

Gandhi's Role in Making Women Visible in the Socio-Political Space of the Indian National Movement

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Introduction**

One of the greatest contributions of Mahatma Gandhi in contemporary India was changing the status of women in early twentieth-century India by enhancing their role in political movements. His successful call to women to join the nationalist movement led to wider participation of women in public affairs. Through his speeches and writings he was successful in bringing out their latent power of women and the greatness of their strength, before the world. His politics gave a new life not only to Indian women but women in many other countries got the opportunity to search a new meaning in their life.

This paper attempts to bring out Gandhi's vision of the role of women in maintenance of peace and how the various movements initiated by Gandhi also became a powerful platform for women to assert their political agency.

Gandhi's contribution lies in expanding the techniques of Satyagraha, Ahimsa and Non-Cooperation to encompass the whole mass of people, especially the women and making it a mass movement. Gandhi believed women could do much to transform India on all levels. The Gandhian nonviolent movement for freedom has prominently influenced different women's groups and social groups in India and it is to the credit of Gandhi that women participated in large numbers in the nationalist struggle. They could play a significant part in the freedom fight under his inspiring leadership.

Women's influence on Gandhi

It is said that Gandhi developed the notion of women as natural bearers of peace and effective exponents of ahimsa due to the intimate influences of some women in his life. Gandhi had admitted that he learnt technique of non-violent passive resistance from women, especially from his mother, Putlibai and wife Kasturba (Limaye 1999). His mother was a great source of inspiration for him and was largely responsible for the extremely tolerant, religious disposition of Gandhi.

It was Kasturba's passive resistance against Gandhi's, as a man and husband, unreasonable actions and attitudes that compelled him change himself from a domineering husband to an understanding husband realizing the spirit of equality. He acknowledged, "I learned the lesson of non-violence from my wife, when I tried to bend her to my will.... In the end she became my "teacher" in non-violence. And what I did in South Africa was but an extension of the rule of Satyagraha she practised in her life...."

She was his living "model" of Satyagraha. He spoke of Kasturba as "above" himself, and it is to her moral strength and example that he says he owed his most unique and potent idea in personal growth as well as in activist politics. Writing on her, Gandhi observes that she was "a woman always of very strong will...that strong will enabled her quite unwittingly to become my teacher in the art and practice of non-cooperation". (Mukherjee and Ramaswamy 1994).

In South Africa Indian women, led by Kasturba, offered Satyagraha and went to prison, when the Government of South Africa was about to pass an unjust law. The women's courage was amazing and inspiring to men. Their success proved the power of soul-force. Gandhi said, "My wife made the orbit of all women. In her I studied all women. I came in

contact with many European women in South Africa, and I knew practically every Indian woman there. I worked with them. I tried to show them they were not slaves either of their husbands or parents, not only in the political field but in the domestic as well”(ibid).

Besides his wife, Gandhi’s other women co-workers in South Africa were Olive Shreener, Mili Graham Pollak and Sonia Shlesin. He was also profoundly influenced by Annie Besant, a British militant feminist and a Theosophist, Sarojini Naidu a trusted Gandhi’s co-worker, Kamladevi Chattopadhyaya, a fiery Satyagrahi.

Satyagraha and Women

The greatest contribution of Gandhi was ‘Satyagraha’ which not only aimed at creating a society which would be based on feminine values but also advocated a feminist strategy to achieve that ideal. He could see the possibilities of women participating Satyagraha from his experiences in South Africa. The participation by South African women demonstrated the capacity women had for self-sacrifice and suffering which inspired him for evolving his idea of Satyagraha. From the first Satyagraha of Champaran in 1917 to the 1942 movement Indian women participated in each and every struggle under the leadership of Gandhi.

Gandhi believed that Satyagraha was the most powerful weapon in a nonviolent struggle. It involves defiance — the willful, peaceful, breaking of laws that are unjust. It means picketing, protesting, squatting, obstructing, challenging and publicly resisting wrongs. Gandhi believed since women were the most nonviolent and ardent lovers of peace, they can be the best messengers of peace and non-violence.

Gandhi based his programme of action on such political methods — its source was those virtues — that would be suitable for women. Gandhi had admitted that he had designed his strategy and chosen his particular forms of struggle very consciously and deliberately, so as to encourage women’s participation in them. He wrote in *Young India* [1 January 1932], “Since resistance in Satyagraha is offered through self-suffering. It is a weapon pre-eminently open to women.... she can become the leader in Satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require that heart that comes from suffering and faith”(Prabhu and Rao 1945).

Among those women who have made Satyagraha a mode of struggle for a better world are the Meira Peibi of Manipur who stand in clusters on the roadside outside their village with flaming torches to protest against men who indulge in drugs and alcohol which are jointly ruining the youth of north-eastern India. These women also raise their voices against the excesses the security forces and form a protective shield around their villages against them. They do not quote Gandhi or term their struggle as Satyagraha but their steadfast, powerful and peaceful picketing has all the elements of struggle in the manner, Gandhi followed.

Gandhi said that women “strengthen my belief in Swadeshi and Satyagraha....if I could inspire in men devotion as pure as I find in the women, within a year, India would be raised to a height impossible to imagine. As for Swaraj it was the easiest thing in the world.”The Satyagraha made women feel that because of their femininity they are not inadequate or inferior to men. Their femininity has not been down-graded because of their propensity to face violence is considered less, but rather they were made to feel that as women they are strong because of their feminine character.

Non-violence and Women

Gandhi looked to women as the embodiment of suffering and sacrifice. He saw this as a special quality of women as a mother and thereby considered them to be the best messengers of peace and non-violence. On this basis he prescribed separate education for

women for they make better soldiers in non-violent struggle. They are inherently more peaceful than men.

The superior qualities of women and the intrinsic difference between man and woman was something Gandhi kept highlighting. Since he believed that women could bring about Swaraj better: women were the very embodiment nonviolence, for him they were greater soldiers and beneficiaries of his Swaraj campaigns. The three spearheads of these campaigns were the manufacture of salt, boycott of foreign cloth and shunning of liquor.

The Gandhian concept of women's role in maintenance of peace is clearly expressed in speeches made in several parts of Europe. In a message to the women of Europe in 1932 Gandhi quoted to them the example of Indian women who had come out in their thousands to take part in a non-violent struggle. He said: "If only women will forget that they belong to the weaker sex, I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than men against war.... I really believe that if Europe will drink in the lesson of non-violence, it will do so through its women.... Passive resistance is regarded as the weapon of the weak, but the resistance for which I had to coin a new name altogether is the weapon of the strongest. I had to coin a new word to signify what I meant. But its matchless beauty lies in the fact that, though it is the weapon of the strongest, it can be wielded by the weak in body, by the aged and even by the children if they have stout hearts. And since resistance in Satyagraha is offered through self-suffering, it is a weapon pre-eminently open to women. We found that women in India, in many instances surpassed their brothers in suffering and the two played a noble part in the campaign. For, the idea of self-suffering became contagious and they embarked upon amazing acts of self-denial. Supposing that the women and the children of Europe became fired with love of humanity, they would take the men by storm and reduce militarism to nothingness in an incredibly short time. The underlying idea is that women, children and others have the same potentiality. The question is one of drawing out the limitless power of truth"(Hingorani 1994).

Gandhi reiterated the same faith in women's ability wherever she may belong to, in bringing peace and keeping it. "You have got freedom. You can become a power for peace....(if you) apply your minds to the science of non-violence more than to man....Women are the natural messengers of the gospel of non-violence if only they realize their high estate"

Gandhi felt that only women can fight militarism. In Paris, he said, "I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than men against war."He elaborated his argument to the women there, "...Answer for yourselves what your great soldiers and generals would do, if their wives and daughters and mothers refused to countenance their participation in militarism in any shape or form."

Speaking to a group of women in Italy he said that "the beauty of non-violent war is that women can play the same part in it as men. In a violent war women have no such privilege, and Indian women played a more effective part in 'our' last non-violent war than men. The reason is simple. Non-violent war calls into play suffering to the largest extent, and who can suffer more purely and nobly than women".Gandhi held that if "they (women) would realize the strength of non-violence they would not consent to be called the weaker sex".

Gandhi taught the humankind how to have a revolution with weapons of truth and non-violence that build a future, rather than with weapons that annihilate the past, the present and the future. To learn how to use these weapons, Gandhi himself was willing to be taught by women.He believed that it is given to her to teach that art of peace to the warring world. Women, who according to Gandhi are stronger by virtue of endurance, self-sacrifice and gentleness, were more amenable to the concept of non-violent means than who glorified physical strength.

Ahimsa and Women

Mahatma Gandhi viewed women as the incarnation of Ahimsa and added that due to a different socialization process, women have tended to grow up more peaceful than men and more capable of solving conflicts in a nonviolent manner. Ahimsa has been very much a part of women's attitudes, even with respect to the most emotional, basic issues of feminism.

In 1940, while reviewing his twenty-five years of work in India concerning women's role in society, he said, "...Woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. And who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? Let her translate that love to the whole of humanity.... And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man.... She can become the leader in Satyagraha...." He believed peace often starts in the minds of women.

Gandhi's Call to Women

Gandhi had long believed that women had special capacities for sacrifice and for leadership in peace building. He believed that many of the contemporary movements stopped half-way because woman-power had not been used. He thought that the world had been too long dominated by "masculine" aggressive qualities and that it was time that the "feminine" qualities came to the fore.

Gandhi had sought the support of women for almost all of his political movements – non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India movement. Gandhi did not see his advocacy of women's participation in non-violent movements as contradictory to his basic concept of women as nurturer and care-taker of home. On the contrary, the participation of women in Satyagraha was seen as an extension of her special mission as the care-taker of humanity.

Under Gandhi's inspiration Indian women took part in freedom struggle in large numbers. Gandhi exhorted women in all his movements during the freedom struggle. He wrote in the *Harijan*, "In the war against war, women of the world will and should lead. It is their special vocation and privilege" (Hingorani 1994). Between 1920 and 1940 Gandhi came to advocate a greatly expanded role for women in political movements. Initially in the 1920s, when he called the women to participate in the first Satyagraha he wanted the women to play a supportive role in which they would boycott the purchase of foreign cloth and dedicate themselves to spinning. In 1930 he called for broader participation of women in which they would take on the activity of picketing liquor shops and sellers of foreign cloth. By 1939, Gandhi exhorted the women that they should take the lead in the Satyagraha movement in India. He said, "I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over the men. If the fight came, I should then face it with greater confidence than if men predominated. I would dread the latter's violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak." He wrote: "Nonviolence is woman's inborn virtue. For ages together man has been trained in violence. To become nonviolent they will have to generate womanly qualities in them. Since I have adopted nonviolence, I am myself becoming womanly day by day. Women are accustomed to making sacrifices for the family, they will now have to learn to make an offering for the country. I am inviting all women.... to get enlisted in my nonviolent army."

Thousands of Indian women from all walks of life did respond to his call in the 1930s and 1940s to become actively involved in India's struggle for independence. Many left home and many refused marriage in order to dedicate themselves full time to the movement. Gandhi's advocacy of nonviolence created favourable condition for mass

participation of women in all the movements he launched. They came out from home instead of hiding in fear, as they usually did when the movements were violent.

Yet, after independence the momentum behind the encouragement of women's advancement and leadership in political and social arenas dwindled. With Gandhi's death, women had lost one of their key champions. The linkage between women's advancement, a country's development and the achievement of a culture of peace was obscured.

The Mahila Shanti Sena

Gandhi's peace tradition is being carried on presently by the Mahila Shanti Sena, a new social movement, launched in 2000 by Acharya Ramamurti, (then 91-year-old), a Gandhian, aimed at integrating village and district level democracy with nonviolence and the rights of women. The idea was hatched in 2000, during a meeting between McMaster, Professor of Biology and Peace Studies, Dr. Rama Singh and Acharya Ramamurti, to organize a gathering of Gandhian activists, social workers, academics, and journalists over a three-day period in the village of Vaishali, Bihar to consider the implications of women's roles in Panchayati Raj and the need to promote participatory democracy and peace-building.

The Mahila Shanti Sena Vaishali Sabha Conference on Nonviolence, Peace, and Democracy took place on February 24-27, 2002 — a time period that coincided with a fresh outbreak of horrendous Hindu-Muslim communal violence in Gujarat. Referring to Gandhi's idea of establishing "peace brigades," Acharya Ramamurti decided to call the trained women the "Mahila Shanti Sena" or women's peace corps. His nonpartisan movement has been meeting with spectacular success. Tens of thousands of women have now been trained in a women's peace corps and their collective efforts are beginning to change the social and political climate in parts of northern India.

The general objectives of Mahila Shanti Sena movement are: building peaceful neighbourhoods; promoting participatory democracy (through capacity building, with a special focus on women); the formation of women's action groups of peace workers (trained in leadership skills, crisis intervention, conflict resolution and prevention); and women's economic empowerment through micro-loans schemes, self-help groups, and through local centers of skills training.

Some important aspects of Gandhian ideals on non-violence and ahimsa and their links with women need mention. Gandhi's nonviolence embodied a stance of non-injury, or ahimsa, to the enemy. Destruction of the opponent merely perpetuates the injustice one tries to overcome. Instead, the goal is to win the opponent over the one's own side. Gandhi wrote, "We must try patiently to convert our opponents. If we wish to evolve the spirit of democracy out of slavery, we must be scrupulously exact in our dealings with opponents. We must concede to our opponents the freedom we claim for ourselves and for which we are fighting." Nonviolent actions asserts the value and necessity of acting in support of the truth — the Satyagraha — that doing for self means also doing for others.

The psychology of women supports this policy of non-injury. Rather than basing her worth on the domination of others or on comparative strength, the normative criteria has been sacrifice and service. Such advocacy is in many ways the *raison d'être* of the traditional female role. Gandhi sometimes glorified suffering for the cause of truth. But he, and other non-violent activists, also stressed the need for non-cooperation with the forces of evil.

Gandhi believed that only Satyagraha will solve the problems of the society, whether they are between capitalist and worker or between man and woman. Women must formulate their goals, struggle for them, and redefine them through the practices of

Satyagraha. The practice of Satyagraha will enable them to transform the family and society for the betterment of all – men, women and children.

In today's world, power politics of states still continues to be based on the use of violence to maintain international order and co-existence among peoples. The force of arms and economic exploitation of weaker social groups are still considered permissible instruments for the maintenance of peace among states and within states. The end of the cold war seems to have again legitimised the use of overtly violent means of conflict resolution by subordinating the protection of human rights and the rights of peoples to the economic and strategic interests of small and great powers alike.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi brought the women out of their homes and made them equal participants in all walks of life – social as well as political. His entourage always consisted of several women and many of his closest associates were women. Under Gandhi's leadership thousands of women took leading roles in several movements. His politics gave a new life not only to Indian women but women in many other countries got the opportunity to search for new meaning in their life. Gandhi's writings and speeches afford ample evidence to show that he canvassed for women's active participation in political movement and public affairs.

Gandhi's life mission was to save humanity from barbarity and he had insight that in any social situation where "violence and brute force reign supreme or when social conflicts are sought to be resolved through the use of weapons, women tend to be pushed into more and more peripheral roles, and all the positive qualities tend to be looked upon with contempt". Gandhi did realize that women's entry in the national movement of India was a life-preserving and humanising force which would prevent the movement from getting dissipated by senseless and self-destructive violence.

Having realized the important role women could play in purifying public life Gandhi, a great visionary constructed feminist politics and he became an embodiment of feminine virtues, understood the plight of women especially in Indian society.

The task today of national governments the world over is that of taking up projects of peace, and of identifying non-violent ways of achieving them, bearing in mind, as Gandhi said, that "There is no way to peace; peace is the way". It is up to the transnational civil society to express and foster Gandhian ideals by providing suitable means of achieving peace. There should be political intervention and priority must be given to the creation of appropriate facilities for research, teaching, and training so that political action at the national and international level measures up to the challenges that today's world presents.

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