CHAPTER-VIII

THE ASSESSMENT

A Critical Analysis of Gandhi’s Role in the Mass Mobilization of Women

In the early years of the twentieth century, the number of women associated with political activities was marginal. Moreover, the participation of women was restricted only to those belonging to the elite classes whose presence was symbolic rather than active political participation. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the entry of Annie Besant into politics in 1914 did infuse a new patriotic spirit among women, but still the participation of women in the national movement on a mass scale was lacking. This could partly be attributed to the social environment of those times which was too conservative to allow women to associate themselves with such activities.

But with the advent of Gandhi on the political scene of India, a radical transformation took place in the attitude of women and they began to come forward in increasing numbers to contribute their humble mite to the cause of the country’s emancipation. To start with, however, the participation of women in the non-cooperation campaign (1920-22) was not on a big scale and was “mainly confined to those, whose husbands, fathers, brothers or sons had already joined the struggle and were in jail”. But by the time the Civil Disobedience movement started in the early 1930s, women began to associate themselves with the national movement in increasing numbers in different parts of the country and started taking part in activities like picketing of shops selling foreign cloth and liquor, salt making, public demonstrations, propagation of charkha and khadi, etc.

And with the passing of the Quit India resolution in August 1942, a new generation of women – which was prepared to undertake dangerous and challenging tasks – began to emerge. In contrast to the desh sevikas of the 1930s who were clad
in orange and white sarees, the 1940s saw the women play aggressive roles. A conspicuous feature of the 1940s was that women from both the middle and lower class families became victims of police brutalities. But this did not dampen their spirits, and they stuck to their task with utmost determination. In many provinces and districts women became ‘dictators’ to run the Congress movement. All this went a long way in transforming the self-perception of women and “gave them a new sense of power, a new self-view”. Indeed, full credit goes to Gandhi who succeeded in mobilizing women in such large numbers and in motivating them to fight for the country’s emancipation. The questions that arise are: What made it possible for women to take part in nationalist politics, when other forms of politicization, indeed other means of public activity were strictly denied to them? How come that even after having played such an important role in the national movement, women reverted to their age-old traditional roles at home after the attainment of the country’s independence?

Transformation of nationalism into a religion was one of the important factors which facilitated women’s participation in the movement. Freedom struggle was looked upon as desh puja. It was by virtue of Gandhi’s image as a saint and the perception of the patriotic struggle as essentially a religious duty that the feminine role could be combined with nationalist politics. This meant that even despite their active involvement in the national movement, women could not become a part of the political process. In fact they were sharing a religious mission –

... a role deeply embedded in a tradition sanctified by the example of Meera Bai and the ‘sanyasinis’. The stress on the personal saintliness of Gandhi, a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under his leadership, enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to a religious domain. This was no innovation of Gandhi, however, who actually strengthened and continued an inherited tradition which started with Bankimchandra’s Bande Mataram—his hymn to the Motherland—and was further consolidated with the Extremist discourse.
on nationalism. Patriotism was subsumed within religion, the country became a vivid new deity added to the Hindu pantheon, and, by a sleigh of hand, became at once the highest deity from the moment of her deification: 'it is your image that we worship in the temples. 3

The motherland was identified with mother Goddess, and sacrifice of the highest order was required if the motherland was to be liberated. This was particularly relevant to women, who were supposed to be the manifestations of the Supreme Shakti herself. The nationalists capitalized on this and succeeded in mobilizing women by asserting that "unless the vital principle of Shakti imprisoned in women is released, the great act of sacrifice will not be complete". 4 Though the strong traditional moorings of the national movement did facilitate the participation of thousands of women in the national movement, yet at the time the idea of any permanent reversal of the customary roles of women was never considered by Gandhi.

It may further be noted that Gandhi interpreted women's political participation as an extension of their traditional roles. He placed before women the example of the suffering Sita who was his ideal woman. Gandhi believed that women's involvement in the freedom struggle was necessary for both ideological and practical reasons. If women could be involved, the national movement could be linked to every home in India. 5 Gandhi very ingeniously used the extended family concept as a powerful metaphorical construct for the extension of women's role outside their homes into the areas of public activity in the context of the national movement.

Another important programme through which Gandhi had ensured the participation of a large number of women in the national movement was the khadi programme. This programme was particularly directed to women. A large number of women was associated with this programme in its various dimensions. Many women took part in the picketing of shops selling foreign cloth, while others had cultivated the habit of spinning the charkha. Many widows also got engaged with
spinning activity with the purpose of earning some money.6 Mothers encouraged their sons to earn their livelihood through the manufacture and sale of Swadeshi goods. Above all, at many places mahila shilpamelas were organized where handicrafts and khadi clothes were sold.7 In many patriotic songs women were depicted as making an earnest request to their husbands to buy charkhas for them so that they could carry out their religious duties and also supplement their family income. The importance which women attached to khadi is depicted in the following patriotic song:

I request you, O Lord; with folded hands and lying prostrate at your feet to bring for me a swadeshi sari. I will wear chunari. This is singar of sohagin, the saput of widows; .... Fill with wealth and purify the body of mother. I will spin yarn and weave cloth as sanctioned by dharma. The excess of scarcity is now really intolerable, o dear, raise my veil a little and teach some arts to me. Don’t forget the old traditions. Charkha worship is written in karma kand.8

One important reason why the nationalists attached a special significance to khadi was that as a result of the import of a large amount of foreign made cloth by the British authorities, the indigenous weaving craft had got a big setback. The Swadeshi movement thus aimed at reviving the local textile industry. In due course, handloom weaving became a powerful symbol of moral and spiritual regeneration in India. Spinning became a spiritual activity which could purge the spinner of all impurities. The wheel also assumed the status of being one of the members of the family. Gandhi repeatedly emphasized the spiritual aspect of spinning and said that through this activity a person could become a noble human being. The nationalists tried to infuse into the minds of people the idea that Indian men and women became poor and naked because of the consumption of foreign goods work millions of rupees. Gandhi particularly emphasized the image of female nakedness and shame, as can be seen from the following statement:
The tyrants stripped off the clothes from the body of our sisters on road. We shall never put them on again.... It is our duty to use the spinning wheel and cut off the fetters of bondage and to save Mother India from the shame of being stripped naked like Draupadi.9

The nationalist leaders were thus able to associate women with the khadi programme through constant use of themes like protection, female nakedness, shame, etc. khadi became a religious symbol. And any programme which had religious overtones, greatly facilitated mobilization of women in large numbers. In the following statement, the religious aspect of spinning has been highlighted:

The sohagin adjusted the charkha, fitted the handloom and took up the gin. When she sat on the stool and began to spin yarn, she waked up the yoginis. When she put on the newly-woven cloth and set out for the market even good women began to feel jealous of her.10

Spinning was particularly recommended for every woman who was inclined towards spirituality. Moreover, participation in this activity did not contradict the socially accepted roles of women within the home; on the contrary it strengthened that role.

However, it would be interesting to note that even though Gandhi urged women to take the swadeshi vow and to spend some time each day in spinning, yet he never had the notion of women’s identity as wage – earners. In fact, Gandhi asserted that the spinning activity would reaffirm the ancient status of women.11 The image of women as nurturers rather than wage-earners was pre-dominant in the minds of the nationalists at the time when they were trying to involve more and more women in this activity. The role of spinning was merely confined to supplement the family income, as can be seen from the following statement of Gandhi:

Every yard of Khaddar purchased means a few coppers in the hands of women. It is for the women of India, a large number of whom do not get even
an anna per day, that I am going about the country with my spinning wheel and my begging bowl. The same money which you spend on foreign cloth may be very usefully employed in covering the naked bodies of a few of the poor sisters.12

Gandhi never favoured the idea of economic independence of women. He looked upon spinning and weaving as religious acts which were suited to the gentle nature of women. He regarded women as the embodiment of suffering and sacrifice; and their entry into the political field would cleanse the system of all the corrupt practices. Thus, Gandhi’s perception in regard to an equal status for women was limited to the religious sense of the term which was in conformity with patriarchal norms under which women’s role was complementary to that of men.

To Gandhi, chastity of women was more important than her right as a worker. He strongly recommended the spinning of charkha to women because it gave them dignity and honour. To quote him:

Millions of people are starving. They feel the pinch of hunger, but they cannot go to the costly works that the government has opened for them. The work there mostly consists of breaking stones for the roads or carrying metal. And what are the conditions under which this work has to be done. The majority of them are women and they have to work under the supervision of the overseers who have no character to lose or keep and who are lustful. These women who ought to be as dear to you as your mothers or sisters, if you have any regard for them, have been weaned from this class of labour. This charkha gives them all that they need. It gives them dignity. An old lady of 60 years walks two miles to obtain silvers from my son and says ‘tell your father he has given me something which is a blessing to me because it has given me a dignity which I did not have before’. Today there are millions of such men and women in Champaran to whom charkha would give independence. The wages of women there are anything between 5 and 6 pices
per day, those of boys between 3 and 4 picces and those of men between 8 and 10 picces..... How are they earning this income? No insolent overseers who rob these sisters of their shame and take one rupee as their dasturi of the three rupees that they give to them, but by working under the observation of clean lads who will regard their honour as sacred as of their own sisters and give them money with a smile. It makes all the difference in the world whether you receive 8 or 10 annas from insolent hands or four pice from hands sanctified with work. This is the dignity of Charkha.13

Thus, women's participation in the khadi programme was merely an extension of their domestic roles. On the basis of this, women could not claim an equal status with men in society. The nationalist ideology thus subjected women to a new patriarchy. The nationalists had little concern for the emancipation of women.

All this criticism, however, does not detract from the immense contributions made by Gandhi to the cause of Indian women's emancipation. "Like all solutions, Gandhi's solution had its own strengths and weaknesses. Yet however we these strengths and weaknesses",14 the fact cannot be denied that it was because of Gandhi's influence that a mass mobilization of women could take place in different parts of the country. His achievement becomes all the more significant when we consider that large number of purdah bound women abandoned this unhealthy custom and started working alongside men for the cause of the country's freedom.15

Devaki Jain songs that for many women leaders in pre-independent India, Gandhi's call for Satyagraha opened the door for their own liberation from oppressive social customs. In the ashrams of Gandhi great importance was attached to respect for women. The ashram life thus made it possible for a large number of women to come out of the narrow confines of their homes and to interact with a wider community. Thus in a way Gandhi met the Indian tradition half way. "He directed it away from its establishment structures and towards its changing dynamics".16 Devaki Jain further argues that it was this capacity to meet the Indian tradition half
way that enabled the women to extricate themselves to a certain extent from the firm
grip of male-dominated patriarchal norms. Though Gandhi’s approach was reformist
and moderate in nature, he proved to be tactically effective as his approach provided
vehicles and options for change.

It would not be proper to evaluate Gandhi’s role on the basis of the Western
feminist standards of the present-day times. In order to have a balanced perspective
of the contribution made by Gandhi to the women’s cause, it is important to consider
the social environment of the times – 1920-1948—during which the various Gandhian
movements, starting time the non-cooperation movement of the early 1920s, took
place. One must not overlook the fact that for a long time India had remained a
colony of Britain; the primary concern of the nationalists therefore was to secure the
country’s freedom. Moreover, patriarchy was so deep-rooted in the Indian psyche
that it was difficult to eliminate it completely. Therefore, given the constraints of
those times, women’s participation in such large numbers in the national movement
was in itself a big achievement. Indeed, Gandhi deserves the highest accolade for
being able to mobilize women on such a mass scale and to motivate them for actively
participating in the national movement.

It is also not true to say that all women became passive and reverted to the
age-old structure once the country became independent. It is not denied that the
majority of women completely dissociated themselves from the political as well as
social life after the country’s independence, but at the same there was large number of
women leaders (who took an active part in the national movement) who continued to
be actively associated with Indian political and social life. Notable examples being
Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani, Sarojini Naidu, Subhadra Joshi, Aruna Asaf
Ali, Rameshwari Nehru, Mridula Sarabhai, and so on. There were others who
continued to work for the women’s cause through organizations like AIWC.
We may conclude by saying that the pride of having fought for the country's freedom, the experience of working outside the home, and the act of participating shoulder to shoulder with men and the memories of jail and lathi charge went a long way in infusing a spirit of self-confidence and self-respect among the women of India, and in enhancing their status in society.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Ibid.


