Chapter IV

Participation of Women in the Freedom Struggle under the Leadership of Gandhi
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PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE FREEDOM
STRUGGLE UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF GANDHI

"The women of India should have as much share in winning Swaraj as men. Probably in this peaceful struggle woman can outdistance man by many a mile."\(^{1}\) This statement of Gandhi clearly indicates the role that the Indian women were going to play during the Freedom Movement.

Gandhi recognized from the start that women had a positive role to play in the reconstruction of society. He stressed that the women's right of equality was imperative in order to bring about social justice. He conceded, "Many of our movements stop half way because of the condition of our women. Much of our work does not yield appropriate results; our lot is like that of the penny-wise and pound-foolish trader who does not employ enough capital in his business."\(^{2}\) True to his ideal, Gandhi mobilized women to resort to satyagraha against all undesirable and unworthy restraints.

The women's movement in India was an integral part of the nationalist politics of Mahatma Gandhi. It was at the same time a product of Gandhi's programme. Nationalism had stimulated change and intellectual activity and involved women in roles that
were new and diverse. The nationalist movement was for Gandhi not merely a political struggle but a means of regenerating and rejuvenating society. He encouraged women to participate in all aspects and phases in national activity, particularly in the constructive programme and the non-violent satyagraha, initiated by him. Gandhi believed that a woman's nature was particularly suited to non-violent satyagraha, for it required not physical strength, but moral courage and spiritual determination.

The three essential qualities required of a satyagrahi, were a capacity for love, non-violence, and self-sacrifice. And these have traditionally been associated with women. A woman, Gandhi believed, would make an effective satyagrahi. He wrote, "To call women the weaker sex is libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior."³

Gandhi's first encounter with women's power took place in South Africa. There he realized how woman could "become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith."⁴ This was during the agitation against the 'Black Act' in 1913 when, instead of eliminating the disabilities already imposed on Indians, a new Supreme Court ruling, in a test case, declared all Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages invalid. The
entry of women in the satyagraha gave the movement a new force. Women went to prison willingly, underwent hard labour, and were not discouraged even when some of them lost their children as a result of the privations suffered in the struggle. Their appeals brought out thousands of miners in a protest strike. The success of this satyagraha was mainly due to the new moral force that women's entry brought into the movement. And Gandhi was convinced of women's inner moral strength and decided to make use of it in India.

In India a few elite women, encouraged by the presence of Annie Besant, had attended political meetings since the beginning of the First World War. The most outstanding of these women were Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and Bi Amma, mother of the Ali brothers. The Home Rule League had established a Women's Branch to enable women to meet and discuss political issues without the inhibiting presence of men. Women had participated in the first major political satyagraha in India in 1919, but in limited numbers. Small and isolated groups of women held political meetings in Bombay and Punjab. Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu addressed meetings in Bombay to educate women in the nature of satyagraha, and Kasturba Gandhi and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya sold proscribed literature in the streets. In Punjab, Sarladevi Chaudharani organized women on a political
basis. In Lahore an increasing number of women were attending public meetings, but none so far had attempted to address them. At the All India Congress Committee Session of 1922 of the 350 delegates 16 were women. In spite of all this, women were still not active enough in Indian politics during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The social and religious conventions of the country and the lack of training and discipline among women had limited their participation in politics.

It was Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength and inspiration to the Freedom Movement and drew into it women in large numbers. Indian women under his leadership joined the satyagraha struggle. Gandhi assessed rightly that in a long drawn political struggle against the Raj, he would achieve the designed goal only when all sections of people work shoulder to shoulder and put in their efforts, in a consistent and organized manner. He found that a large section of our women needed a great deal of attention. To gear up such a mass of humanity for the national cause and prepare them for a long drawn struggle required a unique strategy, persuasive methods, and training in vocations, which could be economically viable.

Gandhi's Constructive Programme had as one of its objectives the training and education of women in the fundamentals of organized activity and propaganda. In the first Non-Cooperation
Movement of 1921, Gandhi consciously involved women in an attempt to link their struggle with the struggle for National Independence. But the programme for women was devised in such a way that they could remain at home and still contribute to the movement. The Constructive Programme of swadeshi hinged around boycott of British goods, and spinning and weaving of khadi. Both these were eminently suited to the limitations imposed upon the contributions of women by their roles in the household. Madhu Kishwar remarks, “His programme for women complemented their household role and yet seemed to give them a sense of mission within their prosaic existence.”

The participation of women in the Constructive Programme would enable them to organize social reform activity on a local level. Social reform work was considered by the progressive as well as the conservative sections of society as an acceptable and a commendable form of activity. Therefore, women could accept supportive as well as leadership roles in the Constructive Programme without any fear of stepping outside the limits of conventional behavior. Their involvement in khadi work and prohibition would not expose them to criticism from their family or their community. Experience gained at a local level would make the women self-confident and generate leadership.
The Constructive Programme included several social reform activities. The women were, however, encouraged to participate in the programme of khadi, village industry, prohibition, communal harmony and eradication of untouchability. The propaganda to encourage the use of khadi and promote village industry was simple, forthright and could easily be understood by the average woman.

As with the other important groups such as the students and the peasantry, Gandhi told the women that they had to take the responsibility not just for changing their own situation, but that of the society at large. Because khadi was seen as a symbol of self-reliance and regeneration, it seemed to provide solutions to various problems. Gandhi declared, "I swear by this form of swadeshi, because through it I can provide work to the semi-employed women of India." With the destruction of India's village crafts, especially the textile industry, due to the impact of colonialism, millions of women had lost their means of subsistence. They responded to Gandhi's appeal.

Gandhi said that spinning and weaving were for women "The first lesson in the school of industry." While for the middle class women the charkha would supplement the income of the family, for poor women it was a means of livelihood and for the rich it was a duty, their dharma. Khadi, therefore, became a common bond
uniting women from different walks of life. While for the mass of women it meant spinning and weaving, the well-to-do women were exhorted not only to give up their foreign cloth but also wear khadi, which purified both the body and the soul. Large bonfires of foreign cloth took place during 1921.

Gandhi’s emphasis on hand spinning from 1920 onwards gave legitimacy to women’s activity and allowed them to participate in a new way. He stated that in matters concerning swadeshi, women should put the interests of the nation before even that of their husbands. The nation was thus considered to have precedence over the household. “He knew that the successful implementation of the vow of swadeshi was only possible if women were involved in the movement, for they look after the children and take decisions regarding dress.”

Gandhi successfully mobilized women to promote the use of khadi. Saraladevi Chaudharani worked actively to popularize the idea in Punjab. She “became a trend setter by going even to parties in her khadi sari. She toured many parts of North India enlisting support for khadi.”\(^9\) Manibehn Patel, the daughter of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, organized the women of Gujarat under the banner of swadeshi. She was encouraged and supported in her work by Gandhi. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur organized a ‘Spinner’s Association’ in Punjab and extensively promoted the use of khadi.
Basanti Devi and Urmila Das, the wife and sister of C. R. Das, sold khadi in Calcutta. Their arrest by the police had given them an added strength and an increasing number of women enlisted themselves as volunteers.

Gandhi's relentless propaganda in favour of charkha spinning and wearing of khadi was designed to bring the spirit of nationalism and freedom into every home, even in the remotest village. Kishwar writes, "In this way, abstract political ideas, such as struggle against colonial rule assumed concrete form for ordinary people. This was a very remarkable way of reaching out to women and bridging the gap between their private lives and the economic-political life of the country."10

Another sphere in which women seemed to have an important role to play was the removal of untouchability. Gandhi stated, "If the Hindu heart is to be cured of the taint of untouchability, women must do the lions share of the work."11 Gandhi addressed women on their duty towards the depressed classes, during his Harijan tour. After this, various women's organizations on their own initiative took up the issue.

On his Harijan tour in 1933 and on other occasions when he addressed meetings of women, Gandhi would make simple appeals to women to give him their jewellery. Young and old women would
offer their gold and silver for the cause of the Harijans and swadeshi. Gandhi firmly believed that the real ornaments for any woman were her virtues and these gold ornaments only enslaved womanhood. Therefore the giving up of jewellery would not only liberate women from their shackles but also help the poorest of the country.

Women had an important role to play in combating communalism and in helping the process of national integration. By making every household the battlefield of individual satyagraha, he asked women not to co-operate with their menfolk. They should refuse to cook for them and should starve themselves in protest so long as their men “...do not wash their hands of these dirty communal squabbles.” Gandhi was thus seeking to extend the power of women as wives and mothers.

The Salt Satyagraha marked a new high water mark of women's participation in the movement. On April 16, 1930 the salt laws were ceremoniously broken by Gandhi. On the famous Dandi March through the villages of Gujarat, Gandhi originally started off with seventy-nine satyagrahis. People from the villages en route and around spontaneously joined the March. When the procession neared Dandi, there were thousands of people walking with Gandhi. Among them were many women. Some of them were wealthy women from cities but a majority were ordinary village
women. Although Gandhi had wished to exclude women, the two people nearest him at the point were Sarojini Naidu and Mithubehn Petite. This was the signal for the mass breaking of the laws throughout the country. Hundreds and thousands of people walked to the nearest depot to manufacture salt. The attempt to manufacture salt was a symbol of the satyagrahis’ determination to win independence. Sarojini Naidu assumed the leadership of the Salt Satyagraha at Dharasana, the scene of the mass breaking of the salt laws.

In Bombay, people including small groups of women, responded enthusiastically to the movement to break the salt laws. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, in addition to breaking the salt laws, had given a daring speech admiring the lawbreakers and criticizing the government. Lilavati Munshi and Sarojini Naidu organized the women and led them in different parts of the city to break the salt laws. The volunteers of the Desh Sevika Sangh went about encouraging the women to manufacture salt. The women however, went a step further and decided to sell contraband salt at exorbitant prices. The purchasers were duly warned that they were buying an illegally manufactured product and could be imprisoned or fined for their purchase. But such warnings did not deter people from buying the salt.
The mass participation of women in the 1930 satyagraha demonstrated that they had been well trained and organized by the Constructive Programme. In almost every province women joined the processions in thousands to break the laws. "To manufacture salt in defiance of British laws prohibiting such manufacture, became a way of declaring one's independence in one's own daily life and also of revolutionizing one's perception of the kitchen as linked to the nation, the personal as linked to the political."13

Gandhi had initially excluded women from participating in the Salt Satyagraha. According to him, the job even more suited to women's genius was the picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops. He felt that the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921 had partially failed because men had been entrusted with picketing, and violence had crept in. So in the Civil Disobedience Movement, this agitation of picketing was to be initiated and controlled exclusively by women. Gandhi rightly said that if women would "...take up these two activities thus, specialize in them, they would contribute more than men to national freedom. They would have an access to power and self-confidence to which they have hitherto been strangers."14

Gandhi organized a Congress of women at Dandi in which women were made fully responsible for organizing and leading the movement against the use of liquor and foreign clothes. The men
could join in but only in a subordinate position. He argued that picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops was as important as the breaking of salt laws.

The anti-liquor campaign reached fresh heights in 1930. David Hardiman rightly assesses, "The campaign struck a chord with many women, who resented the fact that their husbands squandered their hard-earned incomes on drink rather than provide for their families. Also the intoxicated husbands often beat them up." Kasturba Gandhi played a prominent role in this campaign, organizing the cutting down of around twenty-five thousand toddy trees during the period of Salt Satyagraha, and picketing government auctions of liquor shops. In many cases licenses were not sold and in some areas liquor revenues came down sharply. The women also attended religious and social functions and urged the people to give up liquor. And many felt exhilarated and empowered in their new public role.

As the movement progressed women came increasingly to the fore. By early 1931, the authorities frustrated by their inability to break the spirit of resistance moved on to the offensive against women. The police charged the women, beat them with their lathis and rifle butts, at the same time showering them with sexual abuse. This inhuman treatment of women by the police did not discourage them. Instead they felt more and more strengthened.
During this period, women from all parts of India proved themselves the equal of the male freedom fighters and in many cases their superior. In the process, they gained a new sense of empowerment. In the words of Aruna Asef Ali:

Gandhiji's appeal was something elemental. At last, a woman was made to feel the equal of man; that feeling dominated us all, educated and non-educated. The majority of women who came into the struggle were not educated or westernized...

The real liberation or emancipation of Indian women could be traced to this period, the 1930s. Earlier, there had been many influences at work, many social reformers had gone ahead, it was all in the air. But no one single act could have done what Gandhiji did when he first called upon women to join and said, 'They are the better symbols of mankind. They have all the virtues of a Satyagrahi.' All that puffed us up enormously and gave us a great deal of self-confidence.16

Though this movement too petered out in the wake of the general disenchantment with the Civil Disobedience Movement, what Gandhi had done was to liberate the minds of Indian men and women. Women from traditional families came out of their
houses and took part in public processions and suffered prison life. Women gave up their religious and caste prejudices in the process. They willingly accepted food from untouchables in the prison. Gandhi succeeded in galvanizing traditional household as a powerful instrument of political action. By opening the gates to women's political participation, Gandhi facilitated the acceptance of the women's cause by the nationalists.

Women came to be represented in legislatures in the 1920s. Sarojini Naidu was Gandhi's choice for Congress Presidentship in 1925. Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant led a small delegation of women to demand that the same rights of representation in legislatures be granted to women as well. Within a few years of Gandhi's entry into politics and his attempts to integrate women's issues into the movement, many legislatures between 1922 and 1928 voted to make it possible for women to be represented in the legislatures. Gandhi kept emphasizing with great vigour that women must have votes and equal legal status.

Gandhi had tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for non-violence. "And his experience of participation by women in politics from his days in South Africa till the end of his life bears testimony to the fact that they never failed his expectations." With Gandhi's inspiration they took the struggle into their homes and raised it to a moral level. Women organized public meetings,
sold khadi and proscribed literature, started picketing shops of liquor and foreign goods, prepared contraband salt and came forward to face all sorts of atrocities including inhuman treatment by police officers and imprisonment.

Gandhi's insistence on non-violence as a revolutionary weapon contributed to creating a favorable condition for mass participation of women. More and more people came out of their homes. Women's entry into the movement was seen as a life preserving and humanizing force which would prevent violence. The political career of a majority of women, like the men, began with some contact, direct or indirect, with Gandhi. They were either present at a meeting addressed by him, had met him personally or communicated with him. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Gandhi's secretary for many years, feels that his commitment to the women's movement influenced and attracted women. She writes, "What drove me to Bapu was his desire to have women in his non-violent army and his faith in womankind. There was an irresistible appeal to a woman in a land where women were looked upon as only fit for producing children and serving their Lords and Masters."18

Sarojini Naidu, a versatile genius, played a dominant role in the freedom struggle. An ardent follower of Gandhi, she led satyagraha, defied the salt law and courted arrest along with her
numerous followers. A poetess of superb quality, she wrote poetry which generated the spirit of patriotism and sacrifice amongst the people of the country. She unquestionably accepted Gandhi as her master.

Many of Gandhi's devout followers like Manibehn Patel, Mirabehn, Mridula Sarabhai and Sushila Nayyar remained unmarried and devoted themselves to a higher cause. To Manibehn Patel, Gandhi wrote, "I for one would, if I could, compel girls to take a vow of lifelong chastity."19 Gandhi as a political leader repeatedly emphasized the advantages of a chaste life in a satyagrahi. He recommended the virtues of Brahmacharya to his followers. "Without Brahmacharya, the satyagrahi will have no lustre, no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world...His strength will fail him at the right moment."20

Gandhi had encouraged women to organize the Swadeshi Movement. The religious overtones of Gandhi's politics and propaganda were particularly attractive to women. He had identified spinning with religion. To spin was the dharma of every woman. To neglect native artisans in favour of foreign ones was an act, which could be equated to a religious sin. Only constant weaving and spinning would wipe out the sin of previous neglect.
The participation of women in politics, as visualized by Gandhi, had historical and religious continuity. He drew examples of heroic women from mythology and history to inspire and encourage women:

Sita set out for the forest with Ramachandra and there was nothing he did of which she remained in ignorance. Draupadi making herself a true partner in life accompanied the Pandavas in their wanderings and when her honour was threatened, she proved to the world that she had the strength to protect herself with soul force. Damayanti stood by Nala's side in all he did: not only that, but she even proved to be his protector when he was not in his right mind.21

Gandhi sought to spiritualize the political process. He and his women followers believed that women were more spiritually attuned than men and that they would therefore, understand and want to work within a movement dedicated to wedding spiritualism and politics. According to Sarojini Naidu, women's work was the "spiritual reform of the world."22 Many women of the Indian nationalist era found their spiritual home in satyagraha. Gandhi found ultimate equality in each person's spiritual nature. He said, "There is the same atman in woman as in man. It is not affected by differences of caste, sex or country."23
The participation of women in the nationalist movement was a definitive assertion of the equality, which they would enjoy, in independent India. Gandhi had encouraged women to take part in public activities to prove to the world that they were capable members of society, could make decisions, hold responsible positions, organize and lead. Such a demonstration, Gandhi believed, would dispel forever questions or doubts about the ability or capacity of women to cope with situations outside the home. But though equal, women would continue to perform the same functions. Domestic responsibilities and housework were not to be considered inferior to activities outside the home, but equal and essential. Gandhi had tried to set an example by doing his share of cooking, cleaning and looking after the sick at the Ashram. By doing this he had hoped to raise the status of housework and indirectly of those who performed it. He urged women to organize their time efficiently, so that they would have time for activities outside their home.

The women's participation in the freedom struggle had a tremendous impact in unfastening the centuries old shackles on the development of women's individuality. The confidence, consciousness and courage which women acquired during the processes of struggle in laying dharnas, going to jails, facing police brutalities and walking in processions made women realize their
own strength. The struggle for the nation's freedom must have made them self-confident to fight for their own emancipation. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, overwhelmed by the astonishing results of the movement remarked, “ancient prejudices melted, walls of tradition cracked and rays of new hope came creeping in.”

Gandhi made a phenomenal contribution to stimulate and motivate women's mobilization in political activism. However, this concern and enthusiasm of Gandhi for women's participation was not shared by other male leaders both at national and at local levels. When Gandhi asked Sarojini Naidu to lead the historic raid at Dharasana during the Civil Disobedience Movement, other Congress leaders tried to dissuade him. But Gandhi remained unmoved and Sorojini Naidu herself declared that the time had come when women must share equally the suffering and sacrifice of their men comrades in the struggle for the liberation of the country. In his article *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (1940), Gandhi reflected upon the narrow mindedness of men towards women's participation in the freedom struggle. He wrote:

I have included service of women in the constructive programme, for though satyagraha has automatically brought India's women out from
their darkness as nothing else could have in such an incredibly short space of time, Congressmen have not felt the call to see that women become equal partners in the fight for swaraj...They have considered themselves to be lords and masters of women instead of considering them as their friends and co-workers.26

Gandhi had enabled the women to project a new revolutionary image. His dominant position within the Congress had assured them that there would be no antagonism towards their new emancipated role. Women were accepted as equal comrades in Congress meetings and public processions without any questions being raised about the ability, capacity or scope of female activity. “It is due partly to the Gandhian legacy that every political party tends to reserve a few seats for women in each election without women having to organize themselves as a pressure group to make such a demand.”27 Thus women’s entry into social and political life came without pressure from below. Also it was characterized by the absence of hostility from men that women’s movements in some other parts of the world had to face.

It has been said that Gandhi did not encourage women to organize as a political force, in their own right around their own issues. They were to seek their liberation by serving the national
cause in the tradition of selfless workers. This is only partly true. Though his emphasis was on the national cause, he frequently told women that they had to assume a role of self-assertion. He said, "only a toad under the harrow knows where it pinches him. Therefore, ultimately woman will have to determine with authority what she needs."28

The participation of women in the nationalist movement created a tradition of female involvement in politics. The involvement of women in the nationalist struggle would not in itself have guaranteed recognition of their rights. Women participated in the American Revolution, but this did not bring any pressure on its leaders to grant them political rights.29 In India, the significant factor in women gaining recognition as politicians and of society's acceptance of them in such roles was due to the leadership and support of Gandhi. Gandhi was committed to improving the status of women in society and continually attempted to liberalize and educate public opinion in this regard. In all his fight for justice, liberty, and human dignity Gandhi brought women to the frontline of the fight. Never before in Indian history women joyfully participated in public activities as they did under the clarion call of the Mahatma.

The nationalist movement in India enabled women to evolve from an oppressed and subordinate position to an enlightened and
equal participation in the social and political affairs of the country. The movement made it possible for women to identify themselves with public life and seek fulfilment in their personal lives. Though the participation of women in the freedom struggle did not completely change their subordinate position in the society, it accentuated the spirit of liberalism and egalitarianism which was evident during the nationalist struggle. Indian women increasingly felt assured that they could use the available opportunities and identify themselves with the social, economic and political affairs of the country.
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