



Women in Development: A *Nehruvian* Model

Ruchi Ramesh

Department of Higher Education, Government of Himachal Pradesh, India

Email: rameshruchi_06@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

Jawaharlal Nehru occupies a pivotal position in the history of women's emancipation in modern India. His engagement with the question of women's equality extended from constitutional guarantees and symbolic recognition during the freedom struggle to concrete socio-legal reforms in the post-independence period, most notably through the codification of Hindu personal laws. This paper critically examines Nehru's vision of women's rights within the broader framework of national development, democratic governance, and social transformation. Drawing upon historical documents, speeches, autobiographical writings, legislative debates, and secondary scholarship—including analyses from the recent studies argues that Nehru's approach to women's emancipation was fundamentally liberal and state-centric. While constitutional symbolism played a crucial role in legitimizing gender equality, the actual implementation of reforms revealed the deep resistance of patriarchal social structures, compounded by intersections of caste, class, and religion. The paper further analyses women's participation in the freedom struggle, their growing political consciousness, and their role in planning and economic citizenship. Finally, it reflects on the contemporary relevance of Nehru's ideas in ongoing debates on gender justice and personal laws in India, including recent developments in the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in states like Uttarakhand.

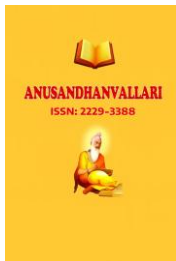
Keywords: Jawaharlal Nehru; women's rights; Hindu Code Bill; liberal feminism; freedom struggle; constitutional equality; state feminism; intersectionality; Uniform Civil Code

1. Introduction

The status of women has been a central concern in the discourse on social reform and nation-building in India. From the colonial period to the post-independence era, debates on women's rights have intersected with questions of tradition, religion, democracy, and modernity. Among the leaders of the Indian national movement, Jawaharlal Nehru stands out for his sustained and explicit engagement with women's emancipation as an essential dimension of national progress. Unlike reformers who viewed women's issues as peripheral or symbolic, Nehru consistently argued that the liberation of women was integral to political freedom, economic development, and social justice.

Nehru's vision of women's equality was shaped by his exposure to international ideas, socialist thought, and the lived realities of Indian society. He firmly believed that national development could not be reduced to industrial growth or political sovereignty alone. As he repeatedly emphasized, genuine progress required transformation on the social plane, particularly in dismantling structures of gender inequality.

“We talk about Five Year Plans, of economic progress, industrialization, political freedom and all that. They are all highly important. But I have no doubt in my mind that the real progress of the country means progress not only on the political plane, not only on the economic plane, but also on the social plane. They have to be integrated all these, when the great nation goes forward.” (Nehru, 1936)



This belief found expression in his support for women's participation in the freedom struggle, the enshrinement of equal rights in the Fundamental Rights resolution of 1931, and the post-independence effort to reform Hindu personal laws.

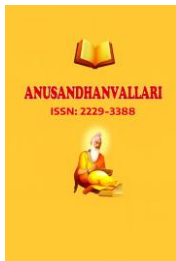
Yet, Nehru's reformist agenda was neither linear nor uncontested. While constitutional guarantees of equality were adopted with relative ease, attempts to translate these principles into concrete legal reforms encountered fierce opposition from orthodox, religious, and conservative sections of society. The Hindu Code Bill (HCB) controversy exposed the limits of nationalist consensus on gender justice and revealed the persistence of patriarchal norms beneath the veneer of constitutional modernity. Recent scholarship highlights that while Nehru championed these reforms, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in drafting and advocating for the HCB, resigning from Nehru's cabinet in 1951 due to delays and opposition within Congress itself. This collaboration and tension underscore the complex dynamics of post-independence reforms.

This paper examines engagement of Nehru with equality of women across three interconnected domains: political participation during the freedom struggle, constitutional symbolism, and socio-legal reform in independent India. It seeks to answer key questions about how Nehru conceptualized equality of women within the framework of national development, what role participation of women in the freedom struggle played in shaping feminist consciousness, why constitutional equality preceded social acceptance and legal implementation, and what the contemporary relevance of Nehru's approach to rights of women might be. By addressing these questions, the paper argues that Nehru institutionalized gender equality as a legitimate national concern while simultaneously revealing the structural constraints of reform from above in a deeply patriarchal society. To strengthen this analysis, the study incorporates intersectional perspectives, acknowledging how caste and class influenced the efficacy of these reforms, and updates the discussion with recent developments in gender justice debates.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a historical and qualitative research methodology, based on textual analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, letters, autobiographical writings (The Discovery of India, An Autobiography), Congress resolutions, legislative debates, and reports of committees such as the Hindu Code Committee and the National Planning Committee. Secondary sources include scholarly works on movements of women, Indian nationalism, feminist theory, and legal reform, supplemented by recent publications on the HCB's legacy and UCC debates. The analysis is informed by liberal feminist theory, which emphasizes legal equality, individual rights, and institutional reform as pathways to women's emancipation. Nehru's insistence on constitutional guarantees and codified laws aligns closely with this tradition. At the same time, the paper draws upon the concept of state feminism, which highlights the role of the modern state in promoting gender justice through policy and legislation. Reliance of Nehru on the postcolonial state as the primary agent of reform situates his approach within this framework.

To explain resistance to reform, the study also draws on theories of patriarchy, particularly the distinction between private and public patriarchy. While constitutional reforms addressed public inequality, private patriarchy embedded in family, religion, and custom continued to shape women lived realities. This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced assessment of both the achievements and limitations of Nehru's vision. Additionally, intersectional feminist critiques are integrated to examine how Nehru's reforms intersected with caste and class hierarchies, often overlooking the compounded oppressions faced by Dalit and lower-caste women. This addition addresses gaps in traditional liberal frameworks, drawing from Dalit feminist thought that argues caste and gender are interlocking systems.



3. Vision of Nehru for Women and Social Progress

Understanding of Nehru for women's emancipation was inseparable from his conception of social progress. He consistently rejected the idea that political independence or economic planning alone could transform Indian society. For him, social reform especially gender equality was a precondition for meaningful national development. He argued that a society that oppressed half its population could not aspire to genuine freedom or democracy.

Nehru was uncompromising in his critique of male dominance in Indian society. He observed that Indian civilization, customs, and laws had been shaped overwhelmingly by men who had ensured their own superiority while relegating women to subordinate positions.

"Our civilization, our customs, our laws, have all been made by men and he has taken good care to keep himself in a superior position and to treat woman as a chattel and a plaything to be exploited for his own advantage and amusement." (Nehru, 1936)

At the same time, Nehru was acutely aware of the complexities involved in reforming social institutions deeply intertwined with religion and tradition. Marriage, inheritance, and divorce were not merely legal matters but were embedded in personal laws considered sacred by various communities.

"Inheritance, marriage, divorce are all supposed to be parts of the personal law of various communities and this personal law is supposed to be part of religion. It is obvious that no change can be imposed from the top." (Nehru, 1936),

Nehru therefore rejected coercive reform imposed from above, advocating instead a combination of legal change, public education, and social persuasion.

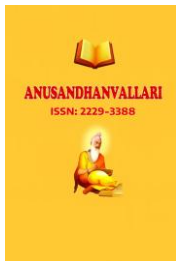
Crucially, Nehru emphasized women's agency in their own liberation. He categorically stated that women would not attain equality through the generosity of men, but through struggle and assertion.

"No people, no group, no community, no country has ever got rid of its disabilities by the generosity of the oppressor... the women of India will not attain their full rights by the mere generosity of the men of India. They will have to fight for them and force their will on the men folk before they can succeed." (Nehru, 1936) This recognition of women as political actors rather than passive beneficiaries distinguishes Nehru's feminism from paternalistic reformism. However, critiques note that this vision was limited by its upper-class, upper-caste lens, often failing to address how caste-based exclusions amplified gender inequalities.

4. Women in the Freedom Struggle

The participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle marked a transformative moment in the history of gender relations. While women had participated in earlier movements such as the agitation against the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Non-Cooperation Movement of the 1920s, their involvement remained limited in scale. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930, however, witnessed unprecedented mass participation by women across class and regional lines.

Nehru regarded this phenomenon as a social revolution. In *The Discovery of India*, he vividly described women from diverse backgrounds—upper- and middle-class women leading sheltered lives, peasant women, working-class women, and wealthy women—coming forward in defiance of colonial authority.



“A remarkable thing happened. Our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle... Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in homes—peasant women, working class women, rich women—pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order and police lathi.” (Nehru, 1946)

This mass mobilisation shattered social barriers and expanded women’s horizons beyond domestic confines.

Two major factors contributed to participation of women. First, moral authority of Mahatma Gandhi helped overcome resistance within conservative families, legitimizing women’s entry into public life. Second, women were driven by anger and indignation at the imprisonment of fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Political participation thus emerged as both an emotional response and a conscious act of resistance. Women organizations played a crucial role in articulating feminist demands.

“In these stirring critical days of India’s destiny there should not be water-tight compartments of service. Women asked that no conference, congresses or commissions dealing with the welfare of India should be held without the presence of women.” (Margaret)

As early as 1917, the Indian Associations of women petitioned for adult franchise without special reservations, asserting equality rather than protection. Despite the exclusion of women from voting under the Government of India Act of 1919, several provincial assemblies lifted the exclusion clause. Although property qualifications limited participation of women, the symbolic significance of these developments was considerable.

Nehru strongly appreciated refusal of women to demand reserved representation, viewing it as an assertion of equal citizenship. He regarded political involvement of women as the beginning of a longer process through which women would seek identity, autonomy, and rights within Indian society. Recent analyses emphasize that this participation was uneven across castes, with Dalit women's experiences often marginalized in nationalist narratives.

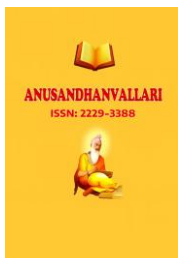
5. Constitutional Equality and the Politics of Symbolism

The adoption of the Fundamental Rights resolution at the Karachi Congress of 1931 represented a landmark moment in the recognition of equality of women. The resolution enshrined the principle of equal rights for men and women, reflecting belief of Nehru in the transformative power of constitutional symbolism.

Nehru was influenced by international developments, including socialist rhetoric that emphasized formal equality. While acknowledging that such legislation often remained ineffective in practice, he believed that constitutional recognition had a powerful psychological effect in reshaping social attitudes. Symbolism, for Nehru, was not empty rhetoric but a necessary step in the long process of social change.

The resolution was adopted without significant opposition, partly because it was perceived as aspirational rather than immediately enforceable. Political elites also supported it to demonstrate India’s social progressiveness and counter colonial claims that Indians were unfit for self-rule. However, Nehru expressed concern that many supporters harboured mental reservations and that resistance would emerge when equality translated into concrete reforms.

“Many of them who silently voted for the Karachi resolution might not have meant what the resolution laid down. They might have had mental reservations. The question was bound to arise again.” (Nehru, 1936). This episode illustrates the gap between constitutional ideals and social realities. While constitutional equality established a moral and legal framework for women’s rights, its realization depended on subsequent political will and social acceptance. Intersectional critiques reveal that these ideals often failed to address caste-based disparities in access to rights.



6. Hindu Code Bill and the Limits of Legal Reform

The attempt to reform Hindu personal law exposed the deepest contradictions in Nehru's project of women's emancipation. Hindu law, shaped by diverse customs and interpretative schools such as Mitakshara and Dayabhaga, had become rigid under colonial non-interference.

"When custom became petrified, progress became impeded altogether, and for a hundred and fifty years our society has not been able to make much progress." (Pattabhi, 1948)

Its underlying principle was inequality, particularly in matters of marriage, inheritance, maintenance, and guardianship.

The Rights of Hindu women to Property Act of 1937 highlighted the inadequacy of piecemeal reform. While it granted limited rights to widows, it denied absolute ownership and excluded daughters. Legal confusion and social dissatisfaction followed, revealing the need for comprehensive codification.

The Hindu Code Committee, established in 1941 under B. N. Rau, recommended a unified code that would retain the framework of Hindu law while introducing progressive reforms. Nehru supported these recommendations, viewing codification as essential for gender justice and legal clarity. However, Dr. Ambedkar, as Law Minister, was instrumental in drafting the comprehensive HCB in 1948, pushing for reforms that granted women equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Ambedkar's resignation in 1951 stemmed from Nehru's initial hesitation to push the bill amid electoral concerns and internal Congress opposition, highlighting tensions in implementation.

The proposed reforms provoked intense opposition from orthodox groups, religious leaders, and conservative politicians. The controversy confirmed Nehru's earlier fears that constitutional equality would face resistance when it threatened entrenched patriarchal privileges. Although the Hindu Code was eventually enacted in stages during the 1950s (e.g., Hindu Marriage Act 1955, Hindu Succession Act 1956), the struggle revealed the limits of reform from above and the resilience of patriarchal ideology. Contemporary critiques note that the HCB's legacy is tied to Ambedkar's intersectional feminist vision, recognizing women as equal citizens beyond caste hierarchies.

7. Women in Planning and Economic Citizenship

Commitment of Nehru to women's equality extended beyond political and legal rights to economic participation. The National Planning Committee, formed in 1938 under his chairmanship, included a sub-committee on women's role in a planned economy composed entirely of women. The committee emphasized identical moral standards for men and women and highlighted education, employment, and opportunity as prerequisites for equality. The report of committee rejected both subordination and imitation, advocating a model of equality that respected women's distinctive contributions while ensuring equal status.

We do not wish to turn woman into a cheap imitation of man or to render her useless for the great tasks of motherhood and nation-building. But in demanding equal status and opportunity we desire to achieve for women the possibility of development of education and opportunity." (NPC Report, 1938)

The enforcement of monogamy through the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 marked a significant step toward gender justice, though its limited application across communities underscored ongoing inequalities. Intersectional analyses reveal that economic citizenship was uneven, with lower-caste women facing barriers due to compounded caste and gender discriminations.



8. Contemporary Relevance

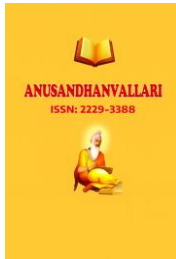
The ideas of Nehru remain relevant in contemporary debates on gender justice, personal laws, and the role of the state. The tension between constitutional equality and social acceptance persists in discussions on the Uniform Civil Code, women's inheritance rights, and marital laws. Gradualist approach of Nehru underscores the need to balance legal reform with social education and women's mobilisation. Recent developments amplify this relevance. In 2024, Uttarakhand became the first state post-independence to pass a Uniform Civil Code bill on February 7, which received presidential assent on March 11, aiming for uniform laws on marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption across religions. This echoes Nehru's state-centric reforms but highlights ongoing debates on whether such codes advance intersectional justice or impose majoritarian norms. Public discourse reflects polarized views: some credit Nehru for laying foundations of women's rights, while others emphasize Ambedkar's role and critique delays in broader reforms. Nehru's legacy thus informs current pushes for a national UCC, as seen in 2023–2024 political narratives.

9. Conclusion

The engagement of Jawaharlal Nehru with equality of women represents a complex legacy of vision, symbolism, and constraint. He institutionalized gender equality as a constitutional principle and pursued progressive legal reform while recognizing the limits of coercive change. His liberal, state-centric feminism legitimized women's rights as a national concern but could not fully dismantle deeply embedded patriarchal structures, especially when intersected with caste and class. Enduring contribution of Nehru lies not in completing women's emancipation but in embedding it within democratic and developmental project of India. His challenge to women to confront injustice and assert their rights continues to resonate, reminding us that equality is a continuous struggle rather than a legislative gift. By integrating intersectional critiques and recent developments, this paper underscores the evolving nature of Nehru's legacy in India's quest for gender justice.

References

- [1] Basu, A. (1995). Women's movements in India. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.
- [2] Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14), 579–585.
- [3] Forbes, G. (1996). Women in Modern India. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819209>
- [4] Government of India. (1937). The Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act, 1937. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- [5] Government of India. (1955). The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- [6] Government of India. (1956). The Hindu Succession Act, 1956. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- [7] Kumar, R. (1993). The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and feminism in India, 1800–1990. New Delhi, India: Kali for Women.
- [8] Margaret Cousins, Letter to M.K. Gandhi
- [9] Menon, N. (2012). Seeing like a feminist. New Delhi, India: Zubaan. National Planning Committee Report, 1938.
- [10] Nehru, J. (1936). Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru (SWJN). -Vol. 3, p. 363. Vol. I, pp. 316–318.
- [11] Nehru, J. (1936). An Autobiography. London, UK: John Lane. p.41 (1946). The Discovery of India. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press. (1958). Speeches, 1946–1949. New Delhi, India: Publications Division, Government of India.



-
- [12] Pattabhi Sitaramayya, B. (1935). The History of the Indian National Congress, Vol. I. Madras, India: Congress Working Committee.
- [13] (1948). Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. V. Madras, India: Congress Working Committee
- [14] Rau, B. N. (1941). Report of the Hindu Law Committee. New Delhi, India: Government of India.
- [15] Sarkar, S. (1983). Modern India: 1885–1947. New Delhi, India: Macmillan India.
- [16] Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.
- [17] Singh, A. (2018). Gender justice and personal laws in India: A constitutional perspective. Journal of Law and Society, 45(2), 243–260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jols.12123>
- [18] Thapar, R. (2002). Early India: From the origins to AD 1300. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books.
- [19] Walby, S. (1990). Theorizing patriarchy. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- [20] Women's Indian Association. (1917). Memorandum on women's franchise presented to the Secretary of State for India. Madras, India: WIA.
- [21] Chaudhary, R. (2021). The Hindu Code Bill: Revisiting the Intersectional Feminist Legacy of Dr. Ambedkar. All About Ambedkar. <https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/the-hindu-code-bill-revisiting-the-intersectional-feminist-legacy-of-dr-ambedkar>
- [22] IPD Online. (2024). The Hindu Code Bill: A Landmark in Legal and Social Reform. IPD Online. <https://ipdonline.net/2024/12/20/the-hindu-code-bill-a-landmark-in-legal-and-social-reform/>
- [23] Law Commission of India. (2023). Uniform Civil Code – Public Notice. <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/notice/uniform-civil-code-public-notice/>
- [24] Menon, N. (2022). A Critique of its Intersectional Reading of Caste and Gender. CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, 3(1). <https://journals.library.brandeis.edu/index.php/caste/article/view/364>