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NEHRU and INDIAN WOMEN TODAY

Nehru's concern for the disadvantaged and the latter's looking up to him for improvement of their lot is a well established fact. Nehru was a visionary and a humanist. As a visionary he had not only the foresight of building a strong, stable and self-sustaining India, he had also the foresight and with it the will to attend to the needs of the specially disadvantaged in the population.

The society in India is a tradition bound society. This has meant many things; it has manifested itself in many forms. Tradition in any society is its mechanism to regulate its activities and actions of the members of the society towards others that brings continuity and progress. In simple terms the traditions of a society are expected to be oriented towards the welfare of the members of the society. In the history of any society, however, the reality is far from this and so has been the experience of India. There came a time in the history of India when it was realized that many of the 'traditions' with the society were putting sections of population to social disadvantage. Such realisation, namely that traditions with the society are putting sections of population to 'social disadvantage' as far as women are concerned made its first impact in the early 19th century. The first and most prominent subject for the early reforms movements in India was the 'status of women'. In the recent history, introduction of the Hindu Code Bill in the 1950's was a prominent landmarks in this sphere.

About the enactment of the Hindu Code Bill, according to one evaluation, "The temper of the first regularly elected Parliament of all India was tested by the Special Marriage Bill. The Success of that measure in 1954 led directly to the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill". Making a closer examination of the scenario in which the

enactment was made, the same commentator had the following to say: "It is not to be assumed that the members of Parliament were united in this context,.... obscurantists and ultra-orthodox elements in this existed, but they were in a minority, whereas the 'advanced' Hindus, whose economic, social and political ambitions conflict significantly with traditional Hinduism, were dominant. It was doubtful whether they would retain their hold in the next Parliament (un-necessary doubts, as it turned out), and hence arose the haste to codify the Hindu Law."

The committed, firm and all influencing hand of Nehru at the back of all this was a common knowledge; his pivotal role is well known.

The Hindu Code Bill, and how he introduced this sensitive subject to test the 'temper' of the first Parliament, may mark the first example of Nehru's commitment towards the cause of the women, after self-rule had come. Preceding this, when India was still under the colonial rule, he had another method to give expression to all he felt should go along with the 'reform' due for women. The following incident would illustrate his ideas.

In 1936-37, when Jawaharlal Nehru as President did not appoint a woman to the Working Committee of Indian National Congress, the incident provoked protests from Mahatma Gandhi and women's organizations. In a letter to Gandhiji, Nehru admits to having received protests from various organizations and adds that:

"I would have welcomed even stronger protests for I wanted our women to be more aggressive and to insist on their rights, both political and social. I invited them to organise themselves to press for their rights which they were not likely to get if they waited for the goodwill of their menfolk."

Nehru was a committed champion of the cause of the women in the society, and the understanding with which he gave action to it is more than proved by his making the Hindu Code Bill as one of the first business to be transacted by the first Parliament.

The story this for makes a very satisfying reading, but today when we look back putting ourselves at the point where we have arrived

today, in nearly two decades after Nehru, there appear many reasons to evaluate Nehru, not in terms of what he has shaped and left behind, but where we have arrived today from the formulations held by Nehru, and from the actions initiated by him. Such an exercise will be of considerable value for those associated with 'action', as well as to the academicians.

II

We may begin by defining where we have arrived today. We may do this by referring to the some events that came to attention during that last two years: Sati in Rajasthan, dowry deaths in Delhi, suicide pact by the three sisters in Kanpur to 'save' their father from the burden of dowry, the Shah Banu episode, to name a few. What do these indicate? An irresponsible perverted media blowing these incidents beyond proportions or an irresponsible perverted society? It appears that from the early nineteenth century to the close of the twentieth century, all that we have travelled has brought us back to the point from where Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar had started more than a century and half ago. Why so?

This can be explained in a variety of ways, the differences in explanations depending on the orietation we hold. There will be many who will explain this as indicative of the breakdown of the traditional Indian values where the woman was referred to as "devi". There may be others who may disagree and go along with Nehru who had said,

"Inspite of many brilliant examples in the past, I think it would be true to say that the position and status of women in India for many hundreds of years has not been a good one in law or in public life."

It was this realization that "there is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman and the real life situation in which women find themselves", that Nehru took the responsibility of attending to the condition of women as his first responsibility.

What Nehru took upon himself was to rectify some of the structural inconsistencies in the Indian society. The major impetus for this came from the nationalist movement for independence, a movement which had its inception in the nineteenth century as a movement for social reforms. Under the influence of Gandhi and later Nehru the slogan of freedom got extended to improving the conditions of a number of 'depressed' groups: untouchables, peasants, women.

The participation of women in the national movement appeared to become somewhat inevitable. This had its indirect but very positive advantages also. This is one point we should not forget. It prepared the ground for the women of the post-colonial period to come to the fore front of action and thought. We need not hesitate to accept that without Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Begum Hamid Ali, who have made their place in the history of this country, the Indian woman of today would have suffered still more from the inertia of age old thoughts and conservatism.

To find answer to the many questions that may come today, about the status of women in the Indian society, to find an answer to the question "how is it that after a century and half we have returned to the place from where Ram Mohun Roy and Vidyasagar made their beginning", we may pay our attention to all that engaged Nehru when he assumed the leadership of the just independent India. He had located two tasks for himself, that of economic development and that of social welfare. Nehru was a visionary, he was a social analyst of the calibre which could humble many of the academics of today. The Five Year Plans and the Hindu Code Bill were the two 'exercises' initiated by him, the first for speedy economic development and the latter for ensuring a just place for women in the society.

The Five Year Plans addressed themselves to socio-economic development. "Structural changes" were considered as essential preconditions as well as natural consequence of the "development" expected to be affected through the efforts of the Five Year Plans. The structural changes thus initiated would effect the socially

disadvantaged in the society, Nehru was very conscious of this, and thus, closely at heels to the launching of the Five Year Plans, Nehru took his pronounced attention towards the needs of the women, the tribals and the other sections of the socially disadvantaged.

It appears that we somehow stopped with legislation and single person leadership, all that came about through Nehru during his time and the first two and half decades after self-rule. The version of Womens Liberation Movement which made its appearance in India, in 1975 with the UN declaration of the International Year of Women, it had far reaching influences. This changed the current notions relating to "status of women" in the Indian society. The shift was visible and characteristic. The UN declaration had its central theme to promote equality between men and women, and to ensure the full integration of women in the development activity. In terms of action it meant equal opportunity, in employment, in education, in inheritance; in principle, it appeared to suggest (as stated) equality with men. In this connection what needs to be noted is the characteristic shift in the ideology. The spirit of the movement from Ram Mohun Roy and Vidyasagar to Nehru was characterised with the ideology of tradition versus liberalism, to use the terminology of the sociologist, from tradition to modernity. The UN declaration, and flowing from it, the Womens' Lib Movement's India's version seemed to hinge on the ideology of women versus men, the depressed (oppressed) women and the dominating men.

It is perhaps this shift in the axis of the orientation which can explain the highest incidence of dowry deaths in the metropolis which also holds high percentage of women in the work force. The male as a colleague in office and the male as husband represent two different personality orientations. We seem to have missed the more basic questions, that of addressing ourselves to the travel from tradition to modernity; instead we have bogged ourselves to more individualized questions. It appears we have forgotten that: "Although the basic objectives of the integration of women in development, the promotion of their equal rights have universal relevance, International Women's Year, the Women's Lib

Movement which has come along with it, will have different meaning for different countries. The operationalization of these objectives will differ according to the situation in which women within each country actually find themselves. More specifically, it would differ according to the development needs of each country”

There is one clarification which needs to be added here. It relates to the influence of the post 1975 Women's Lib Movement on issues related to status of women in India. The observance of the International Year of Women in 1975 and all that flowed from it to India, may have one set of influence on all that we have today in relation to status of women in India, all of it should not be assigned to the shift from the tradition versus modernity (liberalism) to women versus men.

Nehru had played his constructive part in attending to questions relating to the status of women in the society. It soon appeared that those who held the leadership role in this found themselves attracted towards different roles. Ram Mohun Roy to Nehru (1956, Hindu Code Bill), political roles were nearer to social roles and responsibilities, but soon this slipped to the political roles partnered with administrative official roles. The women leaders who had championed the cause of women with Nehru had now been drawn to bigger official responsibilities. The women of India had in the process lost the continuity in the leadership for their cause. According to one opinion: after independence “The women leaders (too) had got settled in new social grooves of power and position that independence had thrown up. As a result, they forged no links with the wide mass of women”. Continuing, this evaluation one notes: “Where state assumes the role of a welfare establishment, there is an increasing tendency for the administration to enter more and more areas of activity, assume greater initiative and slowly develop a monopolistic attitude. This has been responsible for the undermining of that colossal constructive urge and daring initiative which marked the public life of pre-independence days, all that Nehru initiated in the first Parliament”. The answers to the most of questions that come to mind are not readily available. A series of issues seem to be

entangled. Objective debates need to be initiated.

III

There are two experiences which draw our attention. The message from each of these experiences can provide content for a fuller context for the debate.

Sometime back there was a news about a University in UK where the male and female students went on protest when they were denied to share the same hostel. This sent a series of shock waves, it made headline news. One of the prestigious Universities in this country had started with a similar arrangement. It had to be abandoned soon. Interestingly enough, very recently in another university, the authorities of the university felt it was sensible to locate one of the teaching departments in the same building in which the girls' hostel was located, and with the arrangement that both will share the same passage. In this connection what deserves attention is that (a) the authorities of the university had their own explanation to justify such an arrangement; (b) the faculty in the university, the learned Professors and their colleagues did not consider this as a subject for their concern. The authorities in that university appear to have tried to prove beyond doubt that in this age of Women's Lib, the male-female dichotomy needs to be shed, and locating a teaching department in the building having the women's hostel is a mundane issue.

The other experience is in a way more 'personal'. It relates to women in tribal societies. Here, it is doubtful if such women could be considered a disadvantaged section of population; in the first instance as a 'tribal' and following it as a 'female'. The evolving scenario of status of women in tribal societies presents another set of picture.

Tribal societies represented egalitarian values, there was no differentiation or stratification on basis of sex, class or other social identities. Tribal societies were open societies. With the introduction of education and the entry of the different elements of change that came along with planned development and its programmes, the tribal

societies have been drawn in a process of rapid and far reaching change. One of the most ready and prominent manifestation of this has been in the education among women in tribal societies, and all that has followed it. The sequence of experiences in brief have been somewhat as follows:

The rise of level of education in tribal societies has shown itself in more or less equal measures among females and the males. This has drawn the women in as much number towards new avenues of economic activity, specially urban based employment as it has drawn the males. Concurrent to this there have been three implications: (i) increasing contact with 'other' cultures by immigration as well as emmigration, (ii) a characteristic rise in the social and economic aspirations of the females in tribal societies, (iii) the achievements of the women in the new set up equalling the achievements made by men. The implications of this have been serious on the pattern of marriage among the educated tribal women. There has been a visible rise in the marriage by educated tribal girls outside their community.

With such trends of marriages becoming prominently visible, a series of political and social fallouts have emerged. In the political context this has been taken as a threat to the 'tribal identity', at the social level there are now subtle moves to discourage higher education among the girls. The summary of the experience seems to suggest that tribal societies consequent to the implications from education are tending to move from a liberal society to a conservative society now inhibiting the growth of education among their females.

From the analysis this far, and from the messages from the two experiences narrated above, I feel that we need to recall the message of Nehru, "the women should struggle hard for their rights", but at the same time let the women, and those who join them also not forget the message of Nehru — the travel has to be from conservatism and tradition to modernity, to liberalism, and not a contest of male rights as different from female rights. We need to appreciate the spirit, the ideology, rather than remain confined to discrete individual incidents. The orientation of the society has to change, actions will follow.