

Gandhi and Women

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How did Gandhi involve the Indian women in the Indian freedom movement? Did he succeed in proving their conditions?

With the advent of Gandhi we see a major rupture in the story of women's involvement in the nationalist movement. Gandhi conceptualized the ideal Indian Womanhood, and while doing so shifted the focus from motherhood to sisterhood by negating women's sexuality.

Gandhi's programme for women complimented their roles in the household and gave them a sense of mission. Without challenging their social roles in the society, he made women an important social base in the movement.

With the destruction of India's village crafts, especially the textile industry, millions of women lost their means of subsistence. And so they too responded to Gandhi's appeal. By spinning the yarn and cloth for the people of India, Gandhi wanted to provide work to these semi-starved and semi-employed women of India.

This propaganda in favour of the Charkha spinning and wearing of Khadi was designed to bring out the spirit of Nationalism and freedom into every house. In this way, abstract political ideas, such as struggle against the colonial rule assumed concrete form for ordinary people. Khadi became a symbol of opposition.

Salt Satyagraha

In the past the people could pan their own salt but the Britishers tried to acquire a monopoly over this item of everyday consumption. The only legal salt was the government salt from guarded depots and the price had a built in levy. So, to manufacture salt in defiance of British laws prohibiting such laws manufacture became a way of declaring one's independence in one's own daily life.

The Salt Satyagraha marked a new high watermark of women's participation in the movement. Salt seized the significance of the seemingly trivial but

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²²https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/womens_empowerment.htm

essential details of daily living which are relegated to the women's sphere. Salt is one of the cheapest commodities and is bought by women and used by them as a matter of routine. This was another campaign in which women in large numbers were galvanized into action precisely because the action, though simple, appealed to the imagination and its symbolic value touched the everyday life of a woman.

Kasturba Gandhi initiated women's participation by leading 37 women volunteers from the ashram at Sabarmati to offer Satyagraha and to demand abolition of the salt tax. Sarojini Naidu along with Manilal Gandhi led the raid on Dharasana Salt Works. Women's associations played active role in violating the salt laws. They carried lotas of water to make salt at home and many went out to streets selling this contraband of salt at fancy prices.

While the salt Satyagraha and the civil disobedience movements encouraged women to participate, they also accelerated the transformation in the role of women from auxiliary to leading positions. They did not want to extend the traditional division of labour between man and women to the movements as well and demanded a more active political role. Up to this point, women were mainly assigned the tasks which they could pursue while remaining at home such as practicing Swadeshi and spinning, while men were primarily responsible for political organizing and public protest actions. Gandhi saw this patience as a 'healthy sign' but refused to allow the, to join the salt march on the plea that they had a 'greater' role to play than merely break laws. Although women were not allowed to join the march, they compensated by protesting in their own ways.

Picketing Liquor Shops

According to Gandhi, the more suited job for women was to picket liquor and foreign cloth shops. This agitation was to be initiated and controlled by the women. They could be assisted by men but the latter should be in strict subordination. He chose women for this job because of their 'inherent' capacity for non violence. According to him, drink and drug sapped the moral well being of the addicted and the usage of foreign cloth undermined the economic foundations of the nation and threw millions out of employment. The distress in each case was felt by the home and therefore by the women. Here again, Gandhi linked their personal lives to the national cause.

Gandhi felt that if women took up these two causes of picketing liquor and foreign cloth shops, and specialize in them, they would contribute more than men to the freedom movement. They would have an access to power and self-confidence which they hitherto hadn't experienced. This was an agitation which would trouble the government as well as the Indian trading communities involved with the foreign goods. But it would prevent their blatant hostility from both sides. In fact, there is hardly any evidence of their having resisted any women pickets.

Further, the merit of the movement lay in the fact that in this agitation, women- literate and illiterate could freely take part. Highly educated women had an opportunity of actively identifying with the masses and helping them morally and materially.

This programme of picketing liquor shops fired the imagination of many women. Hansa Mehta saw it as an effort to reach 'PurnaSwaraj'. From mere spinning to picketing marked a definite transition. The market now became the sphere of women's activity. For example, the provincial Committee for Prevention of Liquor issued an appeal for 2500 volunteers in Bombay. Women dressed in Orange khadi saris volunteered a³nd picketed shops.

Another effect this movement had was that, women from extremely traditional and conservative backgrounds who had never been out of parda faced the barefacedness of walking unveiled in public processions and all that was afterwards involved in prison life. They gave up their religious and caste prejudices in the process. In all, about 3,000 women served prison sentences. And so, Gandhi succeeded in galvanizing the traditional housebound woman as a powerful instrument of political action. He facilitated the acceptance of the women's cause by the nationalists.

Public administration

Women's role in administration and legislation of the party had increased considerably. Gandhi choice for Congress presidentship in 1925 was Sarojini Naidu.

When Montague and Chelmsford came to India in 1917 to work out reforms for self government, Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant led a small delegation of women to demand the same rights of representation in legislatures should be

³<https://www.epw.in/journal/1985/40/special-articles/gandhi-women.html>

granted to the women as well. This demand was evaded by the British government by leaving the decision to the Indian representatives on the assumption that the Indians would not be able to accept the idea of equal political rights shared by women. But this theory was upturned with the entrance of Gandhi in the political scene as he created this unusual kind of sympathetic awareness, in large sections of the congress, towards the idea of equal political rights for women. Thus beginning with the Madras legislature, between 1924 and 1928, each one of the legislatures voted to make it possible for women to be represented in them.

The sudden and massive entry of women into the Salt Satyagraha too, opened up for women many opportunities and this was the major reason why as early as 1931, the Congress party passed a resolution at its Karachi annual session committing itself to the political equality of women regardless of their status and qualification.

Non Violence and Women's Leadership

The participation of women must not be seen as one of the peripheral gains of the movement. Gandhi had designed his strategy and chosen his particular forms of struggle very consciously and deliberately so as to encourage acceptance of truth and ahimsa in every walk of life and the hope that women will be the unquestioned leaders.

Gandhi's insistence on non violence as a revolutionary weapon contributed to the creation of favourable conditions for mass participation of people especially women. The programmes of action undertaken as a part of nonviolent Satyagraha were such that women would not feel limited or unequal to men. Thus women's traditional qualities, such as their lesser capacity for organized violence, were not downgraded but were held up as models of superior courage.

According to SekharBandopdyaya, women carved for themselves a greater active role in the movement even though they were limited to activities of boycott and Swadeshi. In November 1921, a demonstration of thousand women greeted the Prince of Wales in Bombay. In December, Basanti Devi,

⁴<https://www.britannica.com/event/Salt-March>
<https://www.mkgandhi.org/storyofg/chap20.htm>

wife of Congress leader C.R. Das, Urmila Devi and Suniti Devi participated in the open demonstration of the streets of Calcutta and courted arrest.

It is significant that Gandhi admitted to have learnt the character of non violent passive resistance from women, especially from his wife and his mother.

Women in the Freedom Movement---Some Contradictions

Gandhi continually emphasised on swaraj to be more than the mere transfer of power. According to him Congressmen should go and work for the political and economic reconstruction of the villages. He laid particular stress on the duty of educated urban women to work with their rural sisters. But few dedicated themselves to consistent work in the villages. Of these, very few were women.

To respond to Gandhi's call could well mean a break with one's family and a very few women could not have taken such a step forward in defiance of the wishes of their families. A major cause for this inability was that women were not likely to have independent means of their own, either by way of jobs or property.

Along with this, there was also a dearth of rural women who could develop into full time workers. Rural women had much less education, much less mobility and contact with urban areas.

Most of the urban women activists and leaders came to be involved through the involvement of their male relatives. When a household was mobilized, the extent of a woman's involvement was likely to be decided by that of the male members of the household. Therefore, according to Bandopadhaya, their politicization did not lead to any changes in their domestic or family roles. In fact, if a handful of women actually crossed the socially constituted boundary of feminine modesty by involving in violent revolutionary action, there were heavily censored by a disapproving society. TanikaSarkar argues that such "strong traditionalist moorings" explained why this politicization was possible and why it failed to promote to a large extent social emancipation of women in India.

Even for mass of middle class women in cities, participation remained at a very rudimentary level such as picketing during certain phases, distributing

nationalist literature, attempting meetings and occasionally joining demonstrations. The activity of these women was more sporadic and fitful than the movement as a whole. Active involvement in congress activities⁵ was confined to a few outstanding women such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi and Hansa Mehta.

The debates within the Indian National Congress and the different points of view of different groups were not reflected in the discussions of the women's associations. The policy programme of the All India Women's Conference for the 1930 spells out the policy of maintaining a certain apolitical stance which read out that The All India Women's Conference shall not belong to any political organization nor take an active part in party politics, but shall be free to discuss and contribute to all questions and matters that affect the welfare of the people of India.

Women's activity and discussion focussed on the spinning, hawking khadi, fund raising, enrolling new members, picketing and fitfully working for removal of untouchability and for promoting of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Thus the existing differences in the social possibilities open to men and women inevitably led by a change reaction to the development of fewer women activists and consequently, lesser mobilization of women.

Women and Harijans were seen as Gandhi as two most depressed groups of India which needed special attention. Neither of the two groups has won an equal place in the national mainstream. What Gandhi ensured for both these groups by the manner in which he took up their cause was a twofold achievement. First, he contributed greatly to loosening the traditional biases to such an extent that the rare exceptions among these groups could stand on equal footing vis-à-vis the rest of the society, and could reach high positions. Second, even though Gandhi failed to evolve a concrete programme for materially altering the socio economic condition of the mass of women, he succeeded in raising the question of their depressed condition as a moral question for society to reckon with. He made a major contribution towards creating a general climate of sympathetic awareness of women's situation. Though he had a personal predilection for idealizing certain roles played by women, yet he did not shrink from the accepting the logical consequences of his insistence on absolute equality between man and women. For instance when someone suggested that if women were given equal property rights, it

⁵https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/village_development.html

would help lead to 'immorality' amongst them, Gandhi's reply was in favour of having such rights.

However, the necessity for independent control over the economic resources was not integrated into the struggle for women's rights. Gandhi advocated the spinning of khadi for a livelihood especially in rural areas. But this could evidently not become a viable means of livelihood for most women. The disappearance of British textiles from the Indian market did not mean a victory for khadi but a victory for the Indian owned textile mills. Thus, in this aspect, Gandhi cannot be said to have a concrete programme to tackle one of the basic causes of women's powerlessness- their total economic dependence and the lack of control over resources. One of the limitations of Gandhi's thinking then was that he sought to change not so much the material condition of women as their moral condition. He tried to change women's experience without changing their relation with the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction. He believed in the harmonious division of labour between men and women, but did not believe in women earning wages or undertaking commercial enterprises. Thus, he saw women in terms of active-passive complementary which has been an important device for denying women the right to power and decision making in the society.

According to Gandhi, "Nature has made men and women different and it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two". And so he concluded that "it is a woman's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it". What Gandhi opposed was the excessive subordination of a wife to the husband.

He could envisage woman being free even while playing a socially subordinate role. This contradiction is related to the entire Gandhian world-view and his concept of 'trusteeship' in society, which represents his dual attitude of simultaneous acquiescence and revolt against authority. He did not acknowledge the interconnectedness of injustice and most forms of authority.

Gandhi's dual attitude of obedience to and rebellion against authority is evident in every single movement or campaign he led and in the very philosophy of non violent Satyagraha. The attempt of Satyagraha was not only to transform and win the oppressor into being more 'just', but also meticulously to accept the general jurisdiction of the authority and its laws.

The dichotomy does not end there. Gandhi was of the opinion that large number of girls disappear from the public life after finishing school and college as they are married off. Therefore it is high time that they produce or reproduce a glorified edition of Parvati or Sita. In other words, though he insisted that 'every girl was not born to marry' the symbols to encourage her to be an active part of public life were those of ideal wives whose chief qualification was that they spent their lives in selfless service to their husbands.

Creating a favourable atmosphere

Gandhi helped ensure the entry of women into public life. One can say that it is due to Gandhi's legacy that every political party tends to reserve a few seats for women in each election without women having to recognize themselves as a pressure group to make such a demand.

Thus women's entry into the social and political life came not only without sufficient pressure from below but was marked by the absence of the kind of hostility from men. This accounts for the lack of sufficient militancy in the women's movement, and the fact that the movement constantly tried to accommodate its demands within a male dominated power structure. The same pattern characterizes most of the movements today.

SekharBandopadhyaya argues that the Congress and its leaders were simply not interested in women's issues except for allowing some symbolic presence.

There was an atmosphere of benevolent patronage. Margaret Cousins, an Irish feminist who played a major role in women's organizations in India and Britain wrote saying that after the militant campaign of women in Britain and Ireland after exhausting all constitutional methods, they appreciated the wisdom, nobility and passing of fundamental tests in self government of the Indian Legislators. She attested to the fact that all presidencies had conferred the symbol and instrument of equal citizenship.

However, Gandhi constantly warned women against depending on this kind of a patronage. For instance, he did not favour reservations for women of the kind that was been demanded by the Dalits.

He envisioned women entering public life as selfless and devotes social workers. He saw in women the potential that would selflessly undertake the task of social reconstruction that was to be the hallmark or Swaraj. According to MadhuKishwar, Gandhi saw women as the embodiment of sacrifice and

suffering. And so, her role in the public domain only restricted itself to purifying it and restraining any ambition or accumulation of property as this would be a 'reversion to barbarity'. The role of the middle class educated women was in the public sphere was her extension of her domestic life. Women were to enter public sphere as 'sisters of mercy' or 'mothers of entire humanity'. This revealed the bias of a benevolent patriarch. He made some of these symptoms of subordination into a glorified cult of womanhood.

