

Gandhi's Strategy behind the Symbolism of Sita: Image of an Ideal Woman

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Abstract

Gandhi the most charismatic leader of India's freedom movement was an "extraordinary political strategist" who could catch the attention of the masses through his fancy words. As E.M.S. Namboodiripad, rightly acknowledge Gandhi, "as the most successful mass leader, who could feel the pulse of the people". As a political strategist Gandhi made tactful choices while mobilising the different groups of people against the different socio-political stipulation prevailed in India at the time of colonial rule in India. It is known that Gandhi as a master strategist applied many techniques in politics to communicate with the masses. Among the technique he applied one is the extensive use of different objects as symbol in his political discourse to communicate and convey his message towards the masses. Although his whole life witnesses the symbolisation of different objects as symbol but this study only on seeks to explain Gandhi's symbolic representation and interpretation of ancient mythological imagery of 'Sita' from its multiple strategic point of view. Although, the mythological Sita encompasses with the traditional Hindu beliefs and practises but when Gandhi symbolise Sita, he invested new characteristic and noble ideas with the traditional image of Sita.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, extraordinary, political strategist, mythological, symbolisation

Introduction

Gandhi the most charismatic leader of India's freedom movement was an "extraordinary political strategist" who could catch the attention of the masses through his fancy words. As E.M.S. Namboodiripad, rightly acknowledge Gandhi, "as the most successful mass leader, who could feel the pulse of the people"¹. As a political strategist Gandhi made tactful choices while mobilising the different groups of people against the different socio-political stipulation prevailed in India at the time of colonial rule in India. It is known that Gandhi as a master strategist applied many techniques in politics to communicate with the masses. Among the technique he applied one is the extensive use of different objects as symbol in his political discourse to communicate and convey his message towards the masses, as he was intensely aware of the fact that the functional communication such as writing and speeches had a very limited application in India where the majority of its peoples are instinctive. Although his entire life witnesses the symbolisation of practical day to day objects but this study restrict its focus only on studying Gandhi's symbolic representation and interpretation of 'Sita' from its multiple strategic point of view.

And in order to understand deeper meaning, importance and wider implications of Gandhi's frequent symbolisation of 'Sita' as 'role-model for India women', this study intends to ask the following questions: Was Gandhi simply manipulating the symbolic values of 'Sita' (from Indian Mythology) imagery for the political end or was he generally committed to women cause and their empowerment in Indian society. Along side of it this paper also seeks to highlight the differences between the attributes character associated with the Gandhi's symbolic representation of Sita image and the ancient mythological Sita.

In many occasions Gandhi bring into play the Sita image to attract people. Sita was an ideal woman for Gandhi who is considered as very pure, firm, chaste etc. She represent Gandhi's ideal womanhood. Gandhi exemplified the mythological Sita imagery with multiple new attributes and characteristics in different socio-political context. The following three sections try to understand Gandhi's multi-pronged strategy behind the symbolisation of Sita. **First** To challenge the colonial domination by bringing women into the forefront of nationalist movement; **Second** To promote the idea and values of *Swadeshi* among the women of India and **Thirdly** To uplift the status of women in society and confer them as an equal entity as men in Indian society by challenge and transform the Indian perception which conferred a very lower position to women.

Gandhi's strategic to use Sita imagery in his anti-colonial movement:

Gandhi's first and major Non-violent mass movement in India is non-cooperation movement which started in 1920-1922. Two major agenda of the non-cooperation movement is to resort fully non-cooperate with the colonial regime, which according to Gandhi synonymous to *Ravanraj* and to promote the indigenous village industries in the form of Khadi and charkha which is a part of Gandhi's constructive programme or *Swadeshi* movement. In both the action Gandhi extensively used the symbolic values of the ancient Sita imagery. During this movement Gandhi appealed all section of the people including the women to resort non-cooperation with the colonial government. In this historical movement Gandhi made a specific attempt to bring women into this mass struggle. Needless to say that, in this regards his tactful choices of traditional Sita imagery made an imperative impact on the Hindu people in general and women in specific. Gandhi asked every woman to follow the path of Sita and to resort non-cooperation with the Britishraj/Ravanaraj, because Sita in Gandhi's advocacy did the same with the demon king Ravana. Gandhi narrates "Our men and women should now resort to non-co-operation with the Government, much like Sita's or Ramachandra's non-co-operation with Ravana. The latter held out inducements to Sita, sent her various good things to eat, but she disregarded them all and practised the most rigorous *tapascharya* to be free from the clutches of Ravana"². In another occasion while addressing the women Gandhi says "Ravana offered tempting things to Sita, tried to frighten her, but she did not yield ever so little.... As long as our sisters do not develop the virtues of Sita, we shall remain unfit to employ non-co-operation or to get Swaraj. The sweets offered by Ravana and spurned by Sita were not bitter to the taste; but they had been offered by unworthy hands and so she threw them away"³. Again at another place he writes in 27th February, 1921 "We must end *Ravanarajya* and establish *Ramarajya*. The way to do that was indicated by Sita. She had rejected all sweets, ornaments and other temptations offered by Ravana, and the daughters of India should act in like manner"⁴.

Now, it is quite apparent from Gandhi's writings that, by symbolising Sita, Gandhi brought religious sentiment in his anti-colonial propaganda and made it as the dharma of the women to follow the path of Sita and resort non co-operation with the colonial ruler, likewise 'Sita's non co-operation with the Ravana'. He largely employed the symbolic values of Sita in connection with his anti-colonial struggle, which no doubt help him to create a favourable atmosphere for women's large scale and respectful participation into the nationalist politics as well as in the public sphere too.

By bringing women into the nationalist politics in one way Gandhi wanted to strengthen his mass struggle against the colonial regime on the other hand he wish to give them a liberal space in the public life. Although, in many occasion Gandhi

confess that the participation of women in his nonviolent movement to be an essential ingredient for its success. In 1925 Mahatma Gandhi declared that "As long as women of India do not take part in public life, there can be no salvation for the country". He further declared, "As long as . . . Women do not come to public life.. .. We are not likely to attain Swaraj". "Ever if we did", he added, "it would have no use for that kind of Swaraj to which women have not made their full contribution."⁵, However it would be mistaken to think that he simply manipulated women for his political ends only. Moreover, he was equally committed for women cause and their regeneration. He said that women have the right to participate in all the activities of life and like men have equal rights of freedom and liberty. He called women to "wake up and recognise their essential equality with men"⁶ and more importantly he promised a broader role for them in the Indian society. As Forbes writes "it was a victory for Mohandas k. Gandhi and promised a more active role than that offered by the Swadeshi vow."⁷ In this concern his symbolic representation of Sita enthuse women to participate in both, the national movement and their legitimate fight for their equal status in the society.

Let us now try to understand in some other similar contexts in which Gandhi's symbolic or rhetoric representation of ancient imagery of Sita helps him to create a more liberal space for women to participate in the socio-political sphere out of their domestic sphere.

Sita as a potent symbol in Gandhi's constructive programme:

The adoption of Khadi and charkha is a central factor of Gandhi's constructive programme, which is designed to build up the nation from the very bottom to upward. While propagating for the regeneration of khadi and charkha Gandhi vigorously pursue various methods, such as speeches and writings as well as self-representation in playing with charkha. He asked women of all section to join in his Khadi mission. He urged women to take the Swadeshi vow to give up foreign goods and spin every day. In this connection Gandhi evoked India's sacred legendary symbols, especially Sita, when he asked Hindu women to join the political movement.

He [Gandhi] urged them [women of India] to exhort and encourage their husbands and sons to pursue the path of duty, and urged them to help vigorously and effectively in the building up of a free India by taking up Swadeshi. In the days of Ravana's government even Sita Devi had to wear for fourteen years the rough garment made from the bark of the tree. Even so, today, when the adoption of Swadeshi meant a long step in the path of freedom for India, the Indian ladies should make it a matter of religious duty with them not only to wear only khaddar clothes both hand-spun and hand-woven, they must also devote one hour at least daily to hand-spinning and help in the hand-weaving of cloths.⁸

Gandhi convinces people that India need women leaders who are very 'pure and firm and self-controlled' as the ancient Sita Devi who kept heart and body pure by wearing Khadi. "Mahatmaji prayed that his sisters be like Sita.... He urged his sisters to purify their body by wearing khaddar. Sitaji used to wear cloth made in India. In her days not a bit of foreign cloth was imported into India"⁹.

Perhaps by symbolising Sita Gandhi wanted to promote the Swadeshi ideology in one hand and on the other hand he wanted to stop the drainage of Indian wealth. As he writes "Every year a sum of Rs. 60 crore goes from here to foreign countries as the price of cloth. I shall tell you the way to stop this. We can install Sita..... We should solemnly declare that it is a sin to wear foreign cloth.... Using foreign cloth is a sin. Our first duty is to ply the charkha."¹⁰. Gandhi's rhetoric use of Sita, in

connection with his Khadi movement enabled him to carry his message of Swadeshi and Swaraj to the people and to establish connection with them. Very categorically Gandhi convinces women that, without their active role and co-operation in the Khadi and charkha program Swaraj as Gandhi call Ramraj is impossible. Therefore, he asked women to pursue the path of Sita and exhort active participation in the countries fight to establish Swaraj/Ramraj. Very often Gandhi said “The Swaraj of my dream is impossibility unless the women of India play their full part side by Side with the men....I assure you that in the days of Rama and Sita there was nothing but khaddar, hand spun and hand-woven.... I, therefore, ask you for the sake of those sisters, for the sake of your religion, to throw away all the foreign cloth that you are using and to wear such khaddar saris as you can procure”¹¹.

If we look at the above mentioned Gandhi’s quotes it appears that, Gandhi largely deployed the iconic image of Sita for different strategies which were instrumental in creating condition that could facilitate to his both the anti-imperialist and Swadeshi propaganda at the same time. Perhaps Gandhi’s strategy behind the symbolism of Sita in connection with his constructive program or khadi mission lies in his thought to develop an alternative non-exploitative, de-centralise economic system where both man and women can perform their duties according to their own need and ability. And in order to fulfil these objects Gandhi very strategically symbolise mythological Sita and asked women to make it as a part of their religious duty to contribute in the countries quest for economic Swaraj by performing their full duties towards the Khadi program.

Sita in Gandhi’s propaganda for women empowerment

Throughout the centuries women were conferred a very lower status in the Indian society. Ideologically, they were considered as an absolutely inferior species, weak, having no significance, no personality in comparison to his male counterpart. Socially they were kept in complete subjection, denied all kinds of rights and were suppressed and oppressed. Even this very notion of women as weaker than men is also reflected many times in Gandhi’s own writing. For instance in November 14, 1930 Gandhi wrote “woman was enslaved by man and the impression came to prevail that she was helpless before man, that she was weak and always needed man’s protection”¹².

In this critical juncture Gandhi came up with a new vision and noble ideas of equality of all being like man and women or organising a new social order intended for the benefit of the Indian women, . In his vision women are equal to her counterpart like that of *Ardhanarisvara*. She is the batter half of man. She has the equal right as man. In no way women can be consider as weak. As Gandhi says “To call a woman member of ‘the weaker sex’ is a libel. In what way is woman the weaker sex I do not know”¹³. In this connection Gandhi exemplified the iconic Sita imagery with the purpose to strengthen women’s position in the Indian society where women are considered less importance and an object of male domination and subjugation.

Probably the most spectacular use of the Sita symbol occurred when Gandhi urged women to fight for their own self- development for which they might not be seen as 'mere sex symbols, playthings or dolls'. He asked women to recognise their essential equality with man which is probably vanished because of their long era of subjugation. As Gandhi asserts that “women has as much right to shape her destiny as man has to shape his....women have been taught to regards themselves as slaves of man....wife 'is not a slave of her husband, but a comrade, his better half, colleague and friend. She is co-sharer with him of equal rights and duties”¹⁴.

Gandhi being a committed social reformer very strategically uses the India’s sacred legendary symbol i.e. Sita as role model for Indian women with the endeavour to

encourage women to fight for their essential equality with man. In this connection he asked women to emulate Sita's virtue and courage and not to consider them inferior and depended on others. In Gandhi's words "Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for men including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man. I cannot imagine Sita ever wasting a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charms"¹⁵. Again in another occasion Gandhi said "My ideal of a wife is Sita and of a husband Rama. But Sita was no slave of Rama"¹⁶. And in another way he illustrated that "Who says that woman is dependent on others? The Shastras say nothing of the sort. Sita was Rama's better half and enjoyed empire over his heart. Neither was Damayanti dependent. Who will say, after reading the Mahabharata, that Draupadi was dependent on others?"¹⁷.

It is quite evident that, by symbolising Sita Gandhi wanted to set an example of an ideal womanhood before the Indian women. He sought to establish the legitimacy of equal rights of women in the Indian society. By exemplifying Sita Gandhi not only desired to enlarge the courage of Indian women but at the same time he also challenged the traditional norms and Indian psyche which hitherto consider women as an inferior species and rejected her rights from every aspects of life.

If we look writings of Gandhi more closely and clearly, we find his engagement of Sita symbol with his multiple type of action where Sita act as a medium of his political mobilisation as well as bridge to his communication strategy with the masses. Gandhi's strategy behind the symbolisation of mythological imagery of Sita lies in his repertoire of rhetorical representation and inventing new ideas with it. Sita in the Gandhian political discourse symbolise his various types of political and social campaign. For instance while propagating for the anti-colonial ideology Gandhi characterize Sita as 'symbol of Swadeshi' and while addressing for the women cause he made Sita as symbol of purity, women strength etc. More importantly, Gandhi being a committed reformer wanted to eliminate the subordinate position of women in the society. As he writes "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I have always had a passion to serve the womankind.... My experience has confirmed me in the view that the real advancement of women can only come by and through their own efforts"¹⁸. Perhaps Gandhi realises that without the own effort of women the real regeneration of women is impossible. Therefore in order to stimulate their courage for their real regeneration and eliminate their subordinate position in the society Gandhi strategically asked women stimulate the virtue of Sita Devi, if they desire to get recognition and respect as Sitaji.

Sita in Indian tradition and in Gandhian symbolism:-

Sita is considered as a very influential woman not only in the ancient India but in the present days also. She is considered as the incarnation of goddess Laxmidevi. Devi Sita is the consort of Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of Sri Maha Vishnu, in Hindu mythology. Sita Devi is one of the main characters in the Ramayana, a major Hindu epic. Devi Sita is indeed the ideal example of a woman and possesses all the good qualities that a traditional Indian woman is expected to possess. She represents the Hindu ideal of a chaste, self-sacrificing wife who duty-fully follows her husband into exile. She was the ideal daughter to her parents, ideal wife to her husband, Rama, and the ideal mother to her twins, Luv and Kush. She possesses the quality of a good daughter and a devoted wife to his husband lord Rama. She also vested with mythological power. She is considered as a goddess Sita. At the same time we also find her dependency on his lord master Ram Sita while protecting herself from the hand of Ravana, who rescued her from the Ravana's captive.

However Gandhi's Sita also possess all the qualities which traditional Sita conceive. Apart from the mythological qualities and power Gandhi also envisaged new characteristic with traditional Sita image. Gandhi's Sita is a symbol of Swadeshi who were only Khadi. In Gandhi's words Sita wore only Khadi, she spun Charkha. Gandhi's Sita was no helpless creature; she is a courageous woman who can protect herself from the Ravana's deed without the help of her husband. She was an embodiment of self-sacrifice and non-violent protest against injustice. In Gandhian political discourse Sita was used as a symbol of Swadeshi, which convey Gandhi an anti-imperialist message. Sita only wore 'cloth made in India' or home-spun and thus kept her heart and body pure. Furthermore, 'Sita was no slave of Rama'. She was portrayed as being able to say no even to her husband if he approached her carnally against her will. Gandhi's Sita was no helpless creature"¹⁹.

Concluding Remarks:

Gandhi as a politician per excellence very consciously uses the metaphor of his own choice while resolving a particular issue. In these regards his symbolism of 'Sita' played an important role to deal with the various socio-political issues related to women and Indian national movement. Although, the mythological Sita encompasses with the traditional Hindu beliefs and practises but when Gandhi symbolise Sita, he invested new characteristic and noble ideas with the traditional image of Sita, so people can accept it easily. Here lies Gandhi's strategy, while mobilising the masses in favour of the nationalist movement and Swadeshi propaganda Gandhi deliberately sanctions ancient religious ethics by exemplifying ancient Sita image who is an embodiment of Swadeshi according to the Gandhian notion. His political action therefore does not appear to be directed by moral or religious principles alone, distant from the concrete practical situations at hand. He symbolise ancient Sita as a subversive female figure to all kind of injustice and urged women of India to follow her, if they want to recognise themselves as an ideal women like Sita. Therefore this study is a modest approach to illustrate Gandhi's overall strategy in using Sita imagery to bring women into the nationalist movement by which women gained a new self confidence and pride in one hand and to uplift their position and status in the society where they can claim their essential equal rights as man. According to Gandhi "politics was a species of human activity by which the individual and the community sought the welfare of the whole community and of each individual in it"²⁰. And in this connection his political symbolism of Sita played a crucial role towards the fulfilment of these objectives.

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