



# “MOTHER-WIFE” INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL LIFE OF JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

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*Abstract* : Jawaharlal Nehru was a multi-faceted personality and a man of exceptional character and wisdom. He played a remarkable role in leading the country to freedom which forms a glorious chapter in the history of the nation. As the first Prime Minister of independent India he played an outstanding role in the building of the nation and making of modern India. Behind every successful man there is a woman and, in this light, this paper attempts to examine the important and notable role played by Nehru's mother Swarup Rani and wife Kamala Nehru in shaping, moulding and influencing the political and national activities of Nehru which led to the emergence of Jawaharlal Nehru as a great freedom fighter, and a powerful leader and statesman not only of India but also of the world.

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

## INTRODUCTION

Jawaharlal Nehru, who was the first Prime Minister of the country after independence “was an extraordinary scholar, a great freedom fighter, a politician, a nation builder par excellence and a strong advocate of women rights.” The one and only son of the distinguished Motilal Nehru and Swarup Rani, Jawaharlal Nehru was born in plenty and brought up in opulence. It is quite fascinating to know that though Nehru belonged to a noble background, had a Western upbringing and education, and bred in affluence, who did not know the pangs of poverty ultimately chose to cast his lot with those who suffered from want and misery. This change in his outlook in life and whole mode of living was due to his involvement and participation in the Indian freedom struggle and his whole-hearted dedication for the cause of the nation. Incidentally, though Mahatma Gandhi's major role in influencing him to join the national movement was paramount, yet one cannot disregard the part played by women in the life of Nehru, and in this respect the role played by women family members particularly his mother Swarup Rani and wife Kamala Nehru has not received scholarly attention. Therefore, this article seeks to draw on the neglected aspect of women's part which is generally overlooked and thus make them not only visible in the life of Nehru but also examine the vital and significant role played by Nehru's mother Swarup Rani and his wife Kamala Nehru in acting as a guiding force “in moulding and influencing his political life and activities.”

## Mother-Wife Influence

As it is a well-known fact that mother plays a key role in the upbringing of a child and Swarup Rani had a predominant influence on Nehru when he was a young boy and he “grew up in the ambience of motherly indulgence.” The perception of Nehru about his mother is evident from his Autobiography wherein he remarked:

“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 indiscriminate love for me, I tried to dominate over her a little. I saw much more of her than I did of father” (Nehru, 2004, 8-9).

This shows that Nehru regarded his mother as a tower of strength and backbone and he relied and depended on her. Though Nehru had a scientific bent of mind yet the traditional and cultural values which

were instilled in him by his mother got deeply entrenched in his mind throughout his life. As B.N. Pandey (2011, 31) pointed out: “She (Swarup Rani) constituted for him an unbreakable link with the Indian culture and tradition which he could never entirely abandon.” During his childhood, Nehru “used to often 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” (Nehru 2004: 100). However, the stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata and the great Hindu books like the Bhagwad Gita and Upanishads which left a deep impression on his mind during his childhood later accounted for Nehru’s attraction to the ethical side of Gandhi’s movement for freedom. Though in the beginning, Swarup Rani disapproved of Nehru’s joining politics as she was possessive of her son and did not want her son to suffer the hardships which was inevitable if he plunged into the national movement, but eventually came to accept his national activities as is evident from the following lines:

“So says the mother of Jawahar  
Give up your life for the nation, my son,  
Then only will I be a proud mother,  
When one has taken the vow,  
Then give your life to the nation.  
Never worry about your happiness,  
Not worry about your old mother.” (Cited Bjorkert ,2006, 82)

The search for a suitable Kashmiri bride for Nehru by his father Motilal Nehru had already started when young Nehru was still studying in London. Motilal’s search for a ‘faultless’ “bride from 1906 for his only son did not reach fruition during the seven years” of Nehru’s stay in England. Long correspondences were exchanged between father and son on the subject of marriage. However, once Nehru returned to India in August 1912 the long correspondences on marriage ended and the search for bride also ended as Jawaharlal was to marry Kamala Kaul whom Motilal Nehru had finally selected. The marriage took place on the day of Vasant Panchami on 8 February 1916. Kamala Nehru eventually played an important role in Jawaharlal Nehru’s life. Kamala was only seventeen at the time of her marriage with Nehru and was hardly educated. “She came from a traditional and orthodox family background and was not placed socially like the Nehrus.” In fact, Motilal Nehru had taken up the charge of training Kamala before her marriage with Nehru. Nevertheless, “gradually a timid and undistinguished Kamala turned out to be a brave, spirited and politically active woman” who became a “great source of strength, inspiration and support” in Nehru’s political trajectory.

Incidentally, Jawaharlal Nehru’s vigorous political activities started extensively following his marriage and with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political arena. “What appealed to Nehru was Gandhi’s strength, his rock-like commitment to India’s freedom”, and in making “himself an effective instrument of political change in India.” Gandhi was “a man of action, of enormous restlessness and energy, with a will to power and a touch of ruthlessness” (Gopal, 2012, 40).

Therefore, Nehru was enthralled and captivated by Gandhi’s political leadership and hence Gandhi’s call for action against the British rule kindled tremendous “nationalist flame and spirit in Nehru who was also inspired to join the political struggle against the British rule.” Gandhi also played a dominant role in shaping Nehru’ political career and heroic future as he wanted to create a leader in Nehru fit to rule the minds of millions and lead them to their goal of self-rule after his exit from the world’s stage.

However, Motilal Nehru at first opposed Nehru joining the national movement as he dreaded the idea of his son languishing in a British jail. Consequently, disagreement and friction cropped up between them. “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” (Nehru, 2004, 100). Under such difficult circumstances, it was Kamala Nehru who as a supportive wife stood firmly as a rock by Nehru’s side and served to greatly influence him to actively participate in the freedom movement and support him in his political trajectory till her death. Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi, while pointing to the important role her mother played to support her father at the most crucial juncture of his political career stated that:

“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.” (Kalhan, 1973, 18)

Kamala continued to be the quiet but powerful influence throughout Nehru’s life. Apparently Kamala herself was strongly influenced by Gandhi’s principles and philosophy, perhaps increasingly more than her husband. According to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit: “She took Gandhi’s call for self-sacrifice seriously, encouraged Jawahar in his radicalism and urged him to change his way of life” (Pandit, 1979, 69). Therefore, coming under the strong influence of his wife, Nehru who used to living a easeful and opulent life, now led a spartan life devoid of all luxuries. This change in Nehru’s lifestyle appealed to Kamala, who herself adhered to simplicity and austerity. Thus, it can be said that Kamala’s support came at the moment when Nehru plunged into the politics of suffering which brought about marked changes in his political career, and her firm and unceasing support continued till her death on February 1936.

In 1920, the Non- Cooperation which was a mass movement was led by Gandhi, whom Nehru described as ‘a man of commanding personality who inspired devotion in Indian millions’. The Non-Cooperation offered to Nehru what he wanted that was “the goal of national freedom and the ending of the exploitation of the underdog (India)” and therefore became wholly absorbed and rapt in the movement (Nehru, 2004, 80-83). He was arrested along with his father on charges of anti-government activities on December 1921. While going to prison for the first time, Nehru in one of the messages said: “I go to jail with the greatest pleasure, and with full conviction that therein lies the achievement of our goal” (Pandey, 2011, 91).

Describing about the strain and sense of disquietude undergone by the members of the Nehru household and the strength of mind shown by Swarup Rani, Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, Jawaharlal Nehru’s sister wrote in her Autobiography:

“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.” (Thapar, 1993, 14)

In this way the strong and indomitable spirit of Nehru’s mother sustained her to face such a challenging situation and despite great domestic strain and stress in the family she bravely embraced her son’s valiant and bold participation in the political struggle. Both mother and wife always put on a brave smile whenever he went to jail. In this way during tough situation both his mother and wife displayed great fortitude and resilience which must have given Nehru the courage and tenacity to fight the mighty British rule with renewed vigour. Acknowledging his wife’s encouraging role in times of strain and difficulty he said: “How much I owed to my wife for her splendid behaviour since 1920. Proud and sensitive she was, she not only put up with my vagaries but brought me comfort and solace when I needed them most” (Nehru, 2004, 114).

After his marriage with Kamala, Nehru was deeply engrossed in the freedom struggle movement and he gave all his energy to that cause that he failed to give her the due comradeship which she needed from him. But as Nehru wrote in his Autobiography notwithstanding his preoccupation with the political activities: “what amazing patience and tolerance my wife had shown towards me” (Nehru, 2004, 83). Frequent incarceration made him to stay far from Kamala. However, it failed to wane Kamala’s spirit, but rather she desired to be her husband’s political companion and “she wanted to play her own part in the national struggle and not be merely a hanger-on and a shadow of her husband” (Nehru 2004: 30). Whenever Nehru was in prison, she kept herself actively involved in national activities by going to the villages on her own and make speeches. Revering the “nationalist mission of her husband more than her personal happiness, she never grieved nor grumbled at her difficulties” (Rai, 2018, 54). In this regard, an incident may be pointed out. In September 1934 Kamala’s health deteriorated and the government was willing to

release Nehru “if he gave assurance to refrain from political activity after his release.” He refused the political move proposed by the British government, though at that particular point in time Nehru’s turning up and his companionship would have certainly uplifted Kamala’s mind and spirit in the face of her indisposition. Nehru was also aware of the fact that Kamala herself would strongly object if he gave any “undertaking and if he did, it would have shocked her and harmed her” (Nehru, 2004, 586). Later on when Nehru was released for a short period to visit his wife, who was then in a very frail condition, with great vigour and strength whispered to her husband: “What is this about you giving assurance to Government? Do not give it?” (Ibid). This showed how Kamala despite her constant debilitation stood as “a pillar of strength and support to her husband” which further boosted and reinforced “the nationalist spirit in Nehru and made him realize his duty towards the cause for the nation first and asked him never to bow down for her sake” (Rai,2018, 55).

The moral strength, indomitable spirit and determination instilled in Nehru by Kamala, and her constant and profound support and encouragement must have had a remarkable, encouraging and optimistic impact on Nehru’s political life which propelled and influenced him to fight against the British power till the goal was achieved. Krishna Nehru Hutheesing underlining Kamala’s sanguine role in Nehru’s life 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” (Hutheesing, 1969, 73).

It may be said that Kamala’s active involvement for the country’s national cause regardless of her illness and her persistent and unwavering support to Nehru in his political trajectory gave him the moral strength to undauntedly and single-mindedly “pursue his national goals with whole-hearted devotion.” Had Kamala not stood steadfast and firm as a rock in Nehru’s life, perhaps it would have been difficult for Nehru to endure the hardships and difficulties which he encountered in the course of his fight for the country’s freedom movement and during his long years of incarceration. Nehru himself acknowledging the prominent part played by his wife in his political trajectory 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?” (Nehru, 2004, 586)

While Nehru was in prison, “he would often get the news of women’s active participation, including his mother, sisters and wife in the freedom movement.” This immensely pleased him and it served to inspire him to fight for his motherland. During the 1930s when Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience Movement engulfed the country, Nehru who was then in prison was greatly enthused to hear about his “aged mother and sisters 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” (Nehru, 2004, 225). Nehru’s joy knew no bounds when he got the news of Kamala’s arrest on January 1, 1932 and the bold statement which she made to the press where she remarked: “I am happy beyond measure and proud to follow in the footsteps of my husband. I hope the people will keep the flag flying” (Nehru , 2004, 253).Consequently, the vigorous participation of his mother, wife and sisters in the freedom movement perhaps serve to boost up his morale and further ignited the patriotic spirit in him and unyielding in his fight against the British colonial power till the attainment of country’s independence.

## CONCLUSION

It can therefore be inferred in the context of the above study that Nehru’s mother and wife played a very significant and notable role in guiding and influencing his political and national life. It is decidedly true that the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian national movement motivated and influenced Nehru to challenge the British rule for the cause of the nation. But his mother and wife who were strong-willed women stood as a strong pillar of support, strength and motivation and their vigorous participation in the freedom struggle movement undoubtedly acted as a persuasive and influential force “in shaping, guiding and influencing his national activities and contributed to the making of a great leader in Jawaharlal Nehru

who not only played a notable part in the freedom struggle against the British rule, but also steered the destiny of the newly born nation after independence as India's first Prime Minister.”

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