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## Feminist politics in Gandhian thought

Dr. Beena Rani B. R.

[drrani23@gmail.com](mailto:drrani23@gmail.com)

Mahatma Gandhi University, Athirampuzha, Kerala

### ABSTRACT

*While First Wave feminism of the early 19th century was in an advanced stage of addressing women's issue of suffrage rights and equality, raising the slogan, 'Personal is political', Indian women were in their helpless silence of suffering, exploitation, and discrimination. They believed that they are born to suffer and bound to be ruled by men. They were suppressed by the conflicting social status: either worshipped as Goddesses Durga or Sakti on one hand and on the other, tortured as an object of exploitation. Women, when treated in an objective way, which is what Simon de Bouvier, calls 'the other'. The gender division in patriarchy, is male-centered, where women's rights and identity, are suppressed under custom and taboos. Except for a few, women in general, are not conscious of the inequality, oppression, and cruelties, they face. Women's political history in India in its real sense begins in the Gandhian era. Gandhi has absolute confidence in women's powers and he visualized, an ideal non-violent world, where, women are the right choice for peacemakers and leaders. She is a perfect individual who can exert immense influence on man and society. Gandhi is a feminist in his socio-political perspectives, which are allied to his patriarchal values.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Leadership, Feminist Politics, Gandhian Ideals, Non-Violent Nation Builders*

### 1. FEMINIST POLITICS IN GANDHIAN THOUGHT

While First Wave feminism of the early 19th century. is in an advanced stage of addressing women's issue of suffrage rights and equality, raising the slogan, 'Personal is political', Indian women were in their helpless silence of suffering, exploitation, and discrimination. They believed that they are born to suffer and bound to be ruled by men. They were suppressed by the conflicting social status: either worshipped as Goddesses Durga or Sakti on one hand and on the other, tortured as an object, of exploitation. Women when treated in an objective way which is what Simon de Bouvier, calls 'the other'. The gender division in patriarchy, is male-centered, where women's rights and identity, and suppressed under custom and taboos. Except for a few, women in general, are not conscious of the inequality, oppression, and cruelties, they face. Women's political history in India in its real sense begins in the Gandhian era. Gandhi has absolute confidence in women's powers and he visualized, an ideal non-violent world, where, women are the right choice for peacemakers and leaders. She is a perfect individual who can exert immense influence on man and society. Gandhi is a feminist in his socio-political perspectives, which are allied to his patriarchal values.

India has a great civilization founded upon its unique philosophical systems, where women, are worshipped as a goddess. In Ancient India, women were considered the personification of virtues of power, goodness, and wisdom (*tri-devata* /three goddesses, concept). Education, equality, and freedom have been attributed to women. They were considered to be the spiritual and direct agents of life-forces and have been given a position of pride in every religion. Yet, the passage of time left serious deterioration in women's status, and somewhere in an unknown junction of history, the society has been transformed into absolute patriarchy. Though Indian women have experienced ups and down with the changing socio-cultural scenario of the country, the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been marked as a dark age of Indian history. Social evils, barbarous customs, and inhuman practices, like female infanticide, *Sati*, child marriage, and *purdah*, haunted woman's life. She became a non-entity without a voice, identity, and basic human rights. Social reformers launched a rigorous campaign against social evils. They tried their best to restore the women's lost glory that their rightful place in society. Gandhi gave an astonishing turn in the status of Indian women. He wrote, 'There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men' ( *M.K.Gandhi, The mind of mahatma Gandhi*, p.297)

He was one of the greatest revolutionary leaders of the world, who liberated through non-violent means, his people from the domination of the British Empire. He tried to reconstruct the existing social order. Gandhi was a practical idealist, and his philosophy has grown out of his own experience and experiments with truth and non-violence. He was not only a socio-political philosopher but also a feminist social reformer. He never tried to preach ideals but he was practicing them. His life is his message to humanity.

As a philosopher of action, he struggled for freedom and equality, which had a unique appeal to men and women all over the world. Gandhi's concept of a woman is that of a 'perfect individual', who can exert immense influence on man and society. He realized that women were the most oppressed sections of Indian society. One of the major goals of Gandhi's movement is the emergence and stabilization of certain social values which can help women, to achieve dignity and happiness.

The oppressed situation of Indian Women was regarded by the British as an example of the backwardness of Indians. There the nationalist, particularly Gandhi, emphasized women's emancipation and social change as a supplementary agenda of the nationalist movement. Gandhi says, "I am firm of the opinion that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and salvation of her women."<sup>1</sup> Gandhi respected the traditions of the society, but not at the cost of the loss of individual dignity. His practical and dynamic advice was that it is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide. Gandhi is a feminist in his socio-political perspectives, which are allied to his patriarchal values.

## **2. WOMEN INSPIRED GANDHI**

Besides his father, his mother's ideas cast a considerable influence on Gandhi's work and ideas. During the closing days, Gandhi recollects, "I owe the first to all to my saintly mother and to my good nurse. These were noble women. They taught me to tell the truth and not to fear."<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is evident that the twin basic tenets of Gandhian thought, Truth & non-violence were given to him by women. His mother was one of the biggest factors in making Gandhi. He was deeply influenced by Indian scriptures which consider motherhood as the highest honor to women. Gandhi called women the "*Mother, The Maker and The Silent leader of man.*" For him, "Woman is the incarnation of *Ahimsa*. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it for nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering involved in the pangs of labor? But she forgets them in the joy of creation.... let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker, and silent leader."<sup>3</sup> In Hindu Scriptures, the wife is described as *Jaya* (*Jayate asyamate*) i.e., the husband takes new birth in the wife); *ardhangini* (the better half); *Sahadharma charini* (partner in the performance of duty); *Sakha Ka martha charini* (partner in enjoyment of pleasures); *Sakha-Sachib* (friend and secretary). Kasturba, the wife of Gandhi, was the best manifestation of all the above adjectives. By her immeasurable restraint, infinite patience, and boundless love, she won the heart of Gandhi and brought out the highest potential talent of his personality. He opined, "The wife is not husband's bond slave but his companion, his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows –as free as the husband to choose her own path."<sup>4</sup> Gandhi admitted that he learned the technique of non-violent passive resistance from women, especially from his wife and mother Gandhi pays his tribute to his wife; "I learned the lesson of non-violence from my wife when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will on one hand and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved on the other hand, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity in thinking that I was born to rule over her; and in the end, she became my teacher of non-violence. And what I did in South Africa was, but an extension of the rule of *Satyagraha* which she unwillingly practiced in her own person."<sup>5</sup> Gandhi's housemaid, Ramba, made a deep-rooted influence on his mind. To quote, Gandhi said, "I think, it is due to the seed sown by that good woman Ramba, that, today *Ramanama* is an infallible remedy for me."<sup>6</sup>

## **3. MARRIAGE AND CHASTITY**

About marriage Gandhi says, the ideal that marriage aims at is the spiritual union of the physical. The human love that incarnates is, intended to serve as a stepping stone to the divine or the universal love."<sup>7</sup> Gandhi viewed marriage as a sacrament imposing discipline on both partners, not a license for physical union but emphasized spiritual union in marriage. He insisted on monogamous marriages and put forward a plea for inter-communal marriages between caste Hindus and *Harijan*'s. He thought inter-caste marriage can be a remedy for *untouchability* and caste discrimination. Gandhi advised, within the marriage or outside the marriage, women should be bold and independent.

Opposed to *Purdah* system, Gandhi opined, Chastity is not a hot-house growth, it cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of *Purdah*. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding unsought temptation. And why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individuals self –effort."<sup>8</sup>

## **4. EQUALITY**

Indian society has always been highly hierarchical. Severe hierarchies within the family, and within the community have been maintained and integrated by means of the complex combination of custom, functionality, and religious belief. Here the concept of equality is derived as a correlation of the concept of freedom, alien to society. Gandhi was totally against all kinds of inequalities on the basis of caste creed and sex. His concern for women's equality is so popular. Gandhi believed that the double standards for men and women in social and moral fields have to be abolished and unnecessary- unequal restrictions have to be removed. Against gender discrimination, he proposed equality for all, in all aspects. Gandhi said, "I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women."<sup>9</sup> I make no distinction between man and woman, Woman should feel just as independent as a man". Bravery is not man's monopoly."<sup>10</sup> Gandhi insists that a woman must be able to come out of the home and work outside, which will force society to recognize her status and rights. For Gandhi, "The woman who knows to fulfill her duty realizes her dignity. She is the queen, not the slave of the household, over which she presides."<sup>11</sup>

He opined, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minute details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he, she is entitled to a supreme place, in her own sphere of activity as man is in his."<sup>12</sup> He decried any kind of discrimination against women as an anachronism. "Just as

fundamentally man and women are one; their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. They live the same life and have the same feeling. Each is the complement of the other. One cannot live without another's active help. But somehow or other man has dominated woman for ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She believed in the truth of man's interested teachings that she is inferior to him. But seers among man have recognized her equal status."<sup>13</sup>

## **5. NON -VIOLENT AGITATION**

Violence against women is as old as world history. Violence against women includes many types of political, economic, social, behavioral, and psychological violence. Gandhi gave the right advice in dealing with this social injustice. He said, "When a woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think in, terms of *Himsa* or *Ahimsa*. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ – every method or means that comes to mind, in order to defend her honor. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and if need be, die in the effort."<sup>14</sup> He opined, that "it is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength."<sup>15</sup> Gandhi wrote, that "If I were born a woman, I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that a woman is born to be his plaything."<sup>16</sup> "Woman must cease to consider herself, the object of man's lust. For all her problems, the remedy is more in her hands than men. She must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband if she will be an equal partner with a man."<sup>17</sup> Gandhi's advice to women in India is that every woman should learn how to protect her honor. Let it be man's privilege to protect woman, but no woman in India feels helpless in the absence of man his failure to perform the sacred duty of protecting her."<sup>18</sup> Gandhi believed that women's emancipation will be impossible without women's bold effort and determination. Gandhi asked women if they should be fearless enough to fight against all sorts of inequalities, suppression, and violence against them. Through education, they have to enlighten themselves and get aware of their rights and privileges in society, as the law is confined to them.

The nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi turned out to be a milestone in the history of women's liberation. From the very inception of the Indian National Congress, its membership was open to women. The nationalist movement mobilized women as congress members and executives. The nature and extent of female participation in the nationalist movement can be categorized at three levels. First, women as part of the general mass of people joined the Satyagraha. They were not involved in the congress or with any local or provincial organization. Secondly, a small group of women was committed to one particular aspect associated with the nationalist struggle. This would include women who took part in social reform activity allied with Gandhian politics such as living in Ashrams or being involved in a campaign for *Khadi* and Village Industry or with the *Harijan s*. Their involvement was limited in terms of the issue and its geographical location. The third category consists of a very small number of women who participated in all aspects of nationalist activity. This was an elite group of women, whose allegiance was not limited to the politics of a particular province. Such women in leadership roles were few and they were given special privileged status in the movement.

A number of British women, such as Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins, and Mira Behn were involved in the various issues of the national movement. Annie Besant began to agitate for India's cause for freedom by founding the Home Rule League (1916). All India Women's Conference was established by Margaret Cousins in 1927 and their involvement in women's causes inspired many Indian women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. One of the most celebrated Indian Women, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, was the first woman to serve as a Minister in a Provincial Government. But after independence, her career took her, to the world forum where she became the first woman to be elected as the President of the U.N. General Assembly. Later she worked as Ambassador to the USSR, and the United States, and as High Commissioner in London. In Bombay, Vijayalakshmi Pandit was Governor for five years. No woman diplomat has matched her performance.<sup>30</sup>

## **6. STRUGGLE FOR SUFFRAGE QUESTIONS:**

Women, the real political history of India begins with Gandhi's era. The organized political move by women in this sphere was formally initiated when a franchise delegation led by Sarojini Naidu, including Margaret Cousins, Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Uma Nehru, Ramabai Ranade, and Abala Bose, met the Viceroy and demanded equal franchise for women in 1919, Sarojini Naidu was part of a deputation of the Home Rule League who went to Britain to lobby for reforms and franchise rights. In 1918, Indian National Congress supported the granting of the vote to women. The Constitutional reforms of 1919 allowed provincial legislation to decide on the issue. In 1921, Madras Province took a lead in removing the sex disqualification for the legislative franchise and also in receiving a woman, Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, as a Member of the Legislative Council.<sup>23</sup> Inspired by the Gandhian concept of '*Stree Shakti*', a large number of Bengali women took part in the Gandhian movement. Their identification of freedom struggle with "*deshapuja*" and the evocation of *shakti*, made women's entry into politics, smooth. Gandhi's inspiration and support accelerated women's self-confidence. His proclamation that women were moral, and better suited than men for the non-violence struggle, removed the stigma of their inferiority. Since Gandhi's stature was high, women encountered no opposition from their families, who know that 'they were protected', for the work they have done in the political field.

## **7. WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND POLITICAL ENTRY**

For Gandhi, "Education is that which liberates."<sup>19</sup> By education Gandhi aimed, self-dependence, self-reliance, and personality development. Gandhi believed that education will liberate women mentally, physically, and spiritually. He says, "Education must be for the sake of creation of a new world, based on truth and non-violence. For him, social progress can be achieved only through female education. Hence, he advised, "Educate a man, you educate an individual; educate a woman, you educate a family".<sup>20</sup> It is through education women learned the concept of equality and equal status notions. It is the instrument for positive changes from stereotypes traditional to emancipated womanhood.

During the nationalist movement, the initiative to include women as active political participants came from male leadership, particularly M.K. Gandhi. He affirmed that the women of India should have as much share in winning *swaraj* as men. Probably in

this peaceful struggle women can out-distance men by many a mile. We know that she is in a way superior to men in her religious devotion. Silent and dignified suffering is the badge of her sex. And now that government has dragged the women into the lure of fire, he hopes that women all over India will take up the challenge and organize themselves. It was these words of Gandhi appealed to the women of India to enter the struggle for India's freedom. It was only with the advent of the Gandhian era that women really played a significant role in nationalist politics.

Gandhi's much-published call for women's participation in the national movement spread throughout the country and attracted those from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. His message stressed the self-sacrificing and non-violent nature of women which he felt made them suitable proponents of the philosophy of *Satyagraha*. The success of his appeal lay in the fact that he was re-affirming and not contradicting existing sexual stereotypes. In a fast-changing environment of self-rule, families supported the participation of their womenfolk in non-violent protest; they boycotted foreign goods and sold their jewelry for the Motherland. Gandhi included the service of women in the constructive program, for *Satyagraha* automatically brought Indian women out from their darkness. Gandhi believed that, in a plan of life-based on non-violence, women have as much right to shape their own destiny as man has to shape his. The rule of social conduct must be framed by mutual cooperation and consultation. Gandhi made a deep analysis of women's problems and issues. He proposed a lot of measures for overcoming the many ills under which women as such labor. Hence an organized women's leadership, initiative, and self-help group SEWA registered under Ela Bhatt, as General Secretary to SEWA and winner of the prestigious Magsaysay Award for her work with women in India). For motivating the young generation Gandhi conducted canvassing programs in different Universities all over India.

He opined, "Truth without non-violence is not truth but untruth". To Gandhi, the moral discipline of an individual is the most important means of social reconstruction and it determines the structure of a non-violent state (Satya). Truth, *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Astheya* (non-stealing) *Aparigraha* (non-possession), and *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) are Gandhi's moral principles, which should be observed as vows. Truth, which is the pole star of his life and philosophy, comes first. Gandhi identifies 'Truth as God'. The Gandhian ideal of *Ahimsa* or non-violence is the right remedy for solving a major part of women's problems. Gandhian concept of *Satyagraha* is a powerful weapon for eradicating social evil against women Gandhi does not preach any aggressive means for, in the part of women to practice, to bring forth their dormant capacities. He, on the other hand, advocates moral courage and personal virtues like non-violence, truthfulness, the magnanimity of behavior, etc. as efficient tools to overcome the stubborn nature of the oppressor. According to him, dignified behavior can blunt even the sharpest and cruel behavior of man. Gandhi had a strong faith in women, that she could do public work, politics, and militarism. At various meetings in Europe, the question was pointedly asked as to Gandhi how women might help in fighting militarism. Gandhi's answer to this was, "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."<sup>21</sup>

## 8. STATUS AND ROLE

Referring to the question of women's role in society Gandhi re-affirmed, "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed women are less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then the woman is immeasurably man's superior".<sup>22</sup>

In this context, Gandhi offers a refreshing outlook on the existing value system, which forms the ground, for the ethical status of women. He has great expectations of women. For Gandhi, a woman with her potential powers of patience, dedication, and management skill, ideal in the field of management and administration; her power to influence the heart and adjudicate matters will make her an ideal diplomat; her wisdom and kindness will make her a good teacher and trainer; her truth, love, and courage will transform her into an ideal *Satyagrahi* (non-violent fighter). Gandhi had great confidence in women's ability to teach, manage, and build non-violent generations. Selfless service which makes the core of leadership is abundantly found in women, which qualifies them to become successful rulers, leaders, and managers. Gandhi sees, women's ways are very much similar to habits of 'nature' (*Prakriti*), with respect to the immanent powers and energy (*shakti*) they both carry.

In 1940, reviewing his twenty-five years of work in India, concerning women's role in society, Gandhi said, "My contribution to the great problem lies in my presenting for acceptance truth and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, the woman will be the unquestioned leader and, having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex..."<sup>23</sup>. Gandhi strongly believed that if non-violence is the law of our world and being, the future of the world is with women and they only have the capacity to ideally represent the nation with immense moral power, unlimited dedication, commitment, and unconditional love for the welfare of the nation. Gandhi has absolute confidence in women's powers and visualized an 'Ideal Non-Violent World', where women are the right choice for peacemakers and leaders of the future.

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- [19] *Harijan*,19/01/1947, p.49
- [20] *Harijan*, 10/11/1946, p.394.
- [21] *Young India*,14/01/1932.
- [22] *Young India*, 10/04/1930/ M.K Gandhi, Mahatma., vol.3, p.33
- [23] Gandhi.M. K, *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Navajivan publishing House, Ahmadabad, p.425.
- [24] NOTES:
- [25] *Ahimsa-A Sanskrit term, meaning non-violence (avoidance of violence) It is an important tenet of the ancient Indian religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism*
- [26] *Desha-puja means serving the nation with unconditional devotion*
- [27] *Himsa- Means violence*
- [28] *Harijan- A weekly newspaper published by M.K. Gandhi, in Gujarati.*
- [29] *Khadi is an Indian, cotton hand-spun and hand-woven cloth, which is spun into threads on a spinning wheel. Gandhi promoted the spinning of Khadi as part of rural self-employment in India during the 1920s*
- [30] *Purdah - is the Islamic religious practice of covering a woman's body with a long gown, for preventing other men from seeing them. But women's withdrawal into purdah has restricted them from personal, social, and economic activities outside their homes and gave them slavery.*
- [31] *Ramanama- Chanting the mantra/name of Sri Rama, the ideal manhood in Hindu scripture, Ramayana, one of the two sacred texts of the Hindu religion*
- [32] *Sati -is a funeral practice among some Hindu communities. The widowed woman, immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It is described as the widow being seated on the unlit pyre and then tied or otherwise restrained to keep her fleeing after the fire was lit. Some accounts state that the woman was drugged to fire and men used long poles to prevent her from fleeing the flames, and forcefully made her die in the funeral pyre. However, it is outlawed in modern India.*
- [33] *Satyagraha- is a philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance developed by Mahatma Gandhi. He used satyagraha in the campaign for Indian independence and also during his earlier struggles in South Africa. Satyagraha's theory influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. and it was used in his campaign for the civil rights movement in the United States.*
- [34] *Shakti-A Sanskrit word to denote 'power'*
- [35] *Stree shakti- The power of women*
- [36] *Tri-devata- This is the concept of three powerful goddesses, in Hindu mythology. They signify power, material prosperity, and wisdom.*
- [37] *Untouchability- This is a social construct that discriminates lower caste people as untouchables to upper caste. Considered a social evil developed out of the caste hierarchy in India.*
- [38] *Young India - A journal, published in English, by M.K. Gandhi*
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- [40] *SEWA- Self-employed women's association in India.*