Constitution and its deliberate departure from the inherited social system lay in its implicit assumption that every adult woman, whatever her social position or accomplishments, will function as a citizen and as an individual partner in the task of nation building.<sup>18</sup>

The emphasis - on women's *rights as an individual and not as a member of some collective* - family, community caste etc. came from Nehru.

Strangely, however, in attempting to define the operationalisation of *equity* : Jawaharlal adopted a somewhat inconsistent position : - that equity does not apply to the individual, "but to the community".<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, on the other hand, was talking of *new roles*. The family had been over-utilising women's energy, labour and concerns. The time had come to extend their capacities and concerns 'to embrace the whole of humanity', and most immediately, to the rest of Indian society. "I have long before come to the conclusion that unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no salvation for India, salvation in more sense than one. I mean *political salvation* in the greater sense, and I mean the economic salvation and spiritual salvation".<sup>20</sup>

There is no dearth of evidence that Nehru accepted the emancipation of women as a value in itself. But did he realise, to the same extent as Gandhi, its political importance? He might not have been aware of the debates on the origin of women's subordination, including Engels' work<sup>21</sup>, but was he not aware, from his extensive travels round the country and his wide acquaintance with families from different communities and castes, of the *critical connection between the controls over women and the maintenance of the differentiated and hierarchical Indian social structure*? Coming from an aristocratic family, as he did, was he not aware of the political role of the custom of caste and communal endogamy (practiced even by many non-Hindu communities, including Muslims) to maintain the 'boundaries' between different groups and classes? Sworn anti-fascist that he had become by that time, did he not see the parallels between the Nazi theories of the master race and their insistence on confining women's roles, with Indian theories of maintaining the purity of the blood line through marital restrictions on women?<sup>22</sup> Had he never come across Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's penetrating comment that the subjugation of women was an instrument to maintain Brahminical dominance in Hindu society? Above all, had he not understood Mahatma Gandhi's two theses (a) that women have a *more* significant role (than men) to play, both in the winning of Swaraj and in the building of the nation afterwards; and (b) that a nation can not have a father but needs many mothers?<sup>23</sup>

By 1931 Gandhi had conferred on women, a central role in the national struggle. The ideology of the Khadi movement knit together the *political power* of mass mobilisation for the anti-imperialist struggle, appealing to the poor and the rich alike through the mediacy of women; the *economic objective* of reducing unemployment and poverty, especially in rural areas and among women; and the *social objective* of recognising women's capacity as economically and politically active beings, without whose support, freedom would be unattainable and meaningless.<sup>24</sup>

From the women's perspective, Gandhi's ideology by that time demonstrated "a transition from the concept of women's rights, as propounded by him in 1918, to the far more dynamic concept of unleashing women's energy for the nation building process, through an *assertion and reiteration of their productive and creative roles*, as equal partners, participants, leaders, conscience-keepers and beneficiaries".<sup>25</sup>

Jawaharlal had no illusions that men at the Karachi Congress of 1931 consented 'silently' to the resolution without fully agreeing with its implications.<sup>26</sup> He also referred to 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".<sup>27</sup>

In the history of the international women's movement, the year 1931 provides a landmark, which again seems to have missed the attention of most historians. The Chinese Communist Party, already in the throes of its revolutionary struggle, adopted a resolution on gender equality at its Party congress in the same year. The immediate effort that was initiated to translate this intention into reality was in land

reform, recognising peasant women's right to own agricultural land.<sup>28</sup> Two international conferences on women's equality were also held at Lahore, and immediately afterwards at Geneva.<sup>29</sup>

Some Indian newspapers, (e.g Malayala Manorama, Bharatvarsha etc.) of this period carried regular articles on the women's movement in different countries. Massive changes relating to women's status were taking place in new countries, especially Turkey and the Soviet Asian Republics. Recent studies suggest that in the last two regions at least the national leadership recognised this as a critical political strategy, to destabilise the existing power structures. In the case of Turkey Kemal had to eliminate the Ottoman system, which rested on the power of the clergy. Secularising women's rights was intended to break the clergy's control over their lives.<sup>30</sup> In the Soviet Asian Republics, the strategy of mobilising women as a 'surrogate proletariat' was adopted between 1919 and 1929, following the CPSU's failure to mobilise the working class and peasantry, because of the continued hold of clan loyalties.<sup>31</sup>

In the background of Nehru's increasing awareness of developments in other parts of the world since the Brussels Congress against imperialism, could he have remained ignorant of the political implications of gender equality? By 1937 he was asserting that women should be treated at par with men - educationally, economically and industrially,<sup>32</sup> and assuring the British Section of the International League for Peace and Freedom that the Indian national movement stood for removal of all disqualifications and hindrances imposed on women by law or custom.<sup>33</sup>

That the principle, to be translated into action, would have far wider ramifications became obvious by 1940, with the Report of the Sub Committee on Women's Role in a Planned Economy.<sup>34</sup> He had appointed this group, as Chairman of the National Planning Committee. He is reported to have attached the greatest importance to the work of this Sub-Committee.<sup>35</sup> Not only had the Sub-Committee done the most work, it had come as an 'eye opener' to many, showing "how much room there is for work among women in India".<sup>36</sup>

Despite these pats on the back, the terms of reference defined for the Sub-Committee displayed more examples of Nehru's lack of application in identifying women's issues. The terms included conditions of women's employment in industries, including cottage industries, mines, plantations, domestic work and retail trade, *with no mention of agriculture*; though the preamble emphasised woman's social, economic and legal status, her right to hold property, carry on any trade, profession or occupation to remove all obstacles or handicaps in the way of realising *equal status and opportunity*. The non-mention of agriculture makes still less sense when one notes that successive Censuses (presumably Nehru, and K.T. Shah, the Secretary of NPC were not unaware of the existence of the Indian Census!) before 1939 had reported a larger number of women as agricultural labour than men.<sup>37</sup>

The Report of the Sub-Committee, however, though heavily loaded with issues of industrial workers and white-collared professionals, indicated some knowledge of

peasant women's contribution to agriculture and their divisions between unpaid family labour and wage workers. Recommendations included equal wages, co-sharing of collective income of the family ( for family workers), *a national programme of child care, health service, and maternity benefits to all women in recognition of the economic value of women's work - even when performed within the precincts of the family.* Two general recommendations, made about housewives, were (a) woman's absolute control over some part of the family income, and (b) a share in the husband's property.<sup>38</sup>

Though part of the Sub-Committee's report were considered by several members of the NPC to be too revolutionary, some of its recommendations, e.g. equal pay, child care and recognition of the economic value of women's work within the family and on *family land* were accepted. Co-sharing of family income, and the husband's property were not even mentioned. However, the general resolutions on women's rights were distinctly ahead of its time, and reflected, fairly clearly, the influence of socialist thinking and practices already underway in the Soviet Union. Mystery lies however, in the virtual disappearance of the Women's Committee's document, and the NPC's decisions on its recommendations, from India's planning history after independence.

## II

In this section I attempt a summary assessment of Nehru's contribution to women's status as the first and greatest Prime Minister of India. The basic instruments that Nehru adopted for his 'assault on the barriers of ages' to clear "the way for the *majority* of Indian women to have full social, as well as political equality"<sup>39</sup> were the Constitution, special legislation for the protection of women and expanding educational opportunities.

Apart from the Preamble, the section on 'Fundamental Rights' guarantees, to men and women equally, various freedoms, equality before law, and opportunity for employment or office under the State, and forbids discrimination on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence. Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children even in violation of fundamental rights of non-discrimination.

The Directive Principles of State Policy, on the other hand, were made non-justiciable. These contain some general clauses (e.g. 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, education and public assistance, free and compulsory elementary education upto the age of 14, Uniform Civil Code etc. ); and some 'women-specific' clauses (right to an adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work, just and humane conditions of work, maternity benefits etc.)<sup>40</sup>

In the light of all that has been reported in the last section, one is compelled to raise several questions. since Nehru had always accepted economic equality as the foundation for all other equalities, why were the provisions relating to equal pay and maternity benefits pushed into the Directive Principles instead of Fundamental Rights, particularly as these had been accepted by the National Planning Committee? Maternity benefits were in fact already provided in some State laws from the 1920s. In agricultural labour, unprotected by any legislation traditional practices provided some special support to pregnant and lactating women *in kind*, plus a lumpsum to meet costs of delivery.

It has been argued that the provisions regarding compulsory elementary education and the Uniform Civil Code had to be deferred to a later date, because of financial and political constraints, but since equal pay and maternity benefits were provided to women in public employment automatically, why were they denied to the mass of women workers? Even when the legislation to provide maternity benefits and creche services to workers in factories, mines and plantations followed, to be succeeded by an omnibus Maternity Benefits Act in 1961, no effort was made to extend this essential 'protection' to more than 95% of women workers in agriculture and the informal sector. The only legislation applicable to this majority was the

Minimum Wages Act. Till today this Act does not include any provision for maternity protection or child care through a few states have recently introduced them. The principle of equal pay was introduced only in 1975, in response to the recommendation of the CSWI, and the first World Conference on Women convened by the UN (Mexico, 1975) - which produced a World Plan of Action - by his daughter. *The Nehruvian principle, articulated in 1928, that there can be no gender equality without economic independence had to wait for incorporation in the Government of India's 6th Five Year Plan - 16 years after Jawaharlal's death.*<sup>41</sup>

The social legislations meant to improve women's rights that were enacted during Nehru's life time also display similar departures from his earlier positions. The Hindu Code Bill, drafted by B.R. Ambedkar on the basis of the detailed examination and recommendations made by the B.N. Rau Committee (constituted before Independence), tackled the problems of women of only the majority community. Even then it could only be enacted piece-meal, after substantial concessions. 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), certainly improved Hindu women's legal status substantially, but they did not reflect the principle of equality. The Special Marriage Act, being a secular law, came closer to that principle. The recognition of the father as the first natural guardian went against the basic formulations of the NPC's Sub-Committee. As for the succession law, inbuilt discrimination remained, though a myth of equality was propagated and still continues to confuse a large section of public opinion.<sup>42</sup>

His biographer and other commentators have sought to explain Nehru's failure to extend even such limited reforms to other communities by referring to his obsession with reassuring Muslim opinion, but what prevented him from improving the lot of Christian women? The Bill was drafted but not introduced, leaving different sections of Christian women within the clutches of archaic and discriminatory laws.

A substantial section of progressive Muslim opinion believes that the issue of *reforming* Muslim law to achieve social justice for women has been made '*politically impossible*' by linking it always with the debate on 'national integration'.<sup>43</sup> Lotika Sarkar argues that since the community accepted major changes through the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act in the thirties,<sup>44</sup> the *fear* of community opposition was exaggerated, especially as such reforms were being enacted by many Islamic countries during the 50s and 60s. She also feels that there was little justification for withdrawing the reforms drafted for Christians. *Strategically - delaying such legislation to the period of resurgent fundamentalism has weakened the capacity of progressive forces within these communities, and given rise to identity conflicts among women.* Razia Patel's<sup>45</sup> investigations in several states of India suggests a definite link between attitudinal shifts (progressive, humanitarian, rational, reactionary, orthodox, reformist) of majority with minority communities.

Jawaharlal had propagated the necessity of state intervention to eliminate institutionalised discrimination and inequalities, during the debate over Article 15(4)

- on reservation for scheduled castes and tribes. His failure to display a similar courage on needed reforms in personal laws of minorities indicates not only the lower priority for women in his scale of 'practical politics' - but also a more generic failure - *in estimating people's initiative and response as a political force for change.*

What Nehru had forgotten and overlooked was the people. Planning had made them mere beneficiaries. And since the benefits that was due to them came through a line of intermediaries, even this largesse was imperfectly distributed by imperfect people in an imperfect way. His *Glimpses of World History* and *Discovery of India* had introduced Nehru to the Indian peasant, but had obscured from Nehru's memory the unwavering courage that peasants had shown - not just in their suffering but in their fight against atrocity and oppression. *The activism of people as a force-in-itself was missing from his plans. Between plan and its implementation there was nothing other than the conscience of the intermediaries. Power had been over-centralised, and there was no accountability.*<sup>46</sup>

Two other enactments of the Nehru era deserve some discussion. As Chairman of the Allahabad Municipal Board in 1923, Nehru had condemned social attitudes to prostitutes. Prostitution, in his opinion, could only be lessened by raising women's status and providing them with 'honourable careers'.<sup>47</sup> He was sarcastic that while people were disturbed at the existence of red light areas in the city, "I seldom hear anything against the other party, the man who exploits the poor woman and casts all the blame on her". If the suggestion to exclude prostitutes from any part of the city were to be accepted "I think it equally reasonable to reserve another part of Allahabad for the men who exploit women and because of whom prostitution flourishes".<sup>48</sup> The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1961, however, did not reflect any of these sentiments. No penalty was prescribed for the clients of the prostitutes, but only for those who organised the traffic and/or lived on income from prostitution.

His treatment of dowry revealed an utter failure to understand or loss of contact with the social process. An anti-dowry movement had simmered through the twenties and thirties, within the women's movement and progressive sections of public opinion. Even caste councils had taken note of the negative aspects of this phenomenon and adopted resolutions to put a stop to it. While piloting the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar referred to dowry as 'a menace' and suggested that all dowry paid should become the property of the woman. In other words, Ambedkar wanted dowry to be converted to *Streedhan*, to which Hindu orthodoxy could have raised no objection. This was not accepted. Instead, the emasculated Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 put equal liability on the giver as well as the taker of the dowry. Other flaws in the Act made it a dead letter from the beginning.

Like the women's movement Nehru had placed maximum faith in the spread of education to bring about women's equality. The first official step in this direction was the appointment of a National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59) and the consequent setting up of a National Council for Women's Education under the aegis of the Ministry of Education. But the implementation of the Committee's recommendations displayed little commitment on the part of the Government. Central subsidies to State Governments had to be abandoned after a while,

ostensively because of resistance from the State Governments but actually because of declining allocations to the elementary education sector. The Government of India did not appoint a cell within the Education Ministry, to service the National Council or follow up its recommendations.

The results are revealing. Between 1956 and 1961, the sex ratio (number of girls per 100 boys) increased, in primary schools from 44 to 48, in middle schools from 25 to 32, and in secondary schools from 21 to 23. In contrast, in higher education it improved from 17 to 22, a near doubling since 1947. The number of illiterate women increased from 161.9 millions in 1951 to 185.2 millions in 1961. Class, community and rural urban divides characterised the progress of girls' education to a much greater extent than among boys.<sup>49</sup>

The Committee on the Status of women in India, which included only highly educated women, in despair had to state that education had become an instrument of inequality between different groups of women, and accused the educational system of strengthening and perpetuating gender inequality, instead of promoting the 'new value of equality'.<sup>50</sup>

The third instrument on which Nehru placed equal faith was political equality. Gandhi had wanted to 'feminise' politics, and predicted in his usual cryptic manner : "Women must have votes and equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation".<sup>51</sup>

What happened during the Nehru era? Women's participation as voters registered a steady increase at a rate faster than men's. But 'their ability to produce an impact on the political process' was negligible. This is clearly brought out by the Committee on the Status of Women in India.

Parties have tended to see women voters as appendages of the males. Among women, the leadership has become diffused and diverse - with sharp contradictions in their regard and concern for the inequalities that affect the status of women in every sphere - social, economic and political. The revolution in status of women for which constitutional equality was to be only the instrument, still remains a very distant objective. While the position of some groups have changed for the better, the large masses of women *continue to lack spokesmen in the representative bodies of the State. Though women do not constitute a minority numerically, they are acquiring the features of one by the inequality of class, status and political power. In this sense, the new rights have proved to be only concessional.*<sup>52</sup>

The Committee's cry of despair reflected its shock and outrage at the overwhelming evidence of marginalisation, even decimation of the large majority of women, demonstrated by demographic indicators. A declining sex ratio in the population and in economic participation, widening gender gap in life expectancy, mortality and illiteracy, and a phenomenal rise in female internal migration provided

statistical ballast to what the Committee learnt from nearly 10,000 women of different classes across the country. All the trends had begun long before independence, but what shook the Committee's faith was their *acceleration* in the decades of planned development. Increasing population alone could not explain the fact that "Indian Society was treating its women as dispensable assets, economically and demographically".<sup>53</sup> could it explain the 'regression from the norms evolved during the freedom struggle', demonstrated by escalation of institutions like dowry, domestic oppression, prostitution, and commercial use of women as sex objects in business promotion.

Why had the Constitutional guarantees failed to make any dent in these inexorable trends and why had they not attracted the attention of the planners? A discussion with a large delegation of the Planning Commission's staff and scrutiny of four successive plans revealed that the planners had viewed women as targets of only the social services - education, health, and welfare. And the government's performance in all these sectors had been poor. They had been starved of resources, and despite occasional policy directives, women's needs had received very low priority.

Though employment generation had been a major objective in all the plans, apparently no one had pointed out that women, too, needed employment. Policies for industrialisation and the adoption of new technology, had displaced large numbers of women from the old organised industries (jute, textiles, coal mining), while the attempted revival of village industry had done little to benefit women. Since agriculture could not provide adequate employment to the swelling ranks of the rural poor women, distress migration had increased, to other districts and cities, where the ranks of prostitutes had swollen.

Since three of these plans were finalised under Nehru's chairmanship, it is not possible to exonerate him from all responsibility. I am certain that he remained ignorant of much of what was going on. As authors of *Towards Equality* (1975) many of us bemoaned his absence, as we were certain that he would have been as outraged as us, had he lived to see the results of our investigation. My critique is therefore mainly about omissions on his part, rather than of commission.

Admission of women to public services through competitive examinations, and adopting ILO Conventions in labour laws - that really affected a small sector of the national economy - were no substitutes for a consistent, and well articulated policy for women's employment and economic equality. Since 85% of women lived in rural areas, the complete absence of their actual economic roles and needs in formulation of policies for agriculture and rural development was inexcusable. Some of the Congress ministries (including U.P., Nehru's home province) in 1937 had recognised women's right to inherit agricultural land, by extending the personal laws of succession (pre-reform) to agricultural land also. But during the first decade after independence, these laws were changed, replaced by others which discriminated blatantly against women - widows, daughters and mothers.<sup>54</sup> They were enacted by the States, but surely Jawaharlal's influence on the State

governments (especially U.P.) was not inconsiderable? Why were women's rights ignored in Zamindari abolition, brought forth by a Constitutional amendment? Land reform could not be pushed because of resistance within and outside the party, but why were women forgotten in designing the Community Development Programme, which according to Nehru's biographer, excited and renewed his energy and hopes?<sup>55</sup> He had commented that "the idea is to change the whole face of rural India and to raise the level of the vast majority of our population".<sup>56</sup> This programme, and the national extension service designed as its supportive infrastructure, 'were expected to form the base for the national edifice of a socialistic pattern of society'.<sup>57</sup> Nehru added that "I will not rest content unless every man, woman and child in this country has a fair deal and attains a minimum standard of living".<sup>58</sup>

Why then did he not ensure women's participation in all aspects of the programme, rather than a belated (under pressure from the Government of West Bengal) inclusion of a women's component, restricted to educating rural women in nutrition, child care and decorative crafts? Concentration on such activities by the Mahila Mandals (village women's groups) automatically excluded poor women from these bodies, because they needed employment and increased income.

One member of the first Planning Commission who fought very hard for tangible interventions in favour of women and other oppressed groups - to live up to the high ideals that the Prime Minister had introduced in the Constitution was Durgabai Deshmukh. She was pacified with an allocation for 'social welfare' - and put in charge of a new agency - the Central Social Welfare Board. Though the Prime Minister, inaugurating the new body - emphasised 'status of women' and the welfare of the tribes and scheduled castes as the Board's areas of responsibility, his lack of attention to details prevented him from ensuring the Board's efficacy and status within the machinery of government.<sup>59</sup> Had he applied his mind more seriously to Durgabai's vision of harnessing women - power in the task of nation building and social development<sup>60</sup>, perhaps the history of the 'Nehruvian paradigm' of development would not have excluded women, and it would not have been necessary for ardent Nehruvians like the most active members of the CSWI to suffer their sense of disillusion, despair and outrage against the State's failure under Nehru's stewardship.

Above all, why were the recommendations of the pre-independence Sub-Committee of the NPC not even examined by the planners - in general, or for the Community Development Programme?<sup>61</sup> The Punjab refugees rehabilitation centre at Nilokheri, supplied the model and the inspiration for the C.D. programme had demonstrated the determination and capacity of women to resurrect their shattered family economy. Why then were suggestions to incorporate economic activity for women in the community projects discarded without consideration? If there had been some questioning by the Prime Minister, would the outcome have been different?

Gopal argues that Nehru's familiarity with the peasantry being confined to Awadh, he was not conscious of the differentiation among the peasantry, and was aware only of the difference between large landowners and the poor peasantry.<sup>62</sup> If that were so, how did he miss seeing the peasant women working on the land, or participating in the militant peasant agitations of the twenties and thirties?

Having accepted the NPC Sub-Committee's principle - to recognise the economic value of women's labour, in or outside the home, what explains this blindness to rural women's economic roles? Despite his reservations about Gandhi's rural reconstruction ideas, when he did decide to establish the Khadi and Village Industries Commission in 1956, why did the Commission's mandate exclude any reference to women, though they constituted the largest group among Khadi workers? Had the memory of Gandhi, who called Khadi a women's movement, faded so rapidly?<sup>63</sup>

The failure to articulate the implications of the non-discrimination formula in clear terms to either the Planning Commission, or various agencies and Ministries led to the inevitable results, indifference, invisibility and discrimination. No one had a mandate to look out for what was happening to women. Laws were enacted, but none was given the responsibility to reach information about their existence to millions of women or men. Even the educated remained unaware of or defied with impunity laws for the protection of women.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps his plan to establish a non-executive Ministry of Economic and Social Development, more as a 'think tank' could have helped him, at least to be better informed. But reviewing Nehru's preoccupations after independence, it becomes clear that the fiery zeal for equality of the twenties had lost ground to other priorities. The only connection that could have given women's status priority in his mind was its *value* as a strategy for national integration, and a *resource*, for national development.

Unfortunately, he never perceived these connections. At the Lahore Congress (1929) he had identified three major problems facing the nation - the minorities, the Indian (princely) States and labour and peasantry. The omission of the women's question was not accidental.

### III

I shall conclude with three divergent assessments of Jawaharlal. Gopal describes him as "always a radical in the European tradition, seeking to apply and adopt its doctrines to his own country. Change was wrought not by the revolutionary situation in India but by what he saw and heard and read in Europe. Although always to be deeply influenced by Gandhi, he was never again to be wholly a prisoner in the Gandhian mould."<sup>65</sup>

A stout critic from the left, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, after a pain-staking analysis of Nehru as the spokesman of the Indian bourgeoisie, a trusted leader of the left who surrendered to the right in crisis situations because of his 'imprisonment to Congress loyalty', ends his assessment by calling Jawaharlal, "No ordinary disciple of Gandhi ... but more with Gandhi than the rest of his colleagues in the determination to fight the communal frenzy .... that devoured the strongest of his allies in the struggle for secularism".<sup>66</sup>

These assessments, though they contain elements of truth, do not take account of the gender dimension in Nehru's or Gandhi's ideas. In his assessment of the women's question, Jawaharlal was far more a prisoner of his own class, unable to shake off the view that the women's question was basically one of social attitudes, customs and traditions. The legacy of 'radical European tradition' made him accept blindly the thesis that solution lay in 'modernisation'. Even his diluted 'Swadeshi brand of socialism'<sup>67</sup> did not extend to a class analysis of women's roles, status and problems, and their links with power relations within the family and society. He wrote: "When I talk of it (socialism), I mean the economic theory and all this talk of religion or marriage and morals in connection with it is absurd".<sup>68</sup>

For the same reason, he felt uncomfortable with some of the radical suggestions of the NPC's Sub-committee with regard to the family and women's rights as mothers inside or outside wedlock. In a letter to the Chairperson, Lakshmi Bai Rajwade, he observed 'many of the subjects dealt with by your Committee related to intimate details of personal life and to all manner of prejudices and customs. It is right that these prejudices and injurious customs should go .... but the way to remove them is not always the way of merely denouncing them. One has to approach the subject in a manner which is least offensive to large sections of people .... there are ways of approach and suggestion .... make the approach gently and persuasively'.<sup>69</sup>

Jawaharlal was the epitome of the well brought-up urban middle class of the post social reform movement, which viewed women as objects of 'protection'.

At the debate on the Fundamental Rights Resolution, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay objected to the word 'protection' for women workers and said, women want *attention* and not protection. The word protection, in her opinion, denoted an inferior position and they were not going to tolerate protection from anybody, not even from the State. Her amendment was, therefore, 'The State shall pay attention to the needs of women workers, including the children when their mothers are at work and adequate provisions during maternity period'. Replying to the amendment, Nehru said - 'I am personally unconcerned even if the House accepts the amendment in preference to the original clause', but he went on to add 'there can be no better instance of inferiority complex than Mrs. Kamaladevi's objection to the word 'protection'. I do not understand what is humiliating in 'protection'.<sup>70</sup>

There was a definite contradiction between this kind of resistance and his insistence that women must fight for their rights. Having piloted the fundamental rights resolution, he took no action to set up any mechanism for its follow-up. When women protested at the non-inclusion of any woman on the Congress Working Committee, his answer was "It was certainly possible for me to nominate a woman

member, but I decided to break this tradition in the hope that this would ultimately be good for women themselves".<sup>71</sup>

In the argument that followed with Gandhi on this issue, Nehru defended himself by saying that he would have welcomed stronger protests, as he wanted women to be more aggressive and insist on their rights - both political and social. Gandhi recorded that he was not satisfied with this explanation.

As Lotika Sarkar commented "Even if Nehru wanted women to be more aggressive, how he was going to achieve this by excluding them from the Working Committee and not giving them a chance to participate in the working of the Congress, is far from clear. Nor is it clear on what basis he nominated the others - did the men demand their rights aggressively?"<sup>72</sup>

While some Provincial Congress Committees (under pressure from women) constituted women's departments within the organisations, the establishment of such a unit within the AICC did not take place till 1938 when Subhash Bose became President. It was also Bose who constituted the National Planning Committee under Jawaharlal's Chairmanship. The failure to create a machinery to follow up, initiate, monitor and evaluate policies and action for women's advancement continued through Nehru's period as Prime Minister.<sup>73</sup>

According to Gopal, by the late 50s Nehru had lapsed back to his pre-1927 self :

'the conventional Hindu untouched as yet by rationalist ideas and the unquestioning worshipper of Gandhi, seeing in his master's philosophy and methods an ideology far superior to that of Bolshevism or Fascism. He was now a socialist but was seeking to mix his left wing ideas with a sophisticated form of religious commitment. He had always favoured the method of non-violence; but, whereas in the 1930s and 1940s it had commended itself to him as the technique most suited to India, he was now persuaded of its intrinsic merit and considered it more important than even the objective. It was a curious amalgam of socialism, science and religion, which he was now trying to evolve'.<sup>74</sup>

It is doubtful whether Gandhian critics of the Nehruvian path of development would agree with this assessment. Apart from their identification of Gandhi as a right-wing leader, neither of the analysts have perceived Nehru's inability to grasp Gandhi's recognition of women as a force, with a lot of creative energy, and his realisation that the subordination of women was essentially a political issue tied up with inequalities in power. According to Gandhi, "Man has always desired power, ownership of property gives this power".<sup>75</sup>

He was also far more conscious of the economic basis of women's subordination. "Not only is the woman condemned to *domestic slavery*, but when she goes out as a labourer to earn wages, though she works harder than men she is paid less".<sup>76</sup>

He was the only leader of the freedom movement who realised the impact of the colonial transformation of the economy on women's economic and consequently social status.<sup>77</sup>

Nehru never understood Gandhi's analysis of the women's question, nor shared his faith in women's energy. While he repeatedly mentioned oppressive customs and traditions as the main enemies of women's freedom, he did not enumerate them or suggest ways that they could be eliminated. His comment on the practice of Sati as an 'outdated custom' was superficial, and has been proved to be utterly wrong. In contrast, Gandhi condemned it as a gross example of double standards.

"If the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. You cannot have one set of weights and measures for the one and a different one for the other".<sup>78</sup>

It is significant that some village women in Rajasthan used virtually the same words commenting on the incident of Sati in Deorala on 4th September 1987.<sup>79</sup>

Even polygamy was not a 'live issue' to Nehru, because he 'supposed' that it did not exist.<sup>80</sup> It is amazing that as a trained lawyer, he remained unaware that polygamy was legally permitted both in Hindu and Muslim law. Nor did his career as a national leader acquaint him with women's perception - Hindu and Muslim alike-of this institution. Had he realised it, he would not have abandoned women of so many communities, including Hindus, for whom he felt he had done a lot, to remain a prey to the rising trend of religious, caste, ethnic, cultural and other brands of fundamentalism, which now threaten the very structure of the nation he set out to build.

Finally, how did *Chacha Nehru* forget his commitment to a National Programme of child care as an essential support for women's equal and active participation in their economic, social and political responsibilities?

However, in assessing the 'Gentle Colossus' at the fag-end of the century, it is perhaps best to stand by Dhavan's gracious objectivity :

India's quest for democracy survives inspite of Nehru's incomplete efforts. Democracy is not what our rulers do, or fail to do. It is that relationship between civil and political society which produce a participatory and responsive system of governance. Democracy is not created by Constitutions, though it may be thwarted. Many Constitutions are no more than a conspiracy to work out arrangements for power sharing among the elite. Democracy acquires dimension from the social movements, and associational freedoms that grow from, and within civil society..... Further, if Nehru's democratic legacy is tested, the yardstick is not the extent to which his successors fell from Nehruvian grace as ministers or parliamentarians, but the extent to which civil society has engendered and found its capacity for sustained pressure and critique.<sup>81</sup>

I am pretty sure that the Indian Women's Movement would agree.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Lecturing at the Berhampore University, 1972, Gopal confessed that he “had difficulties in being objective about Jawaharlal. The Author was present on the occasion.
2. Laying the foundation stone of a women’s college in Allahabad. He was quoting Charles Fourier. Gopal, in *Seminar* No. 363, November 1989, p. 13
3. Ibid
4. Nehru in Constituent Assembly, 27.11.1947. See S. Gopal *Jawaharlal Nehru : A Biography, op.cit*, Vol II, p. 256.
5. A much abused term - which I have come to view as one of the classic examples of the ‘politics of language’ currently a propulsive force behind much of the ‘politics of identity’.
6. Indian Council of Social Science Research : Programme of Women’s Studies ( a Policy Statement), 1977.
7. Rajeev Dhavan and Thomas Paul (ed). “*Nehru and the Constitution*”, Indian Law Institute & N.M. Tripathi Pvt. Ltd. Delhi, 1992. Possibly the most scholarly assessment from various points of view of Nehru the Indian political phenomenon. *Introduction*, p. 18
8. Gopal, op cit. Vol. III, p. 301-2
9. Cited in Zoya Hassan, Maithreyi Choudhury and Vina Mazumdar : Participation of Women in Political Life in India, UNESCO Seminar on the same theme, Lisbon, December 1983 (Mimeo, CWDS).
10. Gopal, op.cit. Vol. III, p. 299
11. Ibid, p. 278-81.
12. *Towards Equality*, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Government of India, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 1975, Chapters, 1,3&5; A.S. Altekar, *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, 1938, M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Berkeley, 1966. Also his *Changing Position of Indian Women*, in *Man* 12, 1977, pp. 221-38.
13. Reviewing Katherine Mayo’s book, *The Slaves of God - Jawaharlal Nehru*, *Selected Works*, op.cit Vol. III, p. 399. See Lotika Sarkar, *Empowering Women*, *Seminar*, 1989, 363, p. 36.
14. There has been an explosion of research on this theme since the Seventies from different regions of the World. I cite only a few pioneers - Ester Boserup’s classic *Role of Women in Economic Development*, 1970; - based on Indian and African data - a direct fallout of her association and difference with Gunnar Myrdal’s *Asian Drama*; *Towards Equality* : Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Government of India, 1975. Chapter 5; Irene Tinker (ed.) *Persistent Inequalities*, New York, OUP, 1990, Washington; Asok Mitra, *India’s Population : Aspects of Quality and Control*, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1978, Vol. I.
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16. J.P Naik, Convocation Address, University of Pune, 1977
17. *Towards Equality*, op.cit. p.3
18. Ibid, p. 7
19. Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. IX, p. 1194-95.
20. M.K. Gandhi, Speech on 24.3.1925. *Collected Works*, Vol. 26, pp. 395-98. For a comprehensive collection of Gandhi's writings and speeches on women, see *Gandhi on Women*, compiled by Pushpa Joshi, CWDS and Navjivan Trust, 1988.
21. Engels, F. *The origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Moscow : Progress Publishers., 1948
22. Hanna Papanek, *The Ideal Woman and the Ideal Society : Failed Visions and Broken Promises in Nazi Germany in General*; *Journal of the Department of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Delhi, Special Issue on Fascism and Culture, 1(i): p. 12-25.*
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24. Vina Mazumdar, *Khadi and Village Industries Commission*, in the series National Specialised Agencies and Women's Equality, CWDS, 1988, p. 7.
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27. Ibid, p. 480
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33. Ibid, p. 616
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