

A Study of the Different Narrations on the Issue of Gandhi and Women: An Exploration for New Possibilities

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Abstract

This paper deals with a very sensitive issue in the whole Gandhian corpus of knowledge, Mahatma Gandhi's relationship with women and in doing so this paper ventures into the different secondary sources written by different authors on this issue. This paper differentiates the different secondary sources on the basis of different themes, which are derived from the narrations made by the authors of these sources related to the issue of Gandhi and Women. By doing this, this paper discusses and analyses the sources extensively and will look for possible research gaps. Lastly, this paper will also make an attempt towards the possibility of new narrations, which will in return further enrich the whole discourse of Gandhi and women.

KEYWORDS :- Gandhi, Women

Introduction:-

Women are an integral part of the society but they were and are suffering from social subordination and suppression for countless centuries. The nineteenth and twentieth century particularly, was very crucial from the point of view of the stepping up of the social condition of the Indian womenfolk due to certain reasons. The solidification of the British rule and the subsequent beginning of the down towards filtration of democratic politics, the expansion of the scope of participatory politics leading to the gradual commencement of the limited franchise, paving the way for women's participation in the public sphere. Then there was the shift from feudal economy to capitalist economy, which was based on the principals of the recognition of individual equality and contractual freedom of the individual. It was at this juncture, Gandhi who was "the figure of that historical moment"¹, emerged on the Indian political and cultural scene with a vision of a new society in which feminine qualities became a vital foundation. All these factors put together provided a new environment where women could walk towards their own emancipation.

This phenomenon captured the attention of many well-known academicians over the course of last few decades. Scholars differ in their interpretations of this historical process. One group of scholars argue that the introduction of British rule and the subsequent transformation of social settings in India paved the way for women's transformation. As A.R. Desai in his book *Social background of Indian Nationalism* argues, "The capitalist economy, which the British conquest inaugurated in India and the legal and political regime established in the country, was based on the principals of the recognition of individual equality and contractual freedom of the individual. It

¹Patel, Sujata (2013). *Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi*. In Raghuramaraju, A. (Ed.), *Debating Gandhi A Reader* (pp. 324-355). New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, p. 328.

did not admit, on principle, all inequalities based on birth, sex distinction, caste or community”² which leads to the awakening of women in India.

The others argue that the awakening of women in India during the nineteenth and twentieth century was a result of honest and sincere efforts of some enlightened and concerned individuals and their local organisations. Nemaï Sadhan Bose in his book *Indian awakening and Bengal* argues, “We have seen how deeply he [Raja Rammohan Roy] felt the prevailing social abuses, how keen and determined he was to fight those evils and to restore women to their rightful place in society. Of all the efforts he made in this direction, the most important was his campaign against the inhuman and dreadful custom of Sati-the burning alive of Hindu widows”³. Gradually, other powerful voices from different provinces of the British India also raised their voices against the inhuman treatment towards women. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Dayananda Saraswati, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda and Gopal Krishna Gokhale made their significant contributions to the society by waging wars against child marriage, Kulin polygamy, infanticide and in support of widow marriage, women education etc. Subsequently, Gandhi also realised the importance of these issues and projected it as a national issue for the first time in the modern India.

Available literature relating to Gandhi and women can be (ignoring some variations) roughly divided into following six groups.

The first group consists of those studies **that attempt to demonstrate Gandhi’s very personal aspects of life by exemplifying his noteworthy associations with his female coworkers**. Eleanor Morton’s *Women Behind Mahatma Gandhi* (1954), Martin Green’s *Gandhi: Voice of a New Age Revolution*, Girja Kumar’s *Brahmacharya Gandhi & His Women Associates*, Thomas Weber’s *Going Native: Gandhi’s Relationship with Western Women* and Sudhir Kakar’s *Mira and the Mahatma* (a novel) can be included in this group. Such studies not only throw light on the very private aspects of Gandhi’s life but they also help to articulate other aspects of Gandhi’s life. Evidently, as Sujata Patel writes, “in no other aspect have the personal traumas and anxieties so colored his ideas as in the case of women”⁴.

Eleanor Morton’s book *Women Behind Mahatma Gandhi* successfully “provides a chronicle of Gandhi’s life using his significant female relationships as the vehicle”⁵. But Thomas Weber contends that “the main problem with the book is that it is not referenced at all and many of the incidents mentioned seem to be based on hearsay”⁶. Girja Kumar’s *Brahmacharya Gandhi & His Women Associates* talks about Gandhi’s association with Indian women, whereas Thomas Weber’s *Going Native: Gandhi’s Relationship with Western Women* discuss Gandhi’s association with Western women.

²Desai, R.A. (2013). *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, New Delhi, India: Popular Prakashan, p. 257.

³Bose, SadhanNemaï (1990). *Indian Awakening and Bengal*. Calcutta, India: Firma Klm Private Limited, p. 197.

⁴Patel, SujataOp cit, p. 327.

⁵Weber, Thomas (2009). *The Shanti Sena Philosophy, History and action*. New Delhi, India: Orient Black Swan, p. 11.

⁶ibid, p. 12.

The second group consisting of those studies **which attempt to analyze the relationship between Gandhi's various political strategies and the subsequent participation of women in the national movement.** Geraldine Forbes's *Women in Modern India*, *The New Cambridge History of India* (1999) and *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, and Historiography* (2005), Karuna Ahmed's *Gandhi, Women's Role and the Freedom Movement* (1984), AnupTaneja's *Gandhi Women and the National Movement, 1920-47* (2005) and TanikaSarkar's work "Gandhi and Social Relations" in which she makes some passing reference to Gandhi's role in bringing women into national movement. Apart from them, many others can be included in this group. Scholars differ in their conclusions regarding Gandhi's contribution in breaking the shackles of women and bringing them in the Indian National Movement. Sujata Patel writes, "given that the phase [1917-22] is characterized by the spontaneous and later organized expression of protest against the British and participation of both men and women in this struggle, it is difficult to separate analytically which proceeded first: women's participation or Gandhi's advocacy of this"⁷. Though Sujata Patel was hesitant to give any credit to Gandhi for women's participation in large number into India's national movement, other scholars like TanikaSarkar, BhikhuParekh and Lyn Norvell were very assertive in their claim that it was Gandhi who brought women from very diverse backgrounds into the national movement. TanikaSarkar very categorically writes:

Gandhian movements changed this. Peasant women, upper-caste middle-class women, upper-class Muslim women, tribal women came together in nationalist demonstrations, picketed foreign-goods shops, organized social boycotts of loyalists and public burning of foreign cloth, filled up prisons, become local level' dictators' during civil disobedience when their men were arrested. No aspect of Gandhian politics was sexually segregated⁸.

She did not forget to add even that "this owed much to the self-representation of Gandhian movements.

AnupTaneja writes,

...in detail the role played by women (from different walks of life) in the freedom struggle in different regions of the country through their association with various Gandhian movements like the Non-cooperation, the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India. Indeed, at Gandhi's call women began to come out of the narrow confines of their homes to participate in the constructive programmes like spinning of charkha, wearing khadi clothes, picketing, boycott of foreign goods, etc.⁹ (Taneja, Anup 2005, p. 12)

But Geraldine Forbes points out that some other scholars [Vijay Agnew, Gail Pearson] either admiring Gandhi for transforming Indian women or condemns Gandhi for manipulating women for political ends¹⁰.

The third group consists of those studies that try to explore **the inherent biases of Gandhi regarding women.** Sujata Patel's "Construction and Reconstruction of

⁷Patel, Sujata, Op cit, p. 333.

⁸Sarkar, Tanika (2011). *Gandhi and social relations*. In Judith M. Brown & Anthony Parel (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (pp. 173-195). New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, p. 185.

⁹Taneja, Anup (2005). *Gandhi Women and the National Movement, 1920-47*. New Delhi, India:Har-Anand Publications PVT. LTD, p. 12.

¹⁰Forbes, Geraldine (2008). *Women in Modern India, The New Cambridge History of India*. New Delhi, India: Chronicle Books, p. 55.

Women in Gandhi”, Lyn Norvell’s “Gandhi and the Indian Women's Movement” among many others can be included in this group. The analysis of Sujata Patel finds that Gandhi could not overcome his anurbanised middle-class/ upper-caste Hindu male’s perception of what women should be. She adds “though Gandhi did introduce a dynamic concept, that of politics, in his model of social role for woman, he did not revolutionize the assumptions on which these middle-class reformers perceived women”¹¹ (Patel, Sujata 2013 p. 330). Sujata Patel comes to the conclusion through analysing Gandhi’s writings and speeches, that it was Gandhi who defined women’s role in the national movement. However, she forgets that Gandhi’s such construction of women’s role in the national movement was not exclusively based on his own perception of women but it was also determined according to the exigencies of the social, political and economic situation of women in the then Indian society. “Gandhi had to go slowly in the beginning’, realizing that it was not going to be easy for women to escape from seclusion because of their own self-doubt about taking part in the national struggle. They were further hindered by their menfolk, who in general were too conservative to permit them to participate in public activities. Perhaps some men were also frightened that women's emancipation would erode their power-base and shake the traditional patriarchal power they had over them”¹² (see Norvell, Lyn 1997 p. 15).

Sujata Patel finds another problem in Gandhi’s construction of the role of women. According to her, though Gandhi defined a significantly new place for women in the household, he could not give an appropriate place for women outside their family and household. In his scheme of things, only de-sexed woman, who had ‘sacrificed’ her sexuality, her family life, and has to dedicated herself to the service of the nation is allowed to work outside the family and household. There is a different level of misunderstanding. First, it is true that Gandhi asked many women on several occasions to scarify their sexuality and family life, if they want to serve the nation. Even Madhu Kishwar also made some passing references by arguing the following fashion,

While Gandhi seemed to characterize a male-female dichotomy in terms of ‘active’ and ‘passive’, Kishwar points out that this ‘has been an important ideological device for denying women any chance to acquire power and decision-making ability in the family and in society’. While Gandhi sought to oppose the unjust domination of women by men, this position was inherent in the very role, that of ‘complement’ to men, that Gandhi envisaged for women. It appears that while Gandhi did not want a wife to play an excessively subordinate role to her husband, kishwar notes that he did not seem to be against them generally playing a subordinate role. While he was able to see that women’s belief in their own inferiority was the result of man’s ‘[self-] interested teaching’, he failed to see that his views on the division of labour were also part of the same ‘self-interested teaching’, that ‘resulted in the confinement and subordination of woman.’¹³

The fourth group constitute of those studies **that are very critical towards Gandhi’s views on sexuality and other related issues**. N. K. Bose’s *My Days with Gandhi*, Jad Adam’s *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*, Nicholas F. Gier’s “Was Gandhi A Tantric”, Arundhati Roy’s introduction viz. “The Doctor and The Saint” for B.R. Ambedkar ‘s new edition of the book “Annihilation of the Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition”,

¹¹ Patel, Sujata, Op cit, p. 330.

¹² Norvell, Lyn. Gandhi and the Indian Women’s movement, p. 15.

¹³ Weber, Thomas (2009), Op cit, p. 13.

Veena R. Howard's "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment" and Vinay Lal's "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality" could be put into this group. They attempt to peep into Gandhi's innermost aspect of his relationship with women. They discuss his controversial 'experiment' of sleeping necked with women without clothes. Nirmal Kumar Bose, the chronicler of Gandhi's Noakhali Brahmacharya experiments, resigned from his position over disagreements with Gandhi. On this issue, he later wrote in his book,

... his relations with members of the other sex was progressively "purified" and he felt that he was becoming a fitter instrument for the practice of the highest virtues of non-violence. We may be permitted to assume that the repression of the sexual instinct was not only a means to a lofty end, but it was also the penance which Gandhiji voluntarily imposed upon himself for having proved untrue to his father during the last moments of his life.¹⁴

On the other hand, Roy writes, "towards the end of his life, as an old man in his seventies, he took sleeping with two young girls, Manu, his seventeen-year-old grand-niece, and Abha (who were known as his 'walking sticks')." And she bluntly concludes that "he [Gandhi] viewed women not as individuals, but a category. That, for him, a very small sample of a few physical specimens, including his own grand-niece, could stand in for the whole species"¹⁵. Though Roy is factually correct regarding Gandhi's experiment, her conclusion seems to be superficial in absence of detail study of Gandhi's experiment. There are some other scholars like Bhikhu Parekh and Nicholas F. Gier who took more detail and in-depth investigation of this aspect of Gandhi's life. Parekh tells us five reasons that Gandhi mentioned to justify for undergoing his 'experiment'. One of the reasons, Parekh writes, "he [Gandhi] decided to plunge into the 'sacred fire... and be burnt or saved.' His sexual yajna was a way of mobilising the capital of his spiritual Shakti and making it yield vitally necessary political dividends. For him, personal purity and political success 'hanged together', especially when the politics was based on non-violence"¹⁶. This and other reasons mentioned by Parekh can definably not be taken as sufficient justification for Gandhi's action. Moreover, Gier writes, "no matter how much we want to hold Gandhi in the highest esteem, that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that Gandhi was inconsistent in his justifications for his sexual experiments and not completely sincere in carrying them out"¹⁷.

The fifth group constitute of **those studies which tried to developed different aspects of Gandhian feminism**. Shane Ryland's "The theory and impact of Gandhi's feminism" (1977), Barbara Southard's "The feminism of Mahatma Gandhi" (1980), Devaki Jain's "Gandhian contributions towards a theory of feminist ethic" (1986) and SushilaGidwani's "Gandhian feminism" can be included in this group. Shane Ryland, apart from many other things, tells us about moral and metaphysical basis of Gandhian feminism. According to her Gandhi's faith in gender equality and his instinctive ability to detect and react against the exploitation of women was reinforced by the Upanishadic notion that human soul (atman) is identical to the

¹⁴Bose, N.K. (1999). My Days with Gandhi. New Delhi, India: Orient Longman Limited, p. 193.

¹⁵Roy, Arundhati (2014). The Doctor and Saint. In Ambedkar R.B., Annihilation of Caste The Annotated Critical Edition (pp. 15-169). New Delhi, India: Navayana Publishing Pvt. Ltd, p. 79.

¹⁶Parikh, Bhikhu (1989). Colonialism, Tradition and Reform an Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse. New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, 196.

¹⁷Gier, F. Nicholas (2007). Was Gandhi a Tantric? p. 34.

transcendental brahman.¹⁸ But we have also contrary views held by other scholars available in the literature; A. L. Basham writes, “we can safely attribute his [Gandhi’s] views on the place of women in society to the influence of Western feminism¹⁹. After investigating different aspects of Gandhi’s life, freedom struggle and women’s role in Indian society, Devika Jain in her essay, concludes that Gandhi was ‘methodologically’ a feminist, because for him ‘the means were as important as the ends’²⁰. SushilaGidwani in her essay argues that economic assumptions of Gandhian thoughts were feminist in nature and she presents a comparison of the economic assumptions of Gandhian feminism with those of modern feminism. She argues, according to Gandhi “modern feminism as a theory and as a movement ultimately is anti-feminine in character. In Gandhi’s words modern women are attempting to ‘ride the horse that men ride’.”²¹

The sixth group constitute of **those studies which try to investigate the issue, whether the Gandhian national movement was an emancipating representation of women or repressive gender essentialism or progressive gender essentialism?** This debate is basically a part of the whole Gandhian Feminism’s debate, but this group is exclusively and specifically interested in the gender essentialism debate, which deserves a special mention. Richard G. Fox’s “Gandhi and Feminized Nationalism in India”, Sanjam Ahluwalia’s “Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India”, Mary N. Woods’s “Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi”, T. N. Khoshoo& M.S. John’s “Mahatma Gandhi and the Environment: analysing Gandhian Environmental thought”, ParthaChatterjee’s “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India” and KetuKartak’s “Indian Nationalism, Gandhian Satyagraha, and Representations of Female Sexuality” can be included in this group. Richard G. Fox apart from many other things tells us by citing different instances,

...Gandian nationalism in India before 1947 kept women “in their place’ and exhorted them “to follow their natures” in order to advance India’s independence. These essentialist understandings of gender, however, proved liberatory rather than restrictive... Curiously, Gandhian nationalism endeavored to remasculinize Indian men, effeminized under British colonialism, by feminizing them, that is, by urging them to behave “essentially” like women. Gandhi thought women more courageous than man; thus Indian men could only gain the self-discipline necessary for nonviolent resistance by becoming feminized. Gender essentialism at the behest of the nationalist movement therefore redefined gender roles,²²

T. N. Khoshoo& M.S. John in “Mahatma Gandhi and the Environment: analysing Gandhian Environmental thought”, while analysing Gandhian Environmental thought also favour the similar type of sympathetic view on this debate. But ParthaChatterjee, on the contrary, argues, “the Indian nationalism established a new patriarchy, which

¹⁸Ryland, Shane (1977). The theory and impact of Gandhi’s feminism. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 12(3/4), 132.

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²⁰Patel, Sujata, Op cit, p. 325.

²¹Gidwani, Sushila. *Gandhian Feminism*, p. 227.

²²Fox, G. Richard (2013). Gandhi and Feminized Nationalism in India. In Williams F. Barckette (Ed.), *The Gender of Agency and The Race of nationality*. New York, USA, p. 37.

associated, “female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood”. Therefore, what might appear superficially as Indian nationalisms, liberation of women was nothing other than a new “subordination”... trapped within its framework of gender essentialism”²³. KetuKatrak also argues, “Indian nationalism, and especially Gandhism, victimized women at the very moment it promised to liberate them”. In her judgement, “Gandhi failed to challenge the domestic patriarchy that oppressed women”.²⁴

These are all meticulously researched, evocative, clear-eyed and fearless history-writing. However, most of these works try to understand specific aspects of Gandhi and women without developing a comprehensive understanding of Gandhi’s view on women and other related issues. The primary purpose of this present paper is to pin point this precise gap which is, it tries “to understand specific aspects of Gandhi and women without developing a comprehensive understanding of Gandhi’s view on women and women issues.” Learning for this research gap, existing in the existing literature on this topic, this paper also infers towards a possibility of a new type of narration based on studying the writings and actions of Gandhi in a chronological manner starting from his childhood days till his death to develop an all-inclusive, wide-ranging comprehension of Gandhi’s views on women and other related issues along with the whole programme he developed for the emancipation of women. Such study will not only take the understanding of Gandhi on Women to an altogether different level but will also help us to evaluate issues like, whether Gandhi was with the tune of his time, or ahead of it or regressive in his approach to women and their problems and also help to evaluate critically the relevance of Gandhi’s perspective on women for their upliftment, which is a primary concern of our time.

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