

A Freedom Fighter, Diplomat and Politician - The Vijayalakshmi Pandit

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The sister of pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. She was the first woman to become the President of the United Nations General Assembly. Well, I am talking about the well known diplomat The Vijayalakshmi pandit. She was an Indian envoy, who was the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post in pre-independent. In this research paper, I will present you with the biography of Vijayalakshmi pandit who was instrumental in the politics of the country.

Early Life -

Vijayalakshmi Pandit was born on 18 August 1900 in Allahabad.² Vijaya Lakshmi's father, Motilal Nehru (1861-1931)⁶, a barrister who belonged to the Kashmiri pandit community, served twice as president of the Indian National Congress during the independence struggle. Her mother, Swaruprani Thussu (1868-1938),³ who came from a well known Kashmiri pandit family settled in Lahore, was Motilal's second wife, the first having died in childbirth. She was the second of three children; while Jawaharlal was 11 years her senior and her younger sister Krishna Huthessing became a noted writer and authored several books on their brother.⁶

Academics -

Vijayalakshmi did not receive any formal school education but was tutored privately. She was the member of Aligarh Muslim University Executive Council.

And also she was an Honorary Fellow of Somerville college, Oxford.⁷ A portrait of her by Edward Halliday hangs in the Somerville College library.

Personal life -

Hailing from the prominent Nehru-Gandhi political family, her brother Jawaharlal Nehru was the first Prime Minister of independent India. Her niece Indira Gandhi was the first female Prime Minister of India and her grand-nephew Rajiv Gandhi was the 6th and youngest Prime Minister of India.⁴ Vijayalakshmi Pandit was sent to London as India's most important diplomat after serving as India's envoy to the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Nations. Her time in London offers insights into the wider context of changes in India-UK.¹

According to reports, Vijayalakshmi pandit secretly married Syed Hossain (a Muslim journalist and later first Indian Ambassador to Cairo) in 1917. Her relatives did not approve the marriage. The couple separated later.

In 1921, she was married to Ranjeet Sitaram pandit (a barrister from Kathiawar, Gujrat). The pandit's had three daughters, including the novelist Nayantara Sehgal.⁷

Career

- Vijayalakshmi pandit attended the 1916 Congress session that took place in Lucknow. She was impressed by Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant.⁸
- In 1920, she spent time in Mahatma Gandhi's ashram close to Ahmedabad. She participated in daily chores including dairy work and spinning. She also worked in the office that used to publish Young India.
- Vijayalakshmi Pandit was the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post in pre-independent India. In 1936, she stood in general elections and became a member of parliament by 1937 for constituency of Cawnpore Bilhaur.⁹
- In 1937, she was elected to the provincial legislature of the United Provinces and was designated minister of local self-government and public health. She held the latter post until 1938 and again from 1946 to 1947.
- She spent significant time in jail for her participation in the Indian independence movement. She was jailed for 18 months from 1931-1933. She was jailed again for 6 months in 1940 before getting jailed in 1942 for 7 months over her participation in the Quit India Movement. After her release, she helped the victims of the Bengal Famine of 1943 and served as president of the save the children fund committee which rescued poor children from the streets⁸.
- Following the death of her husband in 1944, she experienced Indian inheritance laws for Hindu widows and campaigned with the All India Women's Conference to bring changes to these laws.⁴
- In 1946, she was elected to the Constituent Assembly from the United Provinces.

Following India's freedom from British occupation in 1947 she entered the diplomatic service and became India's ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1947 to 1949, the United States and Mexico from 1949 to 1951, Ireland from 1955 to 1961-(during which time she was also the Indian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom), and Spain from 1956 to 1961. Between 1946 and 1968, she headed the Indian delegation to the United Nations⁹.

- In 1953, she became the first woman President of the United Nations General Assembly⁶ (she was inducted as an honorary member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority in 1978 for this accomplishment).
- Hon. Members of shrimati Vijayalakshmi pandit resigned her seat in the house with effect from 17 December 1954.
- In India, she served as Governor of Maharashtra from 1962 to 1964.⁶ She returned as a member of parliament for 1964 to 1968 with her election victory in Phulpur. Pandit was a harsh critic of Indira Gandhi's years as Prime Minister especially after Indira had declared emergency in 1975.

- Pandit retired from active politics after relations between them soured. On retiring, she moved to Dehradun in the Doon Valley in the Himalayan Foothills.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit came out of retirement in 1977 to campaign against Indira Gandhi and helped the Janata party win in the 1977 elections. She was reported to have considered running for the presidency, but Neelam Sanjiva Reddy eventually ran and won the election unopposed.

- In 1979, she was appointed the Indian representative to the UN Human Rights Commission, after which she retired from public life^{6 7}.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit pictured books -

On her retirement from parliament, She wrote her memories. Her writing includes-

(i) The Evolution of India (1958)¹⁰

(ii) The Scope of Happiness : A Personal Memoir (1979)¹⁰

Advice from Mahatma Gandhi

Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, wrote an article titled "The Best Advice I Ever Had"⁶ Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit discusses some of the difficult and painful circumstances she faced after losing her spouse suddenly in this article. When she served as the high commissioner for India in the UK, she wrote this for the monthly magazine 'The Reader's Digest' In this article, she shares the invaluable advice Mahatma Gandhi gave her.

The Best Bit of Advice¹⁰

Mrs. Pandit was a widow with two daughters but no son, therefore she was not granted the family shares. Her intense sadness over her husband's passing was soon followed by the shameful realisation that, in the eyes of Indian Law, she had no separate existence. She and other Indian women had fought for independence with men for many years, toiling & suffering alongside them until the goal had been reached, but women were only recognised in connection to their relationships with males.¹¹

She carried resentment towards her family. Before departing for her Conference in America, she visited Gandhiji, who helped her analyse the dilemma of the situation & gave her advice on how to deal with it. He stressed the significance of maintaining good relations with people. Only by forgiving one another Can we maintain our peace. She remembered his words and it eventually transformed her life. After listening to Gandhi's advice, she called her brother-in-law. She was gently guided into self-reflection by Gandhiji. Instead of fretting more, he urged her to show humility.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a person who worked in an important high profile post so she faced critical international problems so many times, But the wise words of Gandhiji stayed with her. She embraced Gandhi's wisdom when she found herself in a tense argument at a United Nations convention.

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit achieved professional and personal Success by needing Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. Mahatma Gandhi's words of Wisdom, "No one can harm you but yourself", are true for each and every one of us, regardless of our sphere of life.¹⁰

Even these advice is useful for our in daily life

The Best Advice we ever had!

The great Freedom Fighter, Diplomat and Politician died in the year of 1990.² She was Survived by her daughters, Chandralekha and Nayanthara Sahgal.

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