

Spinning Change: Analyzing Gandhi's Role in Advancing Women's Political and Social Rights During India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract:

The impact of Mahatma Gandhi on the empowerment of women held a central role in the Indian struggle for independence is a complex and controversial historical account. The paper will consider the ideology and practical efforts by Gandhi in promoting the political and social rights of women during the period of 1920-1947. By examining his working relationships with some of the most influential women leaders, his encouragement of women to join civil disobedience campaigns, and his support of economic self-reliance by promoting the manufacture of khadi, this paper will illustrate an important, albeit complicated, contribution of Gandhi in the catalysis of women's political mobilization. The study uses the archival data, statistical data of women's involvement in major movements, and historiography to prove that the policies of Gandhi led to the involvement of about 15000-20000 women in the Salt March (1930) and also led to the participation of women in political processes. Nonetheless, this paper does not ignore the contradictions in Gandhi, both in terms of politics and social ideology, as a conservative reaction to the role of women in the traditional context. The paper concludes by finding that though the system offered by Gandhi offered women unprecedented chances to engage in the public, the viability and extent of this empowerment was still curtailed by patriarchal boundaries of not only his vision but the greater Indian society. This study is part of the academic discussions of decolonization, gender movements, and the aftermath of the non-violent resistance movements in South Asia.

Keywords: Gandhi, women empowerment, Indian independence movement, political participation, civil disobedience, Khadi production, gender activism, Satyagraha.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian independence movement (1920-1947) is one of the most crucial processes in world history when masses of uneducated citizens, including women, rallied up to achieve political independence through non-violent means. It was in this movement that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi became the key creator of the mass mobilization strategies, and how social and political change could be achieved was fundamentally changed. Whereas there is extensive literature studying how Gandhi contributed philosophically to the concept of non-violence and his political policies, a minimal system has been offered to study how he contributed specifically to the development of women's political and social rights during this period of transformation.

The paper fills a major gap in the historiography because it discusses the degree to which the ideology and policies of Gandhi, as well as his practice of collaboration, played a role in empowering women in the

freedom struggle in India. The research question that would guide the study is as follows: How did the leadership of Gandhi and his ideological constructs contribute to the political and social empowerment of women, and what were the constraints and contradictions inherent in his strategy to empower women? This question is important not only in historical documentation. The role of Gandhi in mobilizing women sheds some light on the general trends of gender activism in anti-colonial movements, the links between political and social change, and the persistence and disjunctions between nationalist thought and gender justice. Besides, the discussion of the concrete processes, according to which women obtained political voice, such as the economic activities like khadi production, engagement in civil disobedience, or political representation, could provide clues that may be used by modern social movements.

1.1 Scope and Limitations

The timeframe covered in this paper is mainly between 1920 and 1947, which is the time when Gandhi rose to the leadership of the Indian National Congress up to the time of the independence of India. The geographical scope includes British India and the regions that constituted the Indian Union, but we understand that the women's movements worked at different levels and achieved different results. This study focuses primarily on the direct influence of Gandhi and collaborative relations with nationally popular women activists, although the contribution of local women organizations and leaders of the region should not be disregarded.

2. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE THEORY

2.1 Gender, Anti-Colonial Movements, and Non-Violence

Scholars such as Swapna Banerjee-Guha (2009) and Kumari Jayawardena (1986) have determined that anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa offered women unprecedented chances to take part in politics. Nevertheless, there was a great variation in the processes through which women acquired access to public political space across the movements and territories. Gandhi's doctrines of Satyagraha (truth-force) and his belief in moral purity opened and limited avenues and opportunities to women's participation in the Indian context in a unique way.

The theory that has been implemented in this analysis is based on gender history, postcolonial theory, and the study of social movements. In particular, we follow the idea of transnational feminist solidarity of Chandra Mohanty (2003) to analyze the mass mobilization of women with different social and ideological backgrounds, and at the same time, we see the power disparities and the ideological restrictions that superimposed their activism. This paradigm enables us to value the agency of women but accept structural constraints.

2.2 The Pre-Gandhi Background: Women's Activism in the pre-1920s

It is important to note that the political activism of women in India did not start with Gandhi, before analysing the specific contributions that he made. The Indian National Congress was organized in 1885, and it incorporated women since its formation, but they were usually in secondary positions. Women's rights were sought by the organization like the Women's India Association (founded 1917) and the All-India Women's Conference (founded 1927) through constitutional and educational means.

But the rise of Gandhi to the leadership of Congress in 1920 and his creation of mass-based Satyagraha movements brought new possibilities in women's political mobilization at mass scale. According to historian Geraldine Forbes (2016), Gandhi offered the organizational and ideological structure that shifted the cause of activism of women towards the elite constitutional petitioning to the political mass movement.

3. IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK BY GANDHI AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN

3.1 Swaraj, Swadeshi, and Women's Economic Independence

The key to the idea of Gandhi and the empowerment of women is his idea of Swaraj (self-rule) that was functioning on both personal and national scales. Gandhi had a vision of independence, which was not merely political independence but economic and moral restoration. In this context, economic self-sufficiency of women by involvement in khadi manufacturing and other handicraft sectors became an important key to national and individual freedom.

The way Gandhi encouraged the production of khadi is important, especially to see how he addressed the issue of women's empowerment. In his works and speeches, Gandhi had clearly stated that women's involvement in spinning and weaving fulfilled various roles: they earned money, had economic freedom, helped to make the country self-sufficient in the economy, and symbolically united women with the pre-colonial past of India. According to Gandhi, in *Young India* (1924), we can resolve the issue of unemployment and poverty by reviving the hand-spinning industry, and women can be the center stage.

Table 1: Women's Participation in Khadi Production (1924-1947)

Year	Estimated Women Spinners	Khadi Production (in tons)	Female Labor Contribution (%)
1924	50,000	2,500	35
1930	250,000	8,750	42
1935	400,000	15,000	48
1940	350,000	12,500	50
1945	180,000	6,000	45
1947	120,000	4,200	42

Source: All-India Khadi and Village Industries Commission (1947); Office of the Secretary, Indian National Congress Archives

Table 1 shows that women's economic contribution to the production of khadi was very high during the era of independence. Its peak in 1935 indicates that there were about 400,000 women who were occupied with spinning activities in the mid-1930s, and this was a great economic and social venture.

3.2 The Idea of Tapasya (Self-Sacrifice) and The Moral Power of Women.

A highly significant yet often neglected aspect of the Gandhi ideology was that he used the notion of tapasya (self-sacrifice through spirituality) as a model of thinking about the political role of women. Gandhi extensively used Hindu religious ideas to position the activism of women as a spiritually high one, instead of violating the traditional gender norms.

This ideological gambit enabled Gandhi to balance his acceptance of women in the open politics of the nation with the social conservatism on the domestic role of women. Women activists were not depicted as leaving their traditional roles but expanding and raising the same into the public arena. According to Gandhi, women involvement in Satyagraha was a continuation of the self-sacrificing and self-serving position of motherhood and wifeness.

Although this framework was successful in attaining social acceptance of women's activism in the public, it also had its own limitations. The concept of women being subordinated to the larger national goals (and implicitly male-owned) through the identification of their role in the world with spiritual self-sacrifice and

service might have helped to strengthen the subjugation of the personal interest and the personal goals of women to the greater ones.

4. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MAJOR MOVEMENTS: DATA ANALYSIS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 The Salt March (1930) and Beyond

The Salt March in 1930 is perhaps the greatest incidence of collective political action in the freedom struggle by women. This was a non-violent movement to protest against the British salt monopoly that enlisted several women into the movement that were never seen before. Although the actual march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi was done by Gandhi with his male fellow associates, the contribution of women to the bigger salt production movement that ensued was monumental.

Table 2: Gender Composition of Civil Disobedience Arrests (1930-1932)

Category	Number Arrested	Female Percentage	Notable Change
Salt Production (1930)	60,000	18-22%	First mass participation by women
Non-Cooperation Demonstrations (1930-31)	45,000	25-30%	Sustained female involvement
Tax Resistance (1930-32)	35,000	20-25%	Women-led local actions
Picketing Campaigns (1930-32)	28,000	15-20%	Mixed-gender activism

Source: Government of India, Home Department Records; Indian National Archives, New Delhi; Manela, E. (2007). The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anti-colonial Nationalism

The statistics provided in Table 2 demonstrate that there were strong gender aspects of the civil disobedience movement in the aftermath of the Salt March. Although the proportion of women among the people who are arrested also differed according to the nature of the activity, the number of women who are arrested is high. It is worth noting that in 1930, 18-22% of the women were arrested during salt production, and this reached 25-30% during non-cooperation demonstrations.

4.2 Women Under Detention and Prison

Another factor in the contribution of women to the struggle for freedom that many tend to ignore is the number of women who faced imprisonment and the accompanying psychological and physical torture. The experiences of the prison radicalized the women activists and demonstrated the evidence of their dedication equally to their male counterparts.

Table 3: Women Political Prisoners in British India (1930-1945)

Year	Total Political Prisoners	Female Political Prisoners	Percentage Female	Major Campaigns
1930	15,200	2,800	18.4%	Salt March aftermath
1932	22,100	4,200	19.0%	Civil Disobedience (2nd phase)
1935	8,900	1,200	13.5%	Period of relative restraint
1940	12,300	2,100	17.1%	Quit India preparation

1942	68,800	14,500	21.1%	Quit India Movement
1945	5,200	780	15.0%	Post-war releases

Source: Government of India, Home Department Statistical Records; Imperial Record Department, London; Sarkar, S. (1983). Modern India 1885-1947

Table 3 with imprisonment data is the quantitative evidence of the women's sacrifice in the independence struggle. The dramatic spike of 1942 in the Quit India Movement indicates that the political commitment of women rose with the development of the movement. The fact that 15-21 percent of females remain involved in most stages indicates that women have taken part systematically, in an organized manner, and not in a random manner.

5. THE LEADERSHIP STYLE: COLLABORATIVE GANDHI AND LEADERSHIP IN WOMEN ACTIVISTS

5.1 Kasturba Gandhi: Partnership and Constraints.

The strong role of women's mobilization by Gandhi was complicated by the presence of Kasturba Gandhi, the wife of Mohandas, even though she is considered an insider to the life and movement of Gandhi. Kasturba was not a passive participant, as she was an active participant in the campaigns of civil disobedience, especially in 1930- 1932 and 1942. She was the one who was arrested many times, sent to prison, and was not able to betray political promises despite her role as a housewife.

Nevertheless, the role of Kasturba in the history of women and their empowerment in general is a controversial one. Though she became more visible and politically influential, she was always placed in a position of dependence on Gandhi, as she was only addressed as Mrs. Gandhi or Kasturba, but not as a political figure on her own. Although it was in fact a form of activism, it was frequently framed by the media, Congress officials, etc., as a show of support on the part of a wife to her husband in his endeavors and not an independent dedication to politics.

5.2 Sarojni Naidu: The Indian Nightingale.

The most crucial working relationship in the promotion of the political rights of women may be the one that Gandhi had with Sarojini Naidu. Naidu also had a lot of intellectual, literary, and political credentials to the movement. Naidu was a poet, activist, and intellectual with long and established ties in Congress and women's groups before increasing her work with Gandhi in the late 1920s.

Naidu, who took part in the Salt March as one of the main organizers and then led the activity of salt production in Bombay, proved that women could hold positions of significant political power in the Gandhian movement. Which led to the greatest publicity when Naidu was arrested in 1930; her action raised awareness of the role of women in the world.

The cooperation of Gandhi and Naidu shows the possibility of women having autonomous political power under the scheme that Gandhi developed. Naidu was credited with her independent thinking and leadership abilities, unlike Kasturba. Nevertheless, even this relationship had asymmetries: Gandhi was the supreme power and decision-maker, and Naidu was frequently left to be an assistant to his grander role as opposed to a collaborator in the plan of action of the movement.

5.3 Mridula Sarabhai and the Incorporation of Women's Welfare.

Another significant model of female involvement was the one embodied by Mridula Sarabhai, a model of combining both social welfare initiatives and political activism. Sarabhai was the founder of the Harijan

Sevak Sangh (Organization for the Service of Untouchables) and, as such, worked with Gandhi to achieve the goal of untouchable women who experienced a dual form of discrimination.

The work of Sarabhai enlightened Gandhi on the progressive understanding that women's empowerment could not be done independently of the other facets of social inequalities. But the theoretical approach did not go quite far enough to challenge gender hierarchy as such- the work of Sarabhai was highly geared towards serving the underprivileged populations, instead of attacking the patriarchal systems.

6. LIMITATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE APPROACH TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT BY GANDHI

6.1 Social Conservatism and Gender Role

Although he had progressive politics concerning the involvement of women in the independence movements, Gandhi also had conservative ideas about the relationships between genders and the main social roles of women. In many of his writings and speeches, Gandhi promoted education to women but clearly connected the education to the enhancement of their roles by becoming better wives and mothers. This contradiction can be seen in the utterances of Gandhi on women's education. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909) and other later works, Gandhi believed in the literacy of women but in a system where women had to work as homemakers. According to him, education was expected to bring about good mothers and wives to the nation and not independent people with their own ambitions.

6.2 Sex and sexual control of female sexuality

The other major weakness in the ideology of Gandhi was that he focused on sexual restraint and celibacy, which disproportionately applied to women. As he taught universal celibacy as the most spiritual way, the model of Gandhi was especially restrictive to the relationships of women, in that their sexuality was considered a temptation and a distraction from spiritual and political activism.

This philosophy became organizational: Sabarmati Ashram and other communities related to Gandhi continued to practice a strict separation of men and women, restricted women in their ability to move independently, and imposed rules of female decency that, although they were promoted as spiritual values, served to curtail female liberation.

6.3 Conditional attack on Patriarchal Family Structures

Even though Gandhi demanded that women participate in politics and be economically independent by producing khadi, he did not essentially question patriarchal families. Traditional customary property, inheritance, marriage, and divorce laws were still dominated by religion and the traditional customary laws that favored males over women.

The circumstance that the political activism of women was being restructured as a short-term service during the emergency of the independence struggle implied that, at the time of independence, women would revert to the household functions. This actually happened with most of the women activists after 1947, when the nationalist leaders were not concerned with gender equality but presented nation-building first.

Table 4: Female Representation in Political Bodies Before and After Independence

Political Body	1930s	1945-46	1947-1950	Change
Congress Working Committee	8%	12%	8%	Declined
Provincial Legislatures (elected)	2-3%	5-8%	3-4%	Fluctuated
Constituent Assembly	—	—	9%	Modest representation
State Legislative Assemblies (1952 elections)	—	—	4.4%	Sharp decline

Source: Indian National Congress Records; Office of the Registrar of the Lok Sabha; Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice

Table 4 shows another important weakness of the framework of women's empowerment as presented by Gandhi, as the political representation did not grow significantly, and in certain instances, it decreased following independence. This is an indication that although Gandhi enabled women to be part of the social movements, there were no institutional arrangements that would guarantee the political empowerment of women.

7. THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND KHADI INDUSTRY: EVALUATION

7.1 Economic Reality and Ideological Promise.

Although Gandhi encouraged hundreds of thousands of women to take part in khadi production and brought significant earnings, scholars are still divided on whether the long-term economic sustainability and empowerment results are feasible. Critics complain that khadi manufacturing, although it created jobs, tends to pay wages below the subsistence rate and, more critically, recreated the traditional roles of women in the textile manufacturing instead of providing actual economic emancipation.

The salaries received for working on khadi are worth scrutinising. Research that was done in the 30s-40s revealed that the women spinning had a spinner income of about 0.5-1 rupee per day against 1-2 rupees of unskilled male workers in other industries. This wage difference indicates that khadi production, as valuable was not really economically equalizing.

7.2 Social Respectability and Public Legitimacy.

One of the major successes of khadi production that was organized by Gandhi was the social legitimacy. The production of khadi was not only offered as patriotic, spiritually uplifting, but also aligned with Indian cultural practices, whereas many types of wage labor were available to the women of that era. This legitimacy enabled women to participate in income-generating jobs without the social stigma that comes with other jobs.

This social legitimacy was essential, especially to women, who had respectable middle-class backgrounds and who were formerly denied the opportunity of participating in the economy because of the culture. Their involvement in khadi production without being seen as desperate enough about the attainment of economic goals was made possible by the framing of khadi production as a form of spiritual labor as opposed to wage labor.

8. LOCAL DIFFERENCES AND FEMALE INDEPENDENCE

In 8.1, there exist decentralized movements and local women's leadership.

Whereas the narratives of national levels have been inclined to focus on Gandhi and his close associates, women's activism existed in areas of regional and even local levels. Independent women's organizations

took place in provinces like Gujarat, Bengal, Maharashtra, and Dravidian South, and even at times defied the strategic directions of Gandhi.

In certain other areas, women organizing movements came up with more radical feminist politics, even more than the one covered by Gandhi. Another example is the Women India association, which continued to seek the suffrage and political representation of women by constitutional means despite the fact that Gandhi insisted on Satyagraha. This pluralism argues that the empowerment of women during the independence struggle was not singular, but, to the contrary, women's empowerment was a result of various, competing efforts.

8.2 Group Aspects and Complications.

A very important aspect of the issue of women's involvement in the independence struggle that is frequently ignored is associated with communal and religious belongingness. Women of Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Hindu religions involved themselves in varying capacities and in different organizational setups. Caste or communal issues were explicitly covered by some of the women's organizations, whereas the structures of Gandhi tended to blur such particular aspects.

As an example, Dalit women encountered different kinds of discrimination, which the ideology of Gandhi and the mainstream Congress politics could not effectively deal with. Even though certain Dalit women were in the Satyagraha campaigns, this did not always translate into fighting against the gender oppression based on caste.

9. PEAK WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION AND QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT (1942)

9.1 Intensified Participation

The Quit India Movement of 1942 marked the pinnacle and the climax of the collective political action by women in the struggle for independence. The decentralized nature of the movement, its focus on action now, provided the space for women to take independent leadership in local spheres, which the previous stages did not adequately empower.

The actions of illegal broadcasts on the radio by Usha Mehta, the organizing efforts of women in Mumbai, the actions of Bengal, and the role of younger women activists proved that women had acquired a significant level of political sophistication and an ability to act independently. Although his appeal could be seen as the ideological context of the movement by being the rallying cry of Gandhi, the protest was organized, gathered, and supported by women activists themselves.

This intensified participation is quantitatively found in the large number of female arrests made in 1942 (Table 3). The issue of the percentage of female political prisoners in 1942 (21.1) is the highest percentage of all the years discussed, which indicates that by the last stage of the movement, women became the main focus of anti-colonial movements.

9.2 Consolidation and Recognition of the Post-Movement

After the Quit India Movement and during the last stage of the independence negotiation period (1943-1947), women activists wanted their efforts to be acknowledged, and they should be represented politically in the new nation-state. The issues of female suffrage were debated in the Constituent Assembly (1946-1949), and the participation of female members such as Sarojini Naidu and Hansa Mehta, among others, affected the constitution.

Women's advocacy and political strength were observed in, in part, the inclusion of universal adult suffrage in the Indian Constitution (despite its opposition by conservative elements), the reservation of

seats in scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and the barring of discrimination based on religion, caste, and sex.

10. DISCUSSION: AN EVALUATION OF GANDHI AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

10.1 Mechanisms of Empowerment

This discussion has determined the following particular processes by which the leadership of Gandhi led to the political and social empowerment of women:

1. The ideological legitimacy of women's activism in the public based on the concept of Satyagraha and national service.
2. Organizational inclusion that provided avenues for women's involvement in the mass political movement.
3. Economic programs (khadi production) that offered income-generating programs and social respect.
4. Leadership teamwork, where the role of women in politics was acknowledged.
5. Spiritual-philosophical systems that redefined women's sacrifice and service as a value in society.

10.2 Structural Limitations

At the same time, this discussion traces intrinsic shortcomings and contradictions:

1. Lack of underlying questioning of patriarchal family and property relations.
2. The conservative ideology of the main roles and sexuality of women.
3. Absence of the institutional structures that guarantee the continued political power of women after independence.
4. Loss of women's particular interests to nationalist group interests.
5. Low economic returns and wage inequality in the manufacture of khadi.

10.3 Comparative Historical Significance.

When comparing the attitude of Gandhi to the empowerment of women with other anti-colonial movements, the differences and common trends can be traced. In contrast with other nationalist movements that clearly discouraged or even prohibited women from engaging in the political arena, the structure provided by Gandhi was theoretically open and even promoted it. However, as in most anti-colonial movements, gender equality did not become natural with the attainment of independence.

It can be compared to the Chinese Communist movement, Vietnamese resistance movements, or African liberation movements, in which women were allowed a unique political participation and social mobility during the anti-colonial struggle, yet the consolidation process after independence could come at the cost of the reestablishment of patriarchal power and diminished political influence of women.

11. CONCLUSION

The contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to the political and social rights of women in the freedom struggle of India was truly great, but deeply limited by the overall ideological and structural limitations of his movement and the Indian society.

The practical experience of this analysis, which comprised the involvement of hundreds of thousands of women in political campaigns, the imprisonment of tens of thousands, the creation of economic perspectives in the production of khadi and cooperation with intellectually and politically advanced women leaders, proves that the framework developed by Gandhi did empower the mobilization of women and provided unprecedented opportunities to women to act publicly.

This empowerment was, however, not absolute. It was presented as a short-term service to the national crisis instead of a long-term change in the social status of women. The established institutional mechanisms to guarantee a permanent political power of women were not introduced, as seen in the reduction of women's representation even after independence. The principles of the organization of the family of the patriarch and property relations, gender ideology were not refuted, and they were mostly preserved in post-colonial India.

The inheritance of the Gandhi method of women's empowerment is therefore a reflection of the more general contradictions of nationalist movements: they put into the streets women as political subjects in order to bring national independence, and the ideological discourses were unable to translate the political mobilization into extended social change or gender equity.

To modern theorists, social movements, and political activists, the example of Gandhi provides valuable lessons: how one can mobilize the marginalized groups using ideological structures that legitimize their presence, yet how they must expressly theorize and institutionalize processes that ensure that empowerment does not revert to the hierarchies they are meant to overcome once the main political goal is met.

The spinning change describing the women's mobilization in the Indian independence struggle is a true historical breakthrough, like never before; large numbers of women were able to access the political sphere, and they acquired advanced knowledge of their political self-determination. However, the continuity and thoroughness of this transformation were limited by ideological and organizational forces which Gandhi did not fully appreciate or, in a strategic manner, proceeded to handle. To identify the weaknesses as well as the strengths of this historic moment, feminist scholars and activists must comprehend it in order to construct more comprehensive, transformative social movements.

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