




2023

An Examination of Gandhian Economic and Political Thought and Its Relevance to the Empowerment of Women

Purnima Mehta Bhatt
Hood College, bhatt@hood.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/monsoon-sasa-journal>

 Part of the [Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons](#), [Asian Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Body Regions Commons](#), [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Environmental Education Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Law Commons](#), [Linguistics Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bhatt, Purnima Mehta (2023) "An Examination of Gandhian Economic and Political Thought and Its Relevance to the Empowerment of Women," *Monsoon: South Asian Studies Association Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/monsoon-sasa-journal/vol2/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Monsoon: South Asian Studies Association Journal by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

**AN EXAMINATION OF GANDHIAN ECONOMIC AND
POLITICAL THOUGHT AND ITS RELEVANCE TO THE
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

*Dr. Purnima Mehta Bhatt
Professor (Emerita) of History, Anthropology, and
Interdisciplinary Studies
Hood College
Frederick, Maryland, USA*

Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) sought to alleviate poverty and empower women. His commitment to nonviolence and the economic ideal of “small is beautiful” continue to inspire grassroots movements around the globe. This article discusses the Chipko movement of northern India, the protection of rain forests in Kerala’s Silent Valley, the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), and Medha Patkar’s valiant though ultimately futile attempt to save the Narmada River from a massive government damming project. The ongoing legacy of these movements can be found in AWAG, the Ahmedabad Women’s Action Group and Women’s Shanti Sena (Peace Force).

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Chipko Movement, Silent Valley, Self Employed Women’s Association, Medha Patkar, Narmada River

Introduction

In this article I explore and examine the political philosophy and economic thought of Gandhi and its relevance to the alleviation of poverty and the empowerment of women

Despite the voluminous amount of scholarly research on Gandhian political and economic thought, there does not exist much in-depth analyses of its real or potential impact on improving the condition of women. This article provides an assessment of Gandhi's genius as a pragmatist, as a man of action, and a practical idealist whose emphasis on the virtues of humility, sacrifice, self-restraint, suffering, and non-violence were especially appealing and well suited to women. With remarkable effectiveness he raised their political consciousness and mobilized them for political action. In doing so, he contributed significantly to the politicization and empowerment of women. Also of particular relevance are his economic ideas and philosophy which, stressed dignity of labor, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and cottage and village industries. While the numerous critics of Gandhian thought have labeled these ideas Utopian and impractical, my research suggests that they deserve serious reexamination and consideration.

The first part of this article focuses specifically on Gandhi's evaluation of women and their potential. During the gradual evolution of his philosophy of non-violence, he was effective in utilizing this potential and mobilizing them for the political struggle,

thereby creating a new political awakening and a sense of self-confidence among Indian women. This encouraged and inspired a large number of women who were tradition bound and passive to become actively involved in the independence movement. They realized their own potential and power to effect meaningful change.

This Gandhian legacy has survived and is reflected in several grassroots movements among poverty-stricken women who have organized themselves in non-violent movements and succeeded against government actions, bureaucratic indifference, and the economic power of vested interests. In the article I also examine Gandhi's economic ideal of 'small is beautiful'; the numerous environmental and social grassroots movements and the impact of his ideas on war and nuclearization.

Evolution of Gandhi's Attitudes Toward Women

In order to arrive at some understanding of Gandhi's attitudes toward women and his evaluation of their worth, it becomes necessary to trace the events and influences of his early childhood and adolescent years. Considerable insight into this subject is provided by his own writings, his autobiography, as well as the analyses of psychologists like Erickson.¹ It is evident from these sources that Gandhi's estimation of women was shaped heavily by his deep adoration and abiding love for his mother, Putalibai, and his relationship with her.

As Erikson suggests, his mother may have been the single most important influence in his life.² Her qualities of selfless love, sacrifice, generosity, compassion, simplicity, and austerity left a deep imprint on him. It was these very qualities that he incorporated in his political life, which represented merely the extension of the same ideals of truth, love, and justice in the political arena. Throughout his entire life, especially during moments of personal and political crises, Gandhi was guided by these traits. In his autobiography he describes how at a young age he derived the greatest fulfillment and satisfaction from nursing his father during the latter's illness, thus effectively serving as the "mother", a role he later assumed again with his ashrama³ followers and eventually the nation.

Erikson suggests that Gandhi's creativity contained a strong maternal aspect.⁴ A careful examination of his speeches and his

¹ Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (trans. by Mahadev Desai), Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, 1929; *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division of the Government of India, Navajivan Press, 1958-84; and Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*. New York: Norton, 1969.

² Erikson 110

³ Communal retreats where Gandhi lived, worked and organized.

⁴ Erikson 155.

writings reveal quite clearly that feminine imagery came naturally to him. Even in his religiosity he strove to reconcile the feminine with the masculine. Throughout his life Gandhi appears to have relied heavily on "intuition" and "instinct" -- traits that are generally associated with women's behavior and psychological make-up. Further, as Gandhi developed, and refined his philosophy of non-violent resistance, he became convinced that *satyagraha* or 'truth force' required not physical strength but moral courage, spiritual determination, and self-sacrifice which he believed were particularly suited to women, whose very natures conformed to these principles.

Gandhi urged women to lead the fight for truth and *ahimsā* (non-violence) when he wrote, "I have suggested in these columns that woman is the incarnate of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man shows this capacity in the largest measure?"⁵ The religious overtones of Gandhi's politics and political philosophy had special appeal to women, for he employed religious concepts and symbolism that equated political activity with an individual's "dharma" or religious and moral duty and spiritual salvation. His numerous writings demonstrate his unequivocal belief in women's equality and profound capabilities:

Men and women are equal in status. I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion, she should labor under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.⁶

The idea that woman was spiritually superior to man and endowed with qualities of moral strength, tolerance, and compassion are clearly evident in his autobiography:

I have regarded woman as an incarnation of tolerance.⁷

The wife with her matchless powers of endurance has always been the victor.⁸

The wife is not the husband's bond slave, but his companion and his helpmate, and
an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows—as free as the husband to choose her own path.⁹

⁵ "What is Woman's Role?" *Harijan*, 24 February 1940.

⁶ *Young India*, 1929. 17-10."

⁷ *Gandhi: An Autobiography*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Thus, one can argue that Gandhi not only exalted "women's virtues" in themselves, but believed that these very qualities would prove indispensable for a 'satyagrahi', the soldier fighting for truth. I believe that his statements concerning women's potential power and capabilities were not mere political rhetoric. This is borne out by his call to women to get actively involved in the struggles that he initiated -- not just during the independence movement, but as early as 1913 in South Africa when women played an active and visible role on his Tolstoy farm as "Tolstoy sisters" and "Phoenix sisters" in the miners' protest against the 3 pound tax, as well as the campaign to protest the government's ruling requiring them to prove that they were legally married.

Gandhi and the Empowerment of Women

In the mass movements initiated by Gandhi in the 1920s and 1930s in India, women's participation in political activity was evidenced in the Khadi (home-spun cloth) campaigns and Swadeshi (indigenously made) movement, the picketing of foreign cloth and shops, as well as the protest against alcohol. Thus, large numbers of Indian women, confined to their homes by custom and tradition and oppressed and exploited by institutions such as child marriage, arranged marriages, and prohibitions against widow remarriage, became politically conscious and were effectively mobilized for the freedom struggle. Indian women literate and non-literate, rural as well as urban, Hindus as well as Muslims, in the hundreds of thousands marched in processions, attended political sessions and rallies, and in defiance of the British courted arrest and went to prisons. This signified their political awakening.

In the 1930s, Gandhi appointed a woman, Sarojini Naidu, to lead the independence struggle. This politicization of Indian women, thus, gave them a sense of dignity, self-worth, and awareness of their own potential and power. Thus, Gandhi believed that women are essential and central in the task of creating a free nation and a new society. The very qualities associated with the female--her gentleness, her capacity for love and compassion, her moral strength, her forbearance and spirit of tolerance, and her life giving, life reaffirming nature--he saw as the ideal traits necessary in those engaged in non-violent resistance.

Gandhi's unique genius lies in a radical redefinition of warfare, one that entails not brute physical force but moral courage and determination. More significantly, the effect this redefinition had in drawing large numbers of women into the political arena and thereby transforming women from being mere passive onlookers to active participants and players in a political drama.

Strategies for the Empowerment of Women: Women's Participation in Grassroots Movements

Politics has generally been viewed as a male endeavor. The popular assumptions being that women are not political actors but rather, pawns to be used, abused and manipulated for political ends. They have been perceived as passive, politically ineffective and disinterested. We are increasingly becoming aware of the necessity to rethink and reexamine these assumptions in view of a large number of movements in which women have played a central role in shaping, altering, and influencing their own lives and those of their communities. Furthermore, these women have influenced politics not through conventional means—the ballot box and traditional electoral politics but rather, through collective action. Gandhian ideas and philosophy played a critical role in this. We need to bring into discourse the efforts of thousands of ordinary women organizing and working at the grassroots level to change and shape public policy. It thus, becomes essential to redefine both 'political activity' and 'power' to include the efforts of these women. Women's involvement in political activity will, it is hoped, change and alter the very nature of politics, bring forth new visions of a just and equitable world and create new political spaces for women. As Bella Abzug so eloquently stated in 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing:

When we talk of the empowerment of women, we are simply talking about releasing what is inside each of us, women as well as men—not only what we are but, what we can become.¹⁰

Women's Grassroots Environmental Movements

I would like to mention a few selected grassroots efforts of women; not 'elite' women, but rather marginalized, often illiterate women who have waged successful battles to safeguard and preserve their environments. Women, especially in the developing world, experience environmental problems primarily as livelihood crises. Out of sheer desperation and the imperatives of survival, ordinary women are contesting the dominant discourses of development. Women in the developing nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America have a major stake in preserving and maintaining the environment. In these parts of the world, majority of the women live in rural areas and are engaged in subsistence farming. They are, therefore, directly and most immediately dependent on the environment for their survival. Any decline in the resource base, the

¹⁰ United Nations, World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.

degradation of the environment creates a livelihood crisis for them. In the process they have given birth to social movements that are widespread and effective. Many of these women have been inspired by Gandhian ideals and ideas. Their social activism and involvement in so called “grass roots movements” enable women to learn new political skills, to discover their own latent powers and challenge the stereotypes of women as “docile”, “politically passive”, and “apolitical”. These grass roots movements, many of which are also led by women offer a new vision of women’s power and leadership.

A number of these grassroots movements arose as resistance to and struggle against the degradation and depletion of natural resources – land, water, and trees – resources that sustain millions of women.

The ‘Chipko’ Movement

A grassroots movement inspired by Gandhian philosophy that has attracted worldwide attention is the Chipko (“hugging”) movement. This movement was a success story in the struggle to secure women's rights and represents economic and political empowerment. Through this movement hundreds of poor, rural women in the hills of Northern India, in the Garhwal division of Uttar Pradesh, literally “hugged” the trees to prevent their being cut down by loggers.

The Chipko movement grew from a women's protest against the cutting of trees, which symbolized their livelihood, into an ecological movement concerned with the preservation of forests and the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the Sub-Himalayan region. In the 1970’s, the government had auctioned off a large tract of the forest to the Simon Company, a sporting goods manufacturer. Women in these regions have for centuries depended on the forest for firewood for fuel and other needs of daily survival. When the loggers came with their bulldozers, they encountered hundreds of women and children each encircling and hugging a tree to prevent it from being cut. These illiterate peasant women realized their own power and soon the movement spread to other villages. They endured intimidation and threats of violence, but prevailed. In the long run, women’s empowerment also had consequences for a rethinking of gender and power relationships. Women who participated in this movement became aware of their own potentials and demanded their rightful share in the decision-making process.¹¹

Another example of women’s activism comes from a small village in West Bengal in 1980, where a women's group successfully

¹¹ Shobita Jain, “Standing Up for Trees: Women's Role in the Chipko Movement” in *Women and the Environment: A Reader*, ed. by Sally Sontheimer. New York, 1991, pp. 163-178.

reclaimed wasteland and in less than three years, dramatically transformed this barren, worthless land into a prosperous green forest. This marked the beginning of similar experiments in surrounding villages where women organized themselves for collective action.¹²

The Silent Valley in Kerala

A movement in which a large number of women participated to prevent the destruction of the rain forests took place in the Silent Valley in Kerala---habitat of many rare species. The Silent Valley represents one of the few undisturbed rain forests in India. In the 1960's, the state government approved a plan to construct a dam on the Kuntipuzha River, which flows through the valley to generate hydroelectric power. The local population opposed the project on ecological grounds and argued that the energy generated would not benefit the rural people. After years of activism, they prevailed upon the government to appoint a committee to assess the environmental and socioeconomic effects of the project. Subsequently, the government relented and withdrew the project.

In India, the grassroots environmental movements have generally followed the Gandhian non-violent tradition. These movements differ from the ones in the West in the sense that they are concerned with environmental preservation but also with issues of social and economic justice.

In the ancient Indian cosmological view, nature is "Prakriti"-undifferentiated matter, perceived as a living, creative process. "Prakriti" is the feminine principle, from which comes forth all life. It is the creative force behind the functioning of the universe. The women's ecological movement thus, represents the recovery and rediscovery of the feminine principle.

SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)

The Gandhian legacy of non-violent resistance survives today in India and in other parts of the world and has been embraced particularly by women who have employed it to fight economic oppression and social injustices with remarkable effectiveness. A small but growing number of grassroots movements have emerged in the past four decades which have incorporated Gandhian tactics and strategies of non-violent resistance to organize and empower thousands of poor, illiterate, and powerless women. These grassroots movements deserve in-depth study and careful scrutiny, for they may help us better comprehend the politics of

¹² Singh Nalini, "The Bankura Story: Rural Women Organize for Change," in *Women and the Environment*, p. 179-205.

empowerment and point to the future. Notable among these is the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) which was organized in 1972 by Ela Bhatt as a union for the city of Ahmedabad's female street vendors of vegetables and used clothing, manual laborers and piece workers. Before SEWA was organized, these women led a hand to mouth existence, barely able to eke out a living. They were exclusively reliant on moneylenders for capital to buy the goods they sold, who often charged them exorbitantly high interest rates. SEWA members established their own cooperative banks, day care centers, and courses on family planning, yoga, and money management.¹³

Medha Patkar and Save the Narmada Movement ('*Narmada Andolan*')

In 1985, Medha Patkar was a relatively unknown social activist and researcher who came to the Narmada River Valley to study the impact of the construction of a mega dam – known as the Sardar Sarovar Dam. This multi-purpose project conceived in the 80's would have involved the construction of over 30 large dams on the Narmada River, home to over 21 million people in the settlements near the river. This river flows through three Indian states – Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

The multi-million-dollar project was to be funded by the Indian government with massive financial aid from the World Bank and other international donors. The proponents of the project promoted it arguing that when completed, the Project would bring economic prosperity and agricultural development to the regions providing electricity and pure drinking water to over forty million people. However, Patkar and her growing number of followers were dismayed and horrified that little consideration had been given to the impact of the dam on the more than one million people directly affected and those displaced and dispossessed of their lands and homes. The Narmada Andolan estimated that the construction of the Dam would result in the displacement of over a million local residents and would submerge approximately 350,000 hectares of forestland and over 200,000 hectares of agricultural land.

The opponents of the project carried on a sustained and compelling opposition to the construction of the Dam asserting that it would destroy the natural ecosystems of the valley. They argued that the project had been approved before adequate environmental impact studies had been carried out. Opposition to the project also intensified because the government had not fulfilled its promise of adequate resettlement and compensation to those displaced. From

¹³ Terry Alliband, *Catalysts of Development: Voluntary Agencies in India*, 1983, p. 49-50.

this outrage against injustice towards the weak and voiceless, emerged and evolved the activism and leadership of Patkar who became the face of a growing grassroots and environmental movement which gained a large following nationally and internationally. Patkar led the movement for many years – organizing, protesting and resisting the Project. She herself endured intimidation, police brutality, jail terms and hunger fasts, along with her followers. As a leader, Patkar embodied the qualities of a “transformative leader” who could inspire countless others to join the movement to achieve a common goal. They were effective in drawing the attention of the international community and environmentalists to the necessity of the environmental impact of the Dam. After engaging in an independent review, and the release of a Report, the World Bank withdrew its financial support of the Project in March 1993. The Government of India also established a high level panel to review the impact of the Dam.

While the Narmada Bachao Andolan did not succeed in preventing the construction of the dam, the government did adopt design modifications and compensation strategies. Patkar’s non-violent grass root movement created a political discourse centered on the injustices against poor, indigenous and displaced populations. It demonstrated that a popular grass roots movement can become a powerful political and social force. Initially, this movement appeared to lack formal organization and structure, but it proved remarkably effective in mobilizing hundreds and thousands of people.

The Economic Concept of “Small is Beautiful”

Until recently, it was widely assumed that modernization, economic development, and westernization would inevitably result in the enhanced status of women. However, recent scholarship, particularly as it pertains to the roles and status of women in Asia and Africa, indicates that colonization and modernization have brought in its wake economic change and social transformation which has frequently resulted in the decline and deterioration of women's economic position.¹⁴ Arguably, modernization--the application of technology and machinery--far from enhancing the opportunities for women, has in effect actually limited and narrowed their options.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Ester Boserup, *Women's Role in Economic Development*, London, 1970; Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter, eds., *African Women*, Longman, 1989.

¹⁵ Scholars like Margaret Mead saw a negative relationship between socio-economic development and the development of women. According to her, women were denied access to modern agricultural techniques because of the widespread assumption that they are unable to handle machinery. *Women and World Development*, ed. Irene Tinker, New York: Praeger, 1976.

Women in developing countries of Africa and Asia, who played a vital role in the economies of traditional societies as producers of food, reproducers, and market traders, find themselves on the periphery, their contributions marginalized and trivialized. The agricultural and economic contributions of women are often defined as non-economic activity and overlooked frequently because they are self-employed.

Economists, planners, and development theorists stress the need to integrate women into economic and national development. Perhaps what is necessary is to acknowledge that women have always played a crucial role in development, and therefore their contributions should be adequately recognized and rewarded. Another point that needs to be reinforced is that development plans often bypass rural populations, where the majority of women live. This too indicates a need to reexamine their economic roles.

The above discussion draws our attention to the fact that contrary to the prevailing assumption, the modernization process has in fact often undermined the economic power and roles of women in developing countries. It would thus be appropriate to examine Gandhian economic ideas and give serious consideration to them in view of the fact that modernization and economic development have not bestowed wellbeing for all. Millions in developing world continue to live in want, poverty, hunger, and despair -- a majority of whom are women and children. Can Gandhian economic thought offer viable alternatives?

Gandhi's economic philosophy was a curious blend of ideas borrowed from outside and indigenous traditions that had its roots in rural India.¹⁶ On his return from South Africa he increasingly identified himself with the peasants in the countryside. He discarded his Western clothing in favor of the hand-spun "dhoti" (a one piece loin cloth attire) worn by millions of Indian peasants. His economic philosophy was based on the following principles:

- (a) "Self Reliance" and "Self Sufficiency" which he believed would be effectively accomplished by promoting village, small-scale industries, and cottage industries. To achieve self-sufficiency he initiated the "Swadeshi" movement, which entailed a focus on indigenously manufactured goods and a rejection of foreign products;
- (b) The "Khadi" movement which focused on hand spun and handwoven cloth using the spinning wheel; and

¹⁶ During his student days in England, Gandhi came in contact with the ideas of Tolstoy and John Ruskin.

(c) A respect for manual labor¹⁷ that he incorporated into the discipline of his ashramas and among his followers.

An examination and analysis of Gandhi's economic thought reveals the vast inherent potential it had for the improvement of the conditions of women, and for the eventual empowerment of women. His opposition to uncontrolled technology and mechanization would serve the cause of women, for as Mead and others have suggested, the introduction of machine technology has rendered millions of women powerless and economically destitute, depriving them of their traditional sources of livelihood. As Gandhi wrote, "Machinery has begun to desolate Europe...Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; I am convinced that it represents a great sin."¹⁸

His call to millions of Indians to adopt home spinning also provided a validation of women's work, for traditionally spinning has been regarded in most cultures as woman's work. Furthermore, in his ashrama where he trained his followers, the freedom fighters, he strove to eliminate gender roles and duties. Work which had traditionally been associated with women, such as cooking, washing, and cleaning, was now required of all, male and female. Thus he must be credited with eliminating gender-specific roles and in creating an atmosphere of greater equality based on transcendence of class and sexual divisions. Gandhi's views on sexual abstinence, celibacy, and the sublimation of sexual drives have received considerable attention. While scholars have cited these as evidence of his puritanical attitudes and idiosyncratic behavior, it needs to be acknowledged that he may have been effective in giving women greater respect by his insistence that they not be viewed purely as sexual objects.

Gandhi envisioned an economic order based not on competition and the exploitation of the weak, but on cooperation and the well being of the masses. His ideas stressed self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and dignity of labor. He believed that economic well being resulted not from the unchecked multiplication of wants and increase in greed, but from the satisfaction and fulfillment of the basic needs of individuals. He thus appealed to the higher instincts in human beings. One can argue that there is much that is both appealing and relevant for all of us in this philosophy, more so for millions of women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who still feel economically marginalized and politically powerless.

The transition from tradition to modernity, far from conferring benefits and equality to women, have in most cases in the

¹⁷ To a large extent he was inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* which stressed the dignity of labor.

¹⁸ Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* X, 51-52.

developing world, proved detrimental to the economic and psychic well-being of women. This article develops the theme that Gandhian economics may offer some viable alternatives.

Women Transforming Politics: Gandhi's Political Philosophy and the Feminist Approach to War, Conflict, and Peace

Historically, in all societies, war has been a predominantly male past time. Women have been excluded from involvement in war. They are, however, its chief victims—as destitute widows, grieving mothers, as victims of rape and violence, as refugees and the homeless—the hungry and the dislocated. Traditionally, men were identified with war and soldiering and women with peace and mothering. However, during India's struggle for independence, Gandhi developed his philosophy of non-violent resistance and called upon women of India to participate in the freedom struggle. He believed that the qualities associated with women, their capacity for love, compassion, selflessness, mothering, caring and patience would be the qualities essential for the non-violent fighter for truth, and thus, women would make the ideal non-violent warriors. This led to the active mobilization of hundreds and thousands of women in the freedom struggle.

War, militarization and nuclearization have a negative effect on any society, but it is an acknowledged fact that women and children suffer disproportionately in these circumstances. The nuclear arms launched by India and Pakistan have been detrimental to the interests of all, but especially the women who are called upon to make greater sacrifices in the name of patriotism and nationalism. The development of nuclear weapons can only be achieved by crippling social and economic costs that are borne disproportionately by women, children and the poor.

Gendering Nuclear Politics: Sexual Symbolism and Sexual Politics

On May 11, 1998 India carried out three successful nuclear tests in the desert of Pokharan, in the state of Rajasthan, thereby joining the exclusive and privileged club of nuclear powers in the world. In the days following this announcement, there was widespread jubilation and dancing in the streets. The government and media hailed this as proof of India's scientific and technological prowess. The sectarian Hindu nationalist leader Balsaheb Thackerey

announced, “It had to be done. We had to prove that we are not eunuchs.”¹⁹

In the aftermath of the nuclear explosion, there were demonstrations, protest meetings and marches—comprising diverse groups such as students, scientists, academics, political activists, human right advocates, environmentalists and some feminists. However, these voices of protests were drowned by the overwhelming and enthusiastic support for India’s nuclear achievement. Public opinion surveys showed that 91% of adults polled supported and endorsed the nuclear tests. Why did the women not speak out in greater numbers? Why did they not organize against nuclear proliferation? Why did they remain essentially voiceless on the vital issue that affects their survival and importantly the survival of their children? Did their silence suggest that motherhood as a symbol of caring, nurturing and peace had little meaning and relevance?

It would seem that the dominant patriarchal system and the power of the politicians had succeeded in silencing the women and persuading them to buy into their scheme of nuclear power. As Nancy Chodorow points out “Wars are sold by politicians and bought by citizens as wars of one nation against another, one ethnic group against another, or one religious sect against another. And women buy into these distinctions with all they entail just as men do.”²⁰

Interestingly, the ruling party—BJP and the right-wing fundamentalists have continued to employ the symbolism of ‘female power’ to promote their ideas. It is no accident that the nuclear bomb was named “shakti” – which stands for energy, life giving powers; a symbol of female cosmic energy. What they skillfully did was to replace Gandhi’s symbol of motherhood, which equated with peace, non-violence, compassion and nurturing qualities, with that of the Goddess Shakti – also perceived as female power – but one that is simultaneously powerful yet potentially dangerous, when unleashed. Instead of employing the metaphor of ‘Shakti’ to empower women, it was used by the ruling party to create powerful tools of destruction and to assert their masculinity and dispel any notions of their weak and fragile hold on power. In patriarchal societies, masculinity as represented by war is upheld as opposed to femininity as represented by peace.

The right wing RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh), which provides the basic ideology of the BJP has cultivated a climate of hate against Muslims, Christians and minorities. They

¹⁹ Quoted in Subramaniam, Banu, *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*. University of Washington Press, 2019.

²⁰ Laura Kaplan, “Women as Caretaker: An Archetype that Supports Patriarchal Militarism.” *Hypatia*. Vol. 9, No. 2. Spring 1999.

have actively promoted the worship of the armed goddess, invoking war and inciting men and women to bear arms and weapons. Thus, India has been the battleground for violence and ethnic conflict since the beginning of the twentieth century - violence that has intensified since the partition of India in 1947 and the birth of Pakistan and India.

The politicization of Indian women took place during India's struggle for Independence against British rule. Gandhi, the undisputed moral leader of India called upon the women of India to participate in the freedom struggle. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance - "Satyagraha" was ideally suited to appeal to women. Gandhi believed that the very qualities associated with women—the capacity for love, compassion, selflessness, mothering, patience, caring and forgiveness were the qualities essential for the non-violent fighter. Thus, women would make the ideal nonviolent warriors. This call led to the mobilization of hundreds and thousands of women in India who joined the freedom fight and courted arrest, imprisonment and even death.

Gandhi's unique contribution was to take the symbol motherhood (often the site for domination and oppression of women) and to exalt and elevate it and transform it into a powerful instrument of liberation of countless women. Skillfully employing feminine imagery, he helped Indian women reconcile the private and public domains and mobilized them for political activity and action. Consequently, women in India gained political awareness and experience in the decades prior to independence.

Since 1948 when a fundamentalist Hindu fanatic assassinated Gandhi, Hindu-Muslim conflicts have erupted periodically resulting in unprecedented violence, brutal killings and religious animosity. A recent example of this is the Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat and elsewhere. Gujarat, the birthplace of Gandhi has become the battleground for religious conflict. The lives of thousands of Muslims and Hindus have been disrupted and destroyed in these conflicts; countless men, women and children have been murdered brutally and many more have been displaced. The very social fabric of the state has been torn asunder and the collapse of civil society has threatened the democratic and secular base of India.

What roles did women play in this conflict? Did women participate in peace making and peacekeeping efforts? Was Gandhi's message of peace and religious unity completely forgotten?

I went to Gujarat to seek some answers and explanations for this and also to identify and document some of the efforts made by women to promote peace and communal harmony. While, it cannot be disputed that women along with men participated in the ethnic

violence during the riots, in the aftermath of the riots women's organizations are playing a vital role as peace builders and peacekeepers. One such organization is AWAG (Ahmedabad Women's Action Group). Like many other organizations, their philosophy is based on the premise that the best hope for undermining the Hindu-Muslim tensions and ethnic violence is not at the interstate or governmental level but at the 'people to people' level. They believe strongly that communal harmony can be best achieved by promoting extended interface and communication between ordinary citizens. The peace building activities of AWAG have focused on bringing Hindu and Muslim women together – most of whom are survivors of the riots to see the commonality of their lives and help them realize that they are victims of male dominance and patriarchy. AWAG sponsors workshops for these women called *manavta bachao shibir* (workshops to save humanity) where they are encouraged to give expressions to their feelings, emotions, fears and concerns. Participants increasingly become aware of the shared interests and common concerns such as safety of their children and families, inability to leave their homes in times of riots, the loss of income and means of livelihood, gender-based violence, scarcity of basic needs of survival – such as kerosene, cooking gas, milk, tea, water etc. and disruption of their daily lives. The next phase of the workshops is to provide practical training in how to prevent riots and counter the ideology of hate. AWAG also provide opportunities for income generation during times of riots and psychological counseling to riot victims. Once some measure of trust and confidence has been developed, these women are encouraged to send their adolescent daughters to participate in workshops and social activities thereby breaking the barriers of religious separateness and promoting empowerment of young women.

There are other innovative strategies that have emerged to promote sustainable peace. One such group is Women's Shanti Sena (literally 'women's peace force'). This organization requires its members to undergo a week's rigorous training in peace, democracy, non-violence and conflict resolution. Its membership is growing and comprises women from villages, many of whom are illiterate and poor. The goal of this organization was to create 50,000 actively trained peace warriors by 2005.²¹

Elsewhere in India, women are using the medium of street theatre and music to convey their ideas of peace, communal harmony and opposition to armed conflict, militarization and nuclear power. These are particularly effective tools to

²¹ Off Our Backs, March 2003.

²² Elshtain, Jean Bethke, *Women and War*. Basic Books, 1987

²² Arendt, Hannah in Kathleen B. Jones, *Diving for Pearls: A Thinking Journey with Hanna Arendt*. Thinking Women Books, 2013.

communicate with an audience that is largely uneducated and illiterate.

Afterword

As Elshtain points out, when it comes to the subject of women and war, it is essential for us to recognize the complexity and contradictions inherent in many of our assumptionsⁱ. We need to move beyond the prevailing and popular notion that women by virtue of their biological makeup have an innate and natural propensity for peace. The association of masculinity with war and femininity with peace is also misleading and often inaccurate. From the dawn of human civilization, women have been ardent defenders of peace as well as proud and patriotic workers who have sent their sons to war.

Women therefore must take the lead in opposing war and championing peace, for war is detrimental to their best interests and the survival of their children and families. Research on women, war and peace must go beyond the metaphor of the sorrowful and grieving mother and wife – the victims of war and instead, see them as powerful agents of change and keepers of peace.

As students and scholars we would do well to employ Hannah Arendt's approach, which she calls "pearl diving."ⁱⁱ One dives in to the deep waters not quite knowing what one will come up with. This method will serve us well in our study of women and war.

Future research and scholarship needs to bring women's peace and political activism to the forefront and document women's vital contributions to the peace process. We need to examine their activism at the local and grassroots level in the task of reconstruction and rehabilitation and their largely unrecognized role in creating democratic institutions, promoting human rights and creating civil society and sustainable long-term peace.

Gandhi's political and economic ideas and philosophy continue to be relevant in the 21st century and have much to teach us about women's empowerment.

References

- Basu, Amrita Ed. *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. Westview Press, Boulder, 1995.
- Beard, Mary Ritter. *Woman As Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities*. Persea Books, 1987. Press, 1953.
- Boserup, Esther. *Women's Role in Economic Development*. London, 1970.
- Chenoy, Anuradha. *Militarization, Conflict and University Press*, 1986
Dasgupta, Swapan, 1998:8).
- De Volk, Eva, "The Pearl Divers: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History" in *Krisis*, 2010 (1), 36-47.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke, *Women and War*. Basic Books, 1987.
- Erikson, Erik. *Gandhi's Truth*. New York: Norton, 1969.
- Everette, Jana. "We were in the forefront of the Fight: Feminist Theory and Practice in Indian grassroots Movements"
- Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (trans. by Mahadev Desai), Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, 1929; *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division of the Government of India, Navajivan Press, 1958-84.
- "India: Women Form Peace Organizations" *Off Our Backs* V. March 2003.
- Kaplan, Laura D. "Women as Caretaker: An Archetype that Supports Patriarchal Militarism." *Hypatia*. Vol. 9, No. 2. Spring 1999.
- Kumar Radha. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1900*. Kali for Women, 1998.
- Lebra, Joyce et al. eds. *Women in Changing Japan*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976.

Lele, Jayant and Wisdom Tettey. Eds. *Asia-Who Pays for Growth? Women, Environment and Popular Movements*. Dartmouth, England. 1996.

Manchanda, Rita. *Women. War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. Sage Publications, 2001.

Papanek, Hanna. *Women and Development: Perspectives from South and South East Asia*. Dhaka, 1979.

Reuther, Rosemary. *New Woman. New Earth*. 1975.

Robins-Mowry, Dorothy. *The Hidden Sun: Women of Modern Japan*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976.

Shobita Jain, "Standing Up for Trees: Women's Role in the Chipko Movement" in Sontheimer, *Women and the Environment*, 1991, pp179-205.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development in India*. Kali for Women, 1988.

Skjelsboek, Inger. ed. *Gender, Peace and Conflict*. International Peace Research Institute. Sage Publications, 2001.

Sontheimer, Sally ed. New York, *Women and the Environment: A Reader*. 1900-1937. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Subramaniam, Banu. *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism*. University of Washington Press, 2019.

Tinker, Irene. *Women and World Development*, ed., New York: Praeger, 1976.

United Nations. Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995.

Weber, Thomas. *Hugging the Trees: The Story of the Chipko Movement*. Penguin Books, 1988.
