

Constructive Programme: A Women's Perspective

Aparna Basu

Gandhi wanted women to play an important role in implementing the constructive programme. He said that more than a military campaign, constructive work required qualities like tolerance, sacrifice, renunciation, perseverance and penance and who could better exhibit these qualities than women?

Constructive programme formed an integral part of Gandhi's non-violent struggle for freedom. For Gandhi, political freedom from British rule was only one part of his struggle. He held that India's real swaraj would be attained through constructive programmes. Constructive programme could be called the construction of purna swaraj by truthful and non-violent means which would help achieving "independence of every unit, be it in the humblest of the nation, without distinction of race, colour or creed."

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Of all the items included in the constructive programme, Gandhi attached the greatest importance to khadi. Spinning of charkha and wearing khadi were the two symbols to arouse among Indians a sense of self reliance and nationalist zeal. Unlike the nineteenth century social reformers, Gandhi had realised the negative effects of colonial rule on women's economic status. The East India Company had destroyed India's cottage industries and the greatest sufferers had been women. This strengthened his decision to launch the khadi movement. Revival of swadeshi would provide work and supplement the income of the semi-starved women of India.

Gandhi used women's role in the khadi movement to show men that women's participation as equals was essential if the swadeshi movement was to succeed. Calling khadi essentially a women's movement served many purposes. A woman would earn a basic income for survival. It would also enable women to come out of

pardah. It enabled Gandhi to challenge the dominant upper middle-class value that equated a family's status with women not engaged in productive work. He asked well-to-do women to support the movement as producers and consumers, to buy khadi and also spin.

This was one of the programmes of the national movement through which a large number of women were brought into the political struggle. Women were associated with different aspects of the programme. Many



Gandhiji with Mridula Sarabhai in Bihar, 1946

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Kasturba (in 1915)

were spinning, others were picketing shops selling foreign cloth. Many widows had taken to spinning and earned some money. Mothers were telling their sons not to join government service but to take to independent trade, especially the manufacture and sale of swadeshi goods. Women's craft fairs, that is, mahila shilpamelas were held in many places under nationalist auspices. Handicrafts made by women were sold in the melas to promote indigenous cottage industry. A large amount of khadi was sold in these fairs. In many nationalist songs women were depicted as appealing to their husbands to buy them spinning wheels so that they could save their dharma and drive away scarcity.

Saraladevi Chaudhurani was the first woman to address public meetings in Lahore wearing a khadi sari and many women followed her example. She toured around north India delivering speeches to popularise khadi and spinning. She organised spinning classes in Lahore. While spinning she used to sing, "turn, turn, the wheel, the spinning wheels do turn, ye girls of India with Gandhi's ardour burn."

Khadi work in Orissa was done by Subhadra Mahtab who formed Gandhi 'Karma Mandir' and delivered speeches in various parts of the province explaining the significance of khadi and swadeshi, together with Ramadevi Choudhary and others. Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur organised a spinners' association in Punjab. Maniben Nanavati and her co-workers started a 'Khadi Mandir' in Vile Parle in Bombay. The women sang 'charkha chala chala ke lenge swaraj lenge' (We will win swaraj by spinning on the charkha). People used to call Maniben, 'khadiben' (khadi sister). Among Muslim women, Bi Amman propagated khadi. In Bihar, Prabhavati Devi established the Mahila

Charkha Sangh in Patna to involve women in spinning.

Women's magazines such as 'Grihalakshmi' and 'Stree Dharma' took up the cause of swadeshi, charkha and khadi.

In addition to popularising khadi and swadeshi, another important agenda in the constructive programme was removal of untouchability that Gandhi regarded as a 'social curse' and a 'blot' on Hinduism. He regarded women's involvement essential for removing this evil.

Rameshwari Nehru dedicated herself to the service of harijans. She was appointed Vice President of the All India Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1934 and devised new plans for the upliftment of harijans. She, together with other social workers, tried to get the Temple Entry Bill in favor of harijans passed in the Madras Legislative Assembly. Margaret Cousins described Rameshwari Nehru as "Gandhi's right hand woman in the Harijan Sevak Sangh."

In Orissa, Ramadevi Chaudhury and her husband established an ashram known as 'Sevanagar' for keeping harijan children and to give them training in various aspects of the constructive programme. Ramadevi taught girls, mostly from scavenger families, under the auspices of the Anti-Untouchability Board. Kokila Devi established a school and ashram in Balasore for harijan children.

The participation of women in Bihar began with Gandhi's arrival in Champaran in 1917 to enquire into the grievances of the indigo cultivators. During this period, among the women who joined him were Prabhavati Devi, Rajbansi Devi, and Bhagwati Devi. They led the fight against the purdah system. Prabhavati Devi worked hard for the removal of untouchability.

Anasuya Sarabhai opened night schools in mill areas of Ahmedabad for harijan children. Vidyagauri Nilkanth also worked for improving the condition of the depressed and backward classes in Ahmedabad.

Saudamini Mehta opened a clinic for harijan children in a bustee (slum area) in Calcutta where children were regularly examined by doctors and provided medicines and nutritious food. She was made President of the Bengal Harijan Sewak Sangh and toured different villages of Bengal. Anti-untouchability campaigns were carried on by women in different parts of the country. They opened harijan ashrams and balashrams.

Gandhi considered Hindu-Muslim unity imperative and it was one of the central planks of his constructive programme. He asked women to promote communal unity. Inspired by his appeals, many women came forward to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. Sarojini Naidu addressed meetings and spoke from various platforms about promoting Hindu-Muslim solidarity. She said, "Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of the nation and if both eyes are to be focused together on the swaraj image under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, freedom will be there ere long."

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur toured almost every corner of Punjab addressing meetings to promote communal solidarity. Saraladevi Chaudhurani also visited several towns in Punjab appealing to people to strengthen bonds of affection between the two communities.

Mridula Sarabhai played a very active role during communal riots in restoring peace and harmony. Gandhi was deeply concerned about the inactivity of Congressmen amidst all this communal hatred and violence, and commended the courage shown by three women – Mridula, Indumati Chimanlal Sheth and Pushpaben Mehta, who at the risk of their own lives tried to restore peace. In order to bring about communal harmony, Mridula formed the ‘Shanti Sevak Sangh’ with Mahadev Desai as President. In Bihar during 1947, Mridula accompanied Gandhi as he moved from village to village on foot in scorching heat, speaking directly to the people striving to restore communal peace.

Mridula showed remarkable courage in rescuing abducted Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan and Muslim women from India after Partition in 1947. In January 1970, efforts were underway to set up an organisation at the instance of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan on the lines of Khudai Khidmatgars (Servants of God) to promote communal harmony. Mridula was actively involved in the efforts to start the organisation which was called ‘Insani Biradari’ (Human Brotherhood) whose objective was to encourage the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect among all the people of India in regard to each other’s religion, aspects of culture and way of life.

Prohibition was another important item in Gandhi’s constructive programme. To combat this evil, he had a two fold programme viz., educating the people regarding the evil effects of drinking and closing liquor shops. Here again, Gandhi believed that women had a special role. Women who had drunken husbands knew what havoc drinking could cause in the home. Many women responded to Gandhi’s call. During the Non Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements, women came forward to picket shops selling liquor. Among the women who were active were Hansa Mehta, Maniben Nanavati, Mridula Sarabhai, Khurshidben Naoroji, Mithuben Petit, Ambujammal, Malati Devi and many others.

Gandhi wanted the condition of women to be improved both within the



Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

home, and outside. Kamaladevi asked people to put down imperialism in their homes by improving the status of women economically, socially and politically. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Annapurna Devi in Orissa, Hemaprabha Mazumdar in Bengal, Lakshmi Unnava in Andhra Pradesh and many other women in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, Madras and elsewhere organized women’s programmes, opened schools and colleges for girls, etc. Muthulakshmi Reddy tried to abolish the devadasi system and brought a bill in the Madras Legislative Assembly in 1930.

Mridula Sarabhai protested against gender inequality, injustice, oppression and discrimination faced by women within the family and in society. She established in Ahmedabad, ‘Jyotisingh’, a women’s organisation in 1934. Mridula had the capacity to train women from all walks of life, and gathered around her a group of extremely dedicated and loyal workers such as Charumati Yoddha, Hemlata Hegishte, Perin Mistry, Udayprabha Mehta, Pushpaben Mehta and Vidyaben Mehta. For the first time the concept of family counseling was introduced, helping to resolve the problem of disturbed families. Workable solutions were often instrumental in preventing escalating abuse of women and the breakdown of families.

In memory of Kasturba, who died in Aga Khan Palace in Pune on February 22, 1944, the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT) was set up on Gandhi’s 75th birthday (October 2, 1944). It was inaugurated by Sarojini Naidu and its aim was to work for women and children in rural areas. Gandhi remained its chairperson throughout his life and he used to look into every detail and no work was too small for him to attend to. He wanted the work to be done in villages, “Because”; he said, “this is a memorial to my wife. My wife was an uneducated village woman. She was not like these sophisticated women of the cities.”

Women also contributed to the revival of village industries, to conduct programmes of village sanitation and education in health and hygiene. Thus, women played a remarkable role not only in the political struggle but also in implementing the Gandhian constructive programme. ■

(The article has been taken from the book titled ‘Women in Satyagraha’ by Dr. Aparna Basu, Published by Publications Division in 2018)



*Saudamini Mehta (1903-1989)
A social reformer who worked towards
upliftment for harijans*