

THE CONVERSION OF THE NEHRU WOMEN
TO GANDHIAN FREEDOM - FIGHTING

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The web of circumstance that turned Anand Bhawan, "Abode of Happiness," the splendid villa of Motilal Nehru, into Swaraj Bhawan, "House of Freedom," epitomizes the history of the Independence Movement of India.¹ Three women of that household fought side by side with Jawaharlal, the only son, and Motilal himself to bring down the power of the British Government. Differing in earlier environments, ages, attitudes, and needs, they moved in opposing rhythms into the Freedom Movement. Hence they serve well as exemplars of thousands of faceless Indian women of various types, largely unchronicled, who helped to make independence a reality.

Among the Nehru women the earliest convert to Gandhian freedom-fighting was Kamala, the wife of Jawaharlal, the man who became first Prime Minister of India. Next came his sister Swarup, or Nan, who after her marriage became Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and eventually the first woman president of the General Assembly of the United Nations. The most reluctant of the trio to commit herself was Swarup Rani, the wife of Motilal and the mother of Jawaharlal and Nan. Some of the influences that played upon these women's lives were identical, while other inducements to freedom-fighting, Gandhian-style, were as diverse as their personalities.

The meeting of western and eastern cultures within the Nehru home at Allahabad gave to the Nehru children--Jawaharlal, Nan, and the youngest child, Krishna--an early awareness of two sharply divided worlds. Although Motilal and Swarup Rani were both Brahmans from Kashmir, Motilal, an affluent attorney, turned his face toward the West with the same intensity that his wife clung to the religious mores of her conservative Hindu upbringing. But Anand Bhawan was an essentially westernized establishment with swimming pools, tennis courts, stables of horses, and European foods--a fitting setting for Motilal, a handsome man with forceful personality, trenchant wit, and profound love of family.

Swarup Rani, a diminutive figure, married at fourteen and possessed of the unshaken loyalty of the Indian wife to her husband, gave sanction, but with unspoken reluctance, to the two ways of life co-existing under the palatial roofs of Anand Bhawan. Yet she found sanctuary in Hindu quarters with their own cuisine, shared with her sister, a woman widowed at sixteen and forced thereafter to wear white, the color of mourning, and to engage only in religious exercises and sacrificial service to others. Spending hours with the Nehru children, she imbued their minds with "the beautiful and terrible myths and legends"² of their native land. On the other hand, her imprisonment did not escape their notice.

Motilal Nehru, in spite of his Europeanization and professed skepticism of religious superstitions, forswore western ways in choosing a wife for his only son Jawaharlal. The ultimate choice, Kamala Kaul, a Kashmiri Brahman and daughter of a well-to-do businessman of Delhi, had been reared in an orthodox Hindu home, completely insulated from western influences. Moreover, she had had little formal education and spoke no English. Her seemingly robust health must have been

a factor in her selection since Swarup Rani had been a semi-invalid most of her married life.³

Shy and lacking self-assurance, Kamala was intimidated by the Nehru menage, as well as confused and uncomfortable in a place so different from her own orthodox home. Krishna Nehru noted, "The big dinners...on the long table with rows of wine glasses and strange food and most of all the loud voices of British guests made her feel lost and lonely."⁴ Kamala also had to endure the jibes of her sophisticated and meticulously educated sister-in-law, Nan, who spoke English without the trace of an accent and mirrored the dynamism and quick intelligence of her father Motilal. Yet in her memoirs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit recorded, "In those early days Kamala must have had many conflicts in her mind. . .surrounded by the family in what must have seemed a madhouse."⁵

In addition, Jawaharlal Nehru obviously lacked full awareness of Kamala's difficulty in adjusting to her new life. In his autobiography he wrote candidly of their relationship:

I was twenty-six at the time and she was about seventeen, a slip of a girl, utterly unsophisticated in the ways of the world...I hardly realized that this delicate, sensitive girl's mind was slowly unfolding like a flower and required gentle...tending. Our marriage almost coincided with new developments in politics...They were the Home Rule days, and soon after came Martial Law in the Punjab and Non-Cooperation, and more and more I was involved...I almost overlooked her and left her to her own resources...My affection for her...grew...She gave me strength, but she must have suffered and felt a little neglected.⁶

Yet life took a new meaning for Kamala after the arrival of their only child. Eagerly awaited by the grandparents, the baby was happily presumed to be a boy. But after the delivery Swarup Rani crossed the courtyard and announced to her husband that "it" was born. Blinded by the Hindu reverence for sons, she could not bring herself to announce the birth of a granddaughter. But Indira Nehru, the former Prime Minister of India, became the focal point of her mother's being. Kamala spent long hours closeted in her room with Indira beside her, attending to all the needs of her baby without assistance from the servants. As an adult Indira Gandhi spoke of her mother, "We were close to each other. I loved her deeply, and when I thought she was being wronged I fought for her and quarreled with people."⁷ After the birth of Indira, Kamala began to suffer from poor health, a condition that cast a shadow over Anand Bhawan since the malady turned out to be tuberculosis.

Forces shaping the mind of Nan Nehru were as richly variegated as Anand Bhawan itself, a fountainhead of influences flowing into the Freedom Movement. World War I Nan remembered principally for the wave of sympathy for the Irish which swept India. But visitors to Anand Bhawan, persons advocating the end of British colonialism in India, left indelible impressions. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, leader in the Indian National Congress Party, gave her an early lesson in patriotism. This man who passed the torch to Mahatma Gandhi asked Nan, "Do you wear swadeshi cloth?" She told him that

her dress came from England. Smiling, he replied, "Nothing can be so pretty as the things we make in this country."⁸ Sarojini Naidu, poet, political leader, and close friend of the Nehrus, became Nan's teen-age idol.⁹ Annie Besant, English theosophist, activist in Indian protest politics, and founder of the Home Rule League, was another female who fired her imagination. Nan strove to emulate Besant's power of speech and recalled her words: "Let India remember what she was and what she may be--then shall the sun rise once more in the east and fill the western lands with light."¹⁰

A formative influence beyond measure on the thinking of Nan Nehru was her relationship with her brother, for whom she felt a devotion that in her own words amounted almost to worship. After Jawaharlal returned from England, following seven years as a student at Harrow, Cambridge, and the Inner Temple, he took a particular interest in Nan--discussing public issues, urging her to write essays, and reading poetry with her. A game they played began with the question, "If there were dreams to sell, what would you buy?" Their answers often related to the kind of India both of them wanted. Later, as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, she stated, "I have a mind of my own....But gradually I found myself accepting Bhai's views without any questioning."¹¹ But evidence shows that Nan Nehru traveled her own intellectual journey toward her eventual conversion to Gandhianism.

Nevertheless, Jawaharlal was the pivot in the conversion of all the Nehrus into freedom-fighters. After 1916, changes, subtle and then pronounced, began to take place in his thinking. As he gradually moved toward the cause that became his *raison d'être*, the cornerstone of his life, the dilettantism he had brought home from England and the ennui he was experiencing in practicing law began to disappear. Historian Dorothy Norman stated that although the Gandhian era of Congress did not actually begin until 1919 and 1920, the Mahatma "so moved and overwhelmed Jawaharlal after their initial encounter that his entire life was changed."¹² Nehru himself gave the following impressions:

My first meeting with Gandhiji was about the time of the Lucknow Congress during Christmas, 1916....I was simply bowled over...straight off....[He] was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths, like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes, like a whirlwind that upset many things but most of all the working of people's minds. He did not descend from the top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to...their appalling condition. Get off the backs of these peasants and workers, he told us, all of you who live by their exploitation; get rid of the system that produced this poverty and misery.¹³

Political developments themselves, following a pattern of British action and Indian reaction, helped to pull the Nehrus into the vortex. For example, after World War I the expectations of the Indian people for more participation in

government were dashed by the proposed Rowlatt bills. British authorities, fearing terrorism, had made a careful survey of revolutionary movements in India and then proposed these measures to combat subversion. Judges were to be given the power to try political cases without juries and provincial governments granted the right to intern suspects without trials.¹⁴ The Rowlatt Acts, passed in time but never actually implemented, thus "summarily disposed of civil rights of convicted and suspected rebels."¹⁵

As a protest against the Rowlatt bills, Gandhi, now a rising star in India, organized the Satyagraha Sabha, with its members pledged to court jail sentences by flouting the terms of these measures. After the Viceroy, the head of the British Indian Government, turned a deaf ear to pleas for revocation, Gandhi called for a nationwide one-day economic boycott. On April 6, 1919, this successful hartal paralyzed business on every level throughout India. Exactly one week later, on April 13, a day long commemorated in India as "Black Friday," British General Reginald Dyer ordered the tragic massacre of Jallianwala Bagh at the city of Amritsar in the Punjab, an area of Northwestern India where animosity to British repression ran particularly high.

The pace of political developments impacted on the lives of the Nehrus. Domestic peace at Anand Bhawan was rent by the implications of the Satyagraha Sabha. Jawaharlal recalled that he was "afire with enthusiasm and wanted to join immediately." But his father was dead set against it. What moved Motilal was the personal issue, for without question Jawaharlal was the focal point of Nehru pride. "It seemed preposterous that I should go to prison," he commented. "The trek...had not then begun, and the idea was...repulsive...I wanted to lessen his suffering...but I had no doubt in my mind that I had to go the way of Satyagraha."¹⁶ Swarup Rani was also miserable, sensing that "the person she loved most, her son, was on the verge of some action she would have appreciated in a mythological figure but not in one on whom her hopes of happiness on earth and her place in heaven depended."¹⁷ The tension built up as Jawaharlal spent more and more time in the villages, reduced his personal needs, and cut down on his diet. His steel bowl of bread and milk stood starkly among the silver and crystal used by other members of the family.

The Amritsar massacre was the catalyst that led to the transformation of Anand Bhawan into Swaraaj Bhawan, a bastion of freedom-fighters--men and women--working shoulder to shoulder for the independence of India from Great Britain. This infamy took place in Jallianwala Bagh, where General Dyer ordered British troops under his command to open fire on a massed crowd of Indians, trapped within the walled area, and to continue the barrage until the ammunition ran out. Three hundred and seventy-nine persons were killed and over twelve hundred wounded. Dyer was applauded by the House of Lords in London and exonerated by the Hunter Committee of Inquiry.¹⁸

After an isolated act of retaliation--the killing of an Englishwoman who was a missionary--Indians passing the spot of her murder were ordered at gunpoint to lie down on the ground and crawl like snakes. Norman assessed that the Amritsar massacre marked a turning point in Indo-British relations, revealing "in shattering manner that the British who appeared before the Hunter Commission looked upon Indians as an

inferior race."¹⁹ Percival Spear observed that Dyer thought he was saving the Punjab for Britain. But in fact he nearly lost India not only to Britain but to the West.²⁰

The reactions of the Nehrus to events in the Punjab were intensified by Jawaharlal's experience on a train trip from Amritsar, where he had taken depositions and assisted in relief work. From an upper berth he overheard exchanges among some British officers, one of whom was Dyer himself. The "hero of Amritsar," in loud and abrasive tones, informed his companions that although the whole town had been at his mercy and he had felt like reducing the rebellious city to ashes, he took pity and refrained. Jawaharlal stated, "I was greatly shocked to hear this conversation and to observe his callous manner." Then he added that Dyer "descended at Delhi station in pajamas with bright pink stripes and a dressing gown."²¹

Jawaharlal Nehru had now come full circle from the attitude he had held upon his homecoming from England. "I returned to India as much prejudiced in favor of England and the English as it was possible for an Indian to be."²² But the growing influence of Gandhi upon his life and the effects of Jallianwala Bagh upon his mind caused him to take the irrevocable step; he ended his law practice and without reservation threw himself full-time into the National Movement.²³ And where Jawaharlal traveled, the Nehru women were not far behind.

Despite the tributary forces, the sine qua non that revolutionized the lives of the Nehru women was the charisma of Mahatma Gandhi. Nan caught her first glimpse of him at the Lucknow Congress in 1916, "an incongruous figure in...large Kathiawar turban and shawls....I had read and heard a great deal about him, much of which I could not understand," she commented.²⁴ Three years later, in 1919, he spoke at a public meeting in Allahabad. "Practically the whole town turned out...He spoke haltingly in Hindi but his message came over crystal clear."²⁵ Here he took up an offering for the families of those who would be arrested in offering satyagraha. Vijaya Pandit recalled, "Like others, I had been carried away by Gandhiji's talk, and...I pulled off the gold bangles I was wearing and placed them in the bag....For the Nehrus nothing was ever the same again."²⁶

The opportunity for the initial face-to-face encounter between Gandhi and the Nehru women came in November, 1920, when he visited Anand Bhawan, at the invitation of Motilal, to discuss satyagraha with the family. Nan later observed that "with his naked body and his big ears...Gandhiji was...a strange sight."²⁷ Krishna recorded in her memoirs, "I was very young and could not...grasp all he stood for...I had expected... someone tall and strong with flashing eyes." She added, "Instead I saw a thin, almost starved-looking man, a little bent, wearing a loin-cloth...meek-looking and very gentle. I was most disappointed." At the time she asked herself, "Was this...man...going to do great deeds...and free [India] from foreign domination?"²⁸ Nan noted that although Gandhi was economical with words, he expressed himself clearly, avoiding involved sentences and complex ideas. This fact helped to explain how he "could reach the heart even when the brain was rejecting some of his arguments."²⁹

A direct outgrowth of Gandhi's sojourn at Anand Bhawan was Nan Nehru's visit to Gandhi's headquarters at Sabarmati Ashram near Ahmadabad. As far as she could remember, no one

asked her if she wanted to go. But "the idea of the simple life was about to begin in India...and it was obvious that there would be...changes in our life-style....I was the pampered daughter and needed discipline." Her first reaction to the ashram was revulsion. "My heart sank when I first saw the place. Everything was so utterly drab and so unpleasing to the eye. I wondered how long I could survive."³⁰ Life was austere beyond belief with each day beginning at four o'clock with prayers, followed by chores--washing clothes in the river, spinning and weaving, working in the dairy, studying and helping to edit the newspaper Young India.

Yet during these weeks Nan grew close to Gandhi. At night on the veranda he discussed with her what Hindu culture meant, what was happening to India, and what changes were due to come. The fact that she knew the Ramayana and had read the Gita seemed to relieve him. By the end of her stay she had lost her fear of Gandhi and had come to terms with ashram life, "not accepting it but beginning to appreciate the underlying philosophy on which it was based."³¹ Vijaya Pandit stated in her memoirs that although arguments took place between the two of them over the years, Gandhiji always appreciated her frankness. "When I was in sorrow or distress his love seemed to envelope me and give me strength. I never had the slightest problem in joking with him for he had a great sense of humor."³²

A dramatic turn of events affecting the history of the Freedom Movement itself was the conversion of Motilal Nehru to Gandhianism, a step he took in September, 1920, following the adjournment of the Calcutta Congress. Yet before he made the decisive break with the past, he proved the worthiness of his discipleship. Although he was the only front-rank leader of Congress to do so, he courageously voted for the resolution Gandhi was pushing to make Non-Cooperation an official policy of Congress. Non-Cooperation meant the boycotting of titles, honorary offices, official functions, British-owned and -aided schools and colleges, law courts, legislatures, and above all, foreign goods. The resolution carried by only seven votes since the fear of another Jallianwalla Bagh was by no means dead in the minds of the delegates.³³

A demonstration of the implications of freedom-fighting, Gandhian-style, began to take place under the sprawling roofs of Anand Bhawan. Motilal immediately resigned his membership on the Council of the United Provinces and in time completed the process of terminating his law practice. He withdrew his daughter Krishna, to her sorrow, from the local school and disposed of horses, carriages, crystal, china, and a cellar of wine. Household arrangements underwent a metamorphosis with two cuisines reduced to one, an army of servants decreased in size, and foreign-made garments put to the torch in public bonfires.³⁴

Indeed, great bonfires took place in every town in India. Vijaya Pandit noted that at the time they were a shock to her system, but that the Nehru family, as in other matters, took the lead "with only Mother protesting and I silently abetting her."³⁵ Cupboards, closets, and storerooms were ransacked to fill the trucks that went from Anand Bhawan. Later Vijaya was able to rationalize that the importance of this action, as in the wearing of khadi, or Indian homespun, was that it dramatized the break with the past. Indira Gandhi's earliest memory was that of an evening when her indulgent grandfather

Motilal allowed her to stay up and watch a bonfire. She recalled the pleasure of playing hide-and-seek among stacks of velvets, satins, silks, and chiffons.³⁶

Perhaps the differing reactions of the Nehrus to the bonfires indicated the distance each had traveled at this point toward Gandhianism. Allegedly the finality of Motilal's fateful step in no way diminished his zest for life.³⁷ Swarup Rani's vocal protests of the bonfires showed that she was far from enthusiastic at the continuing disruptions of family life and at the intrusion of Spartanism into their more than comfortable existence. Nan, with intellect and emotions in conflict, was raising for herself serious questions regarding certain Gandhian principles she had by no means fully embraced. A statement Indira Gandhi made to a women's seminar in 1965 shows that Kamala was at Motilal's side, aiding and abetting the transformation of Anand Bhawan:

Many people know that part which was played by my grandfather and 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 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.³⁸

Despite heavy political involvements and tragic events, Anand Bhawan was not changed into a glum and solemn place, according to Krishna Nehru Hutheesing. The European-styled dinners came to an end, but the house was more crowded than ever with guests. But instead of being "English officials and maharajas," they were intellectuals and political leaders of all classes, dressed in khadi, and "sparkling with ideas and the intensity of their idealism."³⁹ The biographer of Motilal Nehru gave a less roseate view:

From the select club of the elite of Allahabad, Anand Bhawan turned into a caravanserai frequented by humble-looking folk in homespun--party members sojourning in or passing through Allahabad. With political workers flitting in and out at odd hours, the household was in chaos--an ordeal for the women of the family....Thanks to the ascetic streak which lies just beneath the surface in Hindu womanhood, Swarup Rani, Kamala, and the girls quickly adapted themselves to the changes. The process was helped by the fact that the author was a holy man.⁴⁰

Highly significant was the fact that the forging of the link between Anand Bhawan and Sabarmati Ashram exercised a powerful influence on the course of the Indian Independence Movement. During the years ahead, Gandhi, on the other hand, provided emotional sustenance to the Nehrus in the tragedies they suffered as part of the costs they paid as freedom-fighters.

Circumstances surrounding the wedding plans of Nan Nehru

further demonstrated that the Gandhian credo had not yet made a convert of Swarup Rani. In November, 1920, Nan's engagement to Ranjit Pandit was announced. A young attorney, Pandit was a junior partner in a prominent British law firm of Calcutta, as well as a Sanskrit scholar, linguist, and musician. His first present to Nan he professed to be "the most precious thing" he owned, a small, silk-bound copy of the Gita, always carried by his deceased father and now almost in tatters. Nan related, "When I showed it to my mother she was horrified. It seemed quite mad to her that a young man...should give his fiancée the Gita with its message of renunciation."⁴¹ Yet the Gita was a valid portent of the course of their married life. Prison sentences, suffered by both husband and wife, would separate them. Ranjit Pandit's gift to posterity, in addition to three daughters, would be Sanskrit translations made in various jails, where the conditions of imprisonment eventually wrecked his health and brought on an early death.

The genius of Gandhi sprang in part from his ability to concern himself with all matters, both great and small. Although approving the approaching marriage, he frowned on the bride's wearing a pink cotton sari for the ceremony, according to Kashmiri custom, and leaving for her husband's home in a gold-embroidered sari enhanced by the traditional gift of jewelry from the bride's parents. Gandhi insisted that khadi must be worn and without jewelry. Vijaya stated, "Mother could not have been more angry. She had, so far, not accepted Gandhiji as a friend, could not understand his politics, and certainly did not think he had the right to advise the family on personal matters."⁴² In time the argument between Anand Bhawan and Sabarmati Ashram ended in compromise. Kashturbai, the wife of Gandhi, personally wove a swatch of khadi sufficiently wide to be made into a wedding sari and fine-textured enough to be dyed pink. Instead of jewelry Nan wore ornaments made of flowers. At the wedding Ranjit Pandit's family, according to custom, gave the bride a new name; Nan now became Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit.⁴³

But the pending issue was whether Vijaya and Ranjit Pandit, as husband and wife, would conform to Gandhian philosophy and become freedom-fighters. After spending weeks in Calcutta, heavily involved in social activities in their honor, they traveled to Rajkot, Ranjit's home in Gujarat. Here they rode horseback over the open countryside and read together Sanskrit classics--poetry, drama, and history. Vijaya commented, "I went through all the winding paths of India's evolution, and, as Ranjit unveiled and interpreted the richness of our cultural heritage, for the first time I became aware of myself as an Indian." Then she added, "The national movement, which had seemed remote until that time, became a compelling force."⁴⁴ But Ranjit questioned his ability to conform to the Gandhian principle of non-violence in thought as well as deed. Yet the real hurdle was the mandate that lawyers boycott British Indian courts, a decree that spelled the doom of his legal career. As the vacation came to a close, they cast their lot with Gandhi.

As a remedy for the emptiness and frustration Ranjit Pandit began to suffer in the absence of intellectual challenges, Gandhi sent the young couple to Rajkot to head up one of his programs, aimed at uprooting untouchability. Starting village centers for spinning and weaving, arranging public sales, establishing schools for illiterates, and

working to create social awareness were good discipline but often dull work. Yet as their knowledge of the Indian people and their insight into problems grew, the Pandit home became a center for the Congress Constructive Program, attracting persons otherwise indifferent to the cause of independence. After a year they returned to Anand Bhawan for the birth of their first child. Although Motilal had arranged for a room to be outfitted with every type of equipment for a safe delivery, Vijaya almost died. Due to political tensions, the Civil Surgeon, the best doctor in Allahabad, could not be summoned.⁴⁵

The conversion of Swarup Rani followed a more circuitous route than those of Kamala and Vijaya. Swarup Rani in particular found the new world of Anand Bhawan puzzling and difficult. For example, on one occasion a traveler, a hefty villager, clad only in a loin cloth and carrying a rough blanket, appeared, wanting food and lodging. After she learned that he was a former night watchman at Anand Bhawan, "her remarks...were full of un-Gandhian sentiments and sharp disapproval....It took her some years to accept Gandhiji's egalitarian society."⁴⁶

Yet Swarup Rani must have been drawn to Gandhi out of her own need for moral support in the arrest of both Motilal and Jawaharlal in December, 1921. The grounds were a threatened hartal, or boycott, of the impending visit of the Prince of Wales. Motilal provided further aggravation by refusing the use of Anand Bhawan as Allahabad headquarters for the royal guest.⁴⁷ The Nehrus were sentenced to six months in jail, incarcerated at Lucknow, and fined one thousand rupees. Since rules of the nationalist movement forbade payment of fines in money, policemen came to Anand Bhawan and carted away van loads of carpets, furniture, and objets d'art in lieu of the paltry sum of money.

Here again the Nehru women manifested differing reactions. Vijaya stated, "Mother could not reconcile herself to this invasion of her home...and was seething with anger." For Vijaya herself it was a bitter experience. "Kamala, on the contrary, was quite serene and kept trying to persuade Mother that we must let the men...deal with the situation."⁴⁸ Without doubt the intent of the confiscation was to humiliate and destroy the prestige of the Nehrus. Motilal and Jawaharlal were among the twenty-five thousand Indians arrested as a precautionary measure during the visit of the Prince of Wales to India.⁴⁹

Kamala Nehru left no memoirs as did Jawaharlal, Vijaya, and Krishna. A composite drawing suggests that she led the vanguard of the Nehru women in converting more quickly and with fewer qualms and in laboring under greater handicaps. Krishna Hutheesing declared that after "a thin, half-starved-looking man" came into their lives, Kamala gave up luxuries and became one of Gandhi's most devoted followers. After Jawaharlal dedicated his life to India, Kamala did not hesitate to fall in beside her husband. Krishna added, "If ever India had a super-soldier with thoughts only for the country and none for self, with an energy that never flagged and a courage the like of which one rarely comes across, that soldier was Kamala."⁵⁰

Kamala indeed fought a running battle with tuberculosis, going twice to Switzerland and often to the hills of India for cures that did not materialize. She was also a super-soldier

in working for the independence of India and for women's rights, movements that began to accelerate after the awakening of women in 1930. As president of the Allahabad Congress Committee, she worked at a furious pace, leading drills at five o'clock in the morning and continuing well into the day with picketing of British cloth shops, liquor stores, and government schools. In 1931 she suffered arrest and a brief internment in jail.

Historians agree with family accounts that Kamala was also a feminist par excellence. Krishna Hutheesing noted that Kamala often "landed herself in trouble with the menfolk, because . . . their wives had been listening to Kamalaji and imbibing her views."⁵¹ Historian Sarvepalli Gopal stated that Kamala, "a serious, deeply moral, intense figure," was a champion of women's liberation long before it became a slogan and movement.⁵² The cause of women's education she espoused with burning zeal, regarding it as a key to emancipation. Gopal speculated that if she had not died in Switzerland in 1936, she might well have had, as the wife of the first Prime Minister of independent India, a career akin to that of Eleanor Roosevelt. He added, "If a successful struggle for self-awareness and self-emancipation is the true test of greatness, then Kamala ranks among the greater of the Nehrus."⁵³

Before espousing full faith in Gandhi and what he was doing to bring freedom to India, Swarup Rani held back with a tenacity as sturdy as her character. Yet the symbolism of her actions in February, 1931, conveyed where her heart lay. Although Indian women did not ordinarily attend funerals, she insisted on being present at the service for her husband Motilal. After walking three times around the pyre, she went up to Gandhi, who was officiating, and took her place by his side. "Participation in the national struggle had aged her and she looked frail, but she was silent...the embodiment of...the courage of the Indian woman through the ages."⁵⁴ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit attested, in a retrospective article, that as time passed her mother grew closer and closer to Gandhi, whose approach to life she began to find meaningful once she overcame her fear. "Now she did not have to apologize for her many fasts, her visits to the temple or her faith in the stars." She could build the new life on the firm foundation of Hindu culture and "this she did, making our home a far better place than the old one with its conflicting loyalties."⁵⁵

The mystique of Gandhi revolutionized the thinking and galvanized the actions of the powerful Nehru family whose members in turn pioneered for independence. Moreover, the Nehru women with their divergencies stand tall as prototypes of thousands of nameless Indian women, largely ignored by historians, who after 1930 labored to free India from colonialism.

Among the Nehrus, Nan was the least typical of the average Indian woman, being that rarity -- a spoiled Hindu daughter -- and emerging from a milieu resplendent with opportunity. Possessed of inherent talents honed to perfection through formal education and exposure to contrasting ways of life, she, like a female Moses, was seemingly being prepared for a mission. Beset with inner conflict, she sensed that her emotions were pushing her toward Gandhi while her mind was pulling back, rationalizing that

irrational, simplistic methods, such as non-cooperation, could hardly bring down the mighty British Government. Yet her awakening to the realization of being an Indian, an heir to a unique cultural heritage, created a unity of purpose. As a Gandhian freedom-fighter within India, before independence, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit laid the foundation for a distinguished career on the international level. After independence she attained fame as the Indian ambassador to Moscow and Washington, and in particular as the first woman president of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Kamala Nehru typified the average Indian woman more accurately than the other females of the Nehru household. A sense of emptiness rather than fullness of life must have been the mainspring in her impulse toward ready discipleship. As a young bride, she found herself trapped within an environment that brought sharp awareness of the deficiencies of her formal education and left her feeling emotionally deprived. Yet saturated to the core with the doctrines of orthodox Hinduism, she quickly comprehended and accepted the asceticism of the Gandhian credo, solidly grounded in Hinduism, and apparently worked off her frustration in causes larger than her own inhibitions. Simultaneously energizing and burning out her frail physique, as a zealous feminist and freedom-fighter, she developed rare grace.

Swarup Rani exemplified the complacent older Indian woman for whom the highest desideratum was changelessness. Adaptability to Gandhianism was far more difficult for her than for Kamala and Vijaya Pandit. Despite the dichotomy of western and eastern quarters within Anand Bhawan, it was for Swarup Rani a genuine abode of happiness. Except for the first fourteen years of her life, the focal point of her existence had been her husband and her children. But with the advent of Gandhi, not only the security but the actual physical safety of the Nehrus was threatened. Although the eventual costs, sacrifices, and even tragedies must have exceeded her worst fears, Swarup Rani in time fell in step with other Gandhian freedom-fighters. On one memorable occasion, violating tradition, particularly for a widow, she stood, a diminutive figure, on the platform before a mammoth outdoor gathering of Indians and used the prestige of the Nehru name to undergird her defiant message to British authorities.

As pioneer female freedom-fighters, the Nehru women hewed a path through the forest of Indian traditionalism, leading the way to some degree of freedom for women themselves and to complete liberation of their native land. The characters of these three females cast long shadows into the future, helping to determine that India has probably elevated more women to high office than any other government in the world.

NOTES

¹Indira Gandhi, "The Story of Swaraj Bhawan," in L.R. Nair, ed., Motilal Nehru, Birth Centenary Souvenir (Delhi: Motilal Nehru Centenary Committee, 1961), pp. 73-77.

²Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, We Nehrus (New York: Holt Rinehart, and Winston, 1967), p. 27.

³Sarvepalli Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, a Biography, vol. 1: 1889-1947 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 31; Hutheesing, We Nehrus, p. 9.

⁴Hutheesing, We Nehrus, p. 9.

⁵Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, The Scope of Happiness (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1979), p. 56.

⁶Jawaharlal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, An Autobiography (London: The Bodley Head, 1958), pp. 561-562.

⁷Zareer Masani, Indira Gandhi, A Biography (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), p. 8.

⁸Pandit, Scope, p. 61.

⁹Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, So I Became a Minister (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1939), pp. 89-91.

¹⁰Pandit, Scope, p. 21.

¹¹Ibid., p. 51.

¹²Dorothy Norman, Nehru, The First Sixty Years, Presenting in his own words the development of the political thought of Jawaharlal Nehru and the background against which it evolved, vol. 1: 1889-1947 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.41-42.

¹³Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁴Percival Spear, India (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 345.

¹⁵Erik H. Erikson, Gandhi's Truth, On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969), p. 383.

¹⁶Norman, Nehru, 1: 49-50.

¹⁷Pandit, Scope, p. 69.

¹⁸R.C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1963): 3:27.

¹⁹Norman, Nehru, 1: 52.

²⁰Spear, India, p. 346.

²¹Nehru, Autobiography, pp. 43-44; Gopal, Nehru, 1: 35-36.

²²Gopal, Nehru, 1: 52.

²³Norman, Nehru, 1: 52.

²⁴Pandit, Scope, p. 64.

²⁵Ibid., p. 68.

²⁶Ibid.

- ²⁷Ibid., p. 64.
- ²⁸Krishna Hutheesing, With No Regrets, Krishna Hutheesing's Autobiography (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 17.
- ²⁹Pandit, Scope, p. 42.
- ³⁰Ibid., p. 65.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 66.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³B.B. Nanda, Motilal Nehru (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1964), p. 115.
- ³⁴Ibid., pp. 115-116.
- ³⁵Pandit, Scope, pp. 83-84.
- ³⁶Masani, Indira, p. 12.
- ³⁷Nanda, Motilal, p. 116.
- ³⁸Mansani, Indira, pp. 11-12.
- ³⁹Hutheesing, We Nehrus, p. 49.
- ⁴⁰Nanda, Motilal, p. 116.
- ⁴¹Pandit, Scope, pp. 71-72.
- ⁴²Ibid., pp. 72-73.
- ⁴³Ibid., p. 74.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., p. 78.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., p. 86.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., p. 83.
- ⁴⁷Hutheesing, We Nehrus, pp. 51-52.
- ⁴⁸Pandit, Scope, p. 81.
- ⁴⁹Majumdar, Freedom Movement, 3: 136-137.
- ⁵⁰Hutheesing, With No Regrets, p. 115.
- ⁵¹Ibid., p. 117.
- ⁵²Gopal, Nehru, 1: 196.
- ⁵³Ibid.
- ⁵⁴Pandit, Scope, p. 100.
- ⁵⁵Vijayalakshmi Pandit, "Swarup Rani Nehru," in Nair, Motilal Nehru, p. 98.