

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN'S EDUCATION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Received: 02 May 2018

Accepted: 14 May 2018

Published: 23 May 2018

ABSTRACT

Jawaharlal Nehru a truly great figure of the twentieth century was a true believer in equality between men and women. Nehru's attitude towards women was marked by a profound sense of humanity. Being a committed champion of the women in the society, his contribution towards the upliftment of women in various spheres of life was immense. He was of the firm belief that women's emancipation cannot be achieved by legislation alone, but only if women were educated than they would be empowered in the true sense and would contribute towards the molding and building of the society and nation. In this context, this paper attempts to put forth Nehru's attitude towards women's education

KEYWORDS: *Humanity, Emancipation, Empowerment, Economic Independence*

INTRODUCTION

An outstanding personality of twentieth-century Indian history, Jawaharlal Nehru was a key figure in India's freedom movement and the country's first Prime Minister. Nehru also stands as a multi-faceted personality among the world figures of the democratic system of thought and leadership. Apart from being an active politician for most of his life, a renowned writer and scholar, Nehru was also a great champion of women's rights and a strong believer in equality between men and women throughout his life. In most of his speeches and writings, Nehru is often seen quoting the French philosopher Charles Fourier: "One could judge the degree of civilization of a country by the social and political position of its women." (Gopal, 1972, p. 361) Therefore, he held the view that if India was to be judged, then she should be judged by the position of its women.

It can be said that Nehru's attitude towards women was guided by his deep commitment to humanity and he wanted to bring about the upliftment of women at par with men in the society. In his *Discovery of India*, Nehru wrote that while he was imprisoned in Ahmadnagar fort, the thought of action always filled his mind and he had a great yearning for action. Therefore, this strong urge for action, perhaps also guided him for the cause of women of India. His dream of a socialist India could be achieved only when women were liberated and given equal opportunity and privileges. Nehru held the strong view that the women of India had long been neglected and that "the real and rapid progress in India would come only when women got moving and freed themselves of everything that suppressed them and released them from bondage" (Mody, 1992, p. 178).

NEHRU'S VIEWS ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Nehru strongly condemned the social evils like the purdah, early marriage, denial of rights to women as this greatly undermined the position of women in the society. 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?" (Nehru, 2004, p. 172). Therefore, in India women had to fight many social evils, had to break many an inherited custom that enchains them and drags them down (Gopal, Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol.6, 1974, p. 218). Moreover, according to Nehru the civilization, customs, laws had all been made by man and whereas on the one hand man had taken good care to keep himself in a superior position, on the other hand, he treated the woman as a chattel and a plaything to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement (*Ibid*). Therefore, "under this continuous pressure women has been unable to grow and to develop her capacities to her fullest, and then a man has blamed her for her backwardness" (*Ibid*). Hence Nehru stressed on the need for effective education for women which would train them to play an effective role in all professions and spheres and leading to their emancipation and empowerment.

Though Nehru held the view that education would enable women to perform their traditional household roles as wives and, more importantly, as mothers in a better and more competent manner, however, he did not agree with the education that would train women for household duties and for the widely practiced profession of marriage. He considered this to be a limited and one-sided view of women's education and did not believe in this idea of women's education. In 1928 he came down heavily on the report of the Mahila Vidyapith, Allahabad on the special instruction given to women wherein: "it was laid down that while the man was the breadwinner, a 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" (Gopal S., 1972, p. 362). Nehru strongly disagrees with this idea 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 helpmate, the follower and the obedient slave of her husband and others" (*Ibid*). Nehru visualized "women's education as a means for breaking the confining barriers of the household and the stereotypical roles normally reserved for women" (Jain & Mahan, 1996, p. 220). Therefore, Nehru 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" (Gopal, 1974, pp. 219-20). Only if the women were educated and economically self-reliant than women emancipation and their empowerment was possible.

Nehru said "wherever girl's education was encouraged in India, there was progress" (1968, p. 139). Nehru was far-sighted enough to perceive women's education as an important milestone of women empowerment as it would enable the women to face the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. Education was a powerful tool to change the position of women in the society. Moreover, Nehru strongly believed that the key to the progress of the society and nation was women's education as is evident from his words: "If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered". Attaching special significance to women's education he claimed that: "I have always been strongly of the

opinion that while it may be possible or desirable to neglect men's education it is not possible or desirable to neglect women's education" (1958, p. 398). For Nehru perceived that educating a woman was highly important, for women were the ones who could mould the mind of the younger generation and he also believed that women's education had a wider implication as by educating a woman, probably men would also be affected thereby, and in any event children would be also affected. Further, he remarked that women "are the makers of the country's future, for children, the citizens-to-be, have a natural inclination to imitate their mothers till they grow up and are able to think for themselves" (Gopal, 1993, p. 205). Therefore, education would fully equip them to perform this role so as to make better homes, better families and a better society.

Nehru was a strong champion of the economic emancipation of women, for women could be strong and would be able to move forward only if women were economically free and stable. He remarked: "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" (Gopal, 1974, p. 220). Further emphasizing on the importance of education, he said: "By education I mean education and not merely learning to be ladylike. Learning to be ladylike may be good in itself, but it is not education as such. Education has mainly two aspects, 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... So it is highly necessary that we should develop our education, among our girls more especially, because men are provided for to some extent" (1958, pp. 401-402). Therefore, seen in this light, Nehru considered education as the only key to the path of economic independence. Hence his speeches reiterated his faith that for women, without economic freedom and mental freedom through education, other aspects of gender equality would prove superficial (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006, p. 79).

Nehru considered education to be an important tool towards empowerment of women in every way. From the economic point of view, a woman could be self-sufficient and not dependent on others for her existence. Moreover, since he believed that women could contribute to the progress of the society and nation, in this respect, education would again play an important role in training them for that purpose.

The fact that Nehru gave importance to women's education is evident from the way he provided education to his only daughter Indira Nehru. Indira was born at the time when the Indian national movement kept her family member's pre-occupied denied to her the love, care and attention which she required at the formative years of her childhood. Her parents would often land up in prison, which left her alone and secluded. But Jawaharlal Nehru while in prison took upon the task of writing a series of letters (published in the *Glimpses of World History*) to her which gave her lessons about history and about the ways and philosophy of life. His letters to Indira were educative in nature and sort of mental training to her which would ultimately lead to her empowerment. In 1936 after his wife Kamala Nehru's death, Nehru left eighteen year old Indira behind in Europe to let her pursue her education there as he believed that European education "would give her the strength and the independence of mind which were necessary in order to play a role in public life in India" (Jayakar, 2014, pp. 83-84). Nehru had a dream to make his daughter a prominent figure in the public life of India and wanted her to play an active role in the building of the nation and this is evident in one of the letters which he wrote to

Indira where he said: “Many years ago I used to dream that when you grow up, you also would play a brave part in what is called public life in India, to shoulder this heavy burden, to help in putting brick upon brick in the building of the India of our dreams. And I wanted you to train and fit yourself in body and mind for this engrossing task” (Gandhi, 2005, p. 216). In this way it can be seen that Nehru educated, trained and inculcated in Indira leadership virtues which thoroughly empowered her to become a great leader and statesman.

Therefore, Nehru’s attitude towards women’s education was a reflection of his broad mindedness and his strong conviction that educated women can play a very important role in the development of the society and the country. He held the view that India would progress only when in a real sense Indian women’s progress and this would be possible only if women were empowered and education was the tool for empowerment. Emphasizing on the role of education in training women for the task of nation building, he said: “It has become very essential that women must be educated so that they can participate in national tasks in whichever way they can and benefit themselves as well as the nation” (Hasan, 2005, p. 122).

According to Nehru education would lead to empowerment of women and this would also enable women to play an important role in the development process of the country. Hence, after independence under Nehru’s Premiership, various National Education Policies were formulated to provide education to the women of India which would lead to their empowerment. The University Commission headed by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in 1948-49 was the first Commission, which was set up after independence to inquire into education. Underlining the supreme importance of women’s education, the Commission observed: “There cannot be an educated person without educating women. If general education had to be limited to men and women, that opportunity should be given to women for then it would surely be passed on to the next generation.” (1950, p. 343). Moreover, providing education facilities to women was one of the prime concerns under the Five Year Plans under Nehru’s Premiership. As a result, there was a rise in the enrolment of women in colleges and universities and growth of educational institutions for women.

The Constitution of India in 1950 gave to women all fundamental rights. While Article 14, 15(I), 16 (1 and 2) and 19 bestowed on women equality before the law, equality of opportunity and the right to freedom of speech, to acquire, hold and dispose of property and to practice any profession, Article 45 laid down that: “The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years.” The provision of free and compulsory education for girls as well as boys were a revolutionary development in outlook. (Tagra, 2006, p. 269)

CONCLUSIONS

In a speech, while laying the foundation stone of the Janakidevi Mahavidyalaya, on 30 March 1960, Jawaharlal Nehru said: "The biggest revolution, however, will come into this country through education, because it gives a new focus to thinking and many things come out of it. Education is only coming up very fast in our country; in that process it must be remembered that women's education can bring about more revolutionary changes and its spread will bring very far-reaching results, because its effect will be felt in every home and will thus go to the very roots of society" (Tagra, 2006, p. 282).

Thus, Nehru saw education as an important tool of empowerment of women for which intensive efforts were made during his Premiership to provide opportunities of education to women and really boost up women's education in India in every respect. He wanted a revolution in women's education in the country as the education of women was vital to the progress and prosperity of the country.

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