



# Participation of Women in Civil Disobedience Movement in India

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## *Abstract*

*The women of India had contributed remarkably in various non- violent movements started for India's freedom. The Civil Disobedience movement started in the year 1930. Most of the people of our country especially the intelligential were convinced that the method of persuasion could not work effectively. They felt inclined to use the strong language of agitation to compel the British Government to listen to their demands. Historically the period of 30s onwards had pressures of rising issues of communalism and ideological difference among the national leaders. Decade attracted the male attention to such issues. Gandhi tried to strengthen the national movement by involving mass of the women in the National Movement. Women contributed in mass movements in large scale.*

*Key Words: Women, Civil Disobedience Movement, National Freedom Struggle*

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Historically the period of 30s onwards had pressures of rising issues of communalism and ideological difference among the national leaders. Decade attracted the male attention to such issues. Gandhi tried to strengthen the national movement by involving mass of the women in the National Movement. Women contributed in mass movements like Civil- Disobedience, Dandi March, Quit India Movement. This paper deals with the movements and women contribution during 1930.

Gandhi returned to politics in 1928 and launched a civil disobedience campaign that brought large numbers of women into public life. Women's participation in the civil disobedience movement of 1930-32 differed qualitatively and quantitatively from the early 1920s and won them a place in history.<sup>i</sup>

The British Government had already rejected the Nehru Report of 1928 and repression was going on as usual. Simon and his colleagues arrived in India in the year 1928. Their arrival proved to be a turning point in the national movement. British Government appointed all white enquiry Commission known as Simon Commission to look into the working of the reform act of 1919 under the chairmanship of John Simon.

There was no Indian representation so the Congress passed a resolution to boycott the Simon Commission at every stage and in every form. All important leaders and parties boycotted the Simon Commission and wherever Simon and his colleagues went, they were greeted by hostile crowds, who exhorted them to go back. Women also did not lag behind and vigorously participated in the boycott demonstrations.

Hansa Mehta was actively associated with the demonstration which took place in the metropolitan city of Bombay. Several women's associations criticized the Commission on two counts - non inclusion of Indians and also of women from it. The women of Bombay held a meeting under the president ship of Sarojini Naidu and passed a resolution for a vigorous struggle for complete *Swaraj*.

The British Government retaliated with utmost aggression, resorting to frequent lathi charges to curb the violent crowds. Leaders of the stature of Jawaharlal Nehru, Govind Ballabh Pant and Lala Lajpat Rai took the blows, but sadly, however, Lala Lajpat Rai, who was badly hit on his chest on 30 October, could not survive. The blows inflicted on his body proved to be so serious that he finally succumbed to his injuries on 17 November 1928. Indeed, India had lost one of its most venerated leaders extremely unfortunate circumstances. The hostility shown by the Indian leaders to the Simon Commission definitely gave a big boost to the ongoing nationalist struggle.<sup>ii</sup>

Another important event to have taken place in the year 1928 was the *Bardoli Satyagraha*. This was launched under the leadership of Sardar Patel with the basic purpose of correcting an economic injustice done to the peasants because of the sudden and steep rise of Government demand for land revenue. The Government of Bombay, contrary to the advice of the Joint Parliamentary Committee and contrary to the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council of the Bombay Presidency in 1924, considerably enhanced the rate of rural taxation which was nominally 20 per cent but in actual application, in some instances, over 60 per cent. The public felt that the increase was unwarranted and that an impartial committee to hold enquiry be constituted. The Government paid no heed.<sup>iii</sup>

When, in order to register their strong protest against this repressive measure, people stopped paying taxes, the government resorted to measures like *lathi charge*, imprisonment, fines, auction of land, etc. But none of these measures could change the people's resolve.

The people refused to pay the taxes. The authorities met this challenge with the common lathi charge, imprisonment, fines, attachments and auctions of land. But none had much effect on the people. The women of Bardoli participated in this movement from its very inception but they had no leader. Smt. Mithuben Petit and Smt. Bhaktben Desai from Bombay greatly strengthened the movement amongst ladies. The women attend the meetings covering long distances on foot. They had composed motivating songs suitable to the occasion. Sardar Patel arranged for Mithuben, Bhaktiben, Maniben Patel and other ladies to camp on those very lands to be sold by fixing their tents and huts on it. The women in the area assisted in the collection of funds also. A lady still unknown, donated two hundred rupees and promised to send this amount regularly every month till the fight was over. The *Bardoli Satyagrah*, besides proving an eye opener to the people, exhibited the large measure of coinage among women. However, it served as a training ground for the women of Bombay and a motivation for women all over the country. It was for the first time here that the literate and the illiterate and ignorant women participated in the movement.<sup>iv</sup> The heroism of the simple unsophisticated women of Bardoli observed Mr. Desai was an inspiration to all women outside Bardoli.<sup>v</sup>

*Bardoli Satyagrah* was successfully completed in September 1928 after five and a half months of struggle. It made the Government aware of the strength of an organized and combined attempt.

*Bardoli Satyagraha* also gave an indication to Gandhi that perhaps, time was ripe for launching the non-violent Satyagraha on a big scale. Gandhi himself had looked upon the *Bardoli Satyagraha* as a victory for truth and non-violence in the political field<sup>vi</sup>. In December 1928, the Congress at its annual session held in Calcutta accepted the Nehru Report's 'dominion status' objective as its immediate goal with the proviso that if the government did not accept a constitution based on dominion status by the end of the year, the Congress would not only adopt *Poorna Swaraj* (complete independence) as its goal but would also be free to launch a civil disobedience movement to attain that objective.<sup>vii</sup>

However, the failure of the government to consider the Nehru Report and the demand of the people left the ahead with its plans of launching Satyagraha as per its decision taken at its session in December 1928 at Calcutta. Congress session held at Lahore in December 1929 which was presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru, *Poorna Swaraj* was adopted as the only viable goal for which the Indians would have to make gigantic efforts. On January 30, 1930 Gandhi had issued eleven point ultimatum to Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India, combining general and specific demands which included total prohibition, release of political prisoners, cut in army expenses and civil service salaries, change in the Arms act, reduction of land revenue, levy of duties on foreign cloth and abolition of salt tax and the government salt monopoly.<sup>viii</sup>

## Salt Law

As the ultimatum given by the Gandhi for acceptance of his demands was not given a favorable consideration by the Viceroy, the congress working committee invested Gandhi with full power to launch the civil disobedience movement at a time and place of his choice. Gandhi decided to start the *Satyagraha* by violating the obnoxious Salt Laws. Gandhi was empowered to initiate the Civil Disobedience movement in any manner he thought appropriate.<sup>ix</sup> Since salt is one of the cheapest items used in every house as a matter of routine. Gandhi decided to capitalize on this by breaking the Salt laws. Moreover, Gandhi thought that the issue of salt would also appeal to the imagination of Indian women.<sup>x</sup>

Thus, from March 1930, a new phase of Satyagraha had begun. Gandhi's plan was to walk all the way from his ashram at Sabarmati to *Dandi* – a small village on the seashore situated at a distance of two hundred and forty-one miles idea was to defy the government monopoly in salt manufacture. Gandhi was of the opinion that since salt was a thing of common use, which was consumed by the poorest of the poor therefore it was unjust on the part of the government to tax such a small commodity of daily use. H.F. Owen rightly remarks: His (i.e., Gandhi's) manufacture of salt in illicit circumvention example of his concern to increase material and social welfare, which included improvement in the status of women....<sup>xi</sup>

On 12 March 1930, Gandhi, accompanied by seventy-eight of his close associates, started his historic march from the Sabarmati Ashram. This march was a significant political event which appealed to the popular imagination. Ironically, no women were included by him in his original band of marchers. As was expected Gandhi was taken into custody for violating the Salt Laws.<sup>xii</sup> His arrest was the long awaited signal and the campaign started with country wide *hartals*.

Margaret Cousins, an Irish lady, wrote a strong letter of protest to Gandhi on the behalf of the women's Indian Association, protesting against the division of work by sex. She wrote, this division of sexes in a non- violent campaign seems to us unnatural and against all the awakened consciousness of modern womanhood. In these critical days of India's destiny, there should be no water-tight compartments of service. Women asked that no conferences, congresses or commissions dealing with the welfare of India should be held without the presence of women. Similarly women must ask that no marches, no imprisonments, no demonstrations organized for the welfare of India should prohibit women from a share in them.<sup>xiii</sup>

Durgabai Deshmukh was also against the idea of excluding women from the *Dandi* march. In her letter of protest to Gandhi, she wrote that we women should also be allowed to join. Khurshedbhen, the grand-daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, expressed her feelings of resentment to Gandhi, asking him as to why women were being prevented from breaking the Salt Laws. Mridula Sarabhai, then a student at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, took the plunge in total defiance of the instruction of Principal Kaka Kalekar not to do so.<sup>xiv</sup> Gandhi received similar representations from several other women leaders, who felt aggrieved on their exclusion.

The main reason why Gandhi excluded women was his sense of chivalry.<sup>xv</sup> Gandhi knew that if women were also present in the march, the British Government would feel inhibited to attack the procession, unless there was a big provocation. He thought that the inclusion of women would defeat the very purpose of Satyagraha and men would be accused of hiding behind the skirts of women.<sup>xvi</sup>

Giving a practical and immediate reason for their exclusion Gandhi explained: Just as Hindus do not harm a cow, the British do not attack women as far as possible. For Hindus, it would be cowardice to take a cow to the battlefield. In the same way it would be cowardice for us to have women accompany us.<sup>xvii</sup> But seeing the women in a defiant mood, he ultimately gave his consent to their participation in the Satyagraha.

Although no women accompanied Gandhi on the historic march to *Dandi*, but women were present in large number at every stop on the way to great Gandhi. Gandhi's methodical procedure of walking through dozens of villages, pausing regularly to hold public meetings, and covering the considerably distance of 241 days, may be seen, quite apart from the strength of the issue, as a massive political campaign. On reaching *Dandi*, Gandhi convened a Women's Conference in which he placed before women the special role, he had envisaged for them.<sup>xviii</sup>

Gandhi exhorted them with the responsibility of picketing of foreign cloths and liquor and toddy shops. He said: Drink and drugs sap the moral wellbeing of those who are given to the habit. Foreign cloth undermines the economic foundations of the nation and throws millions out of employment. The distress in each case is felt in the home and therefore by women.<sup>xix</sup>

He chose women for this job because of their inherent capacity for non violence. He further encouraged them to wear *Khadi* and to ply the charkha. On the basis of his past experience, Gandhi had known that women had the necessary patience to perform these tasks, though to many, these seemed secondary.<sup>xx</sup>

The majority of women present in the Conference felt extremely enthusiastic about the roles assigned to them, and in order to accomplish this they formed an organization for women in Gujarat. Mrs. Tyabji and Mithubhen Petit became President and Secretary respectively of this new organization, the main task of which was picketing of liquor and toddy shops and making personal appeals to the shop-owners to keep their shops closed. Gandhi also brought out a pamphlet titled *How to do the Picketing*. As per the plan chalked out by Gandhi, the picketing team was to have nine women members and a leader. It was decided that before resorting to any actual picketing, the picketing team was to send a delegation to the owner requesting him to either close his shop (in case it was a liquor shop) or restrict sales, if it was a shop selling foreign cloth. And in case the owner refused to comply with their request, the women would start making appeals to potential customers. In the process of picketing the women were required to wear a special uniform, carry the picketers should present themselves in a dignified manner, and the use of indecent language was to be strictly avoided. Men were to keep themselves away from this activity- the idea being to make sure that no violence took place.<sup>xxi</sup>

Those woman who for some reasons could not actively participate in the picketing activity, were asked to contribute their services in other ways like encouraging there neighbors to spin and wear *Khadi* clothes and distribute pamphlets, etc. to make the Gandhian programme popular among the masses. Gandhi was also very particular that proper accounts and vouchers in respect of money spent by the picketing team should be maintained.<sup>xxii</sup>

The Civil Disobedience era occupies a very significant place in the history of women's role in the national movement because it was during the period 1930-34 that women started emerging in a big way as speaker's marcher's picketers etc. In fact women's active association with the ongoing freedom struggle had started from the very first day of the commencement of the Salt Satyagraha.

Thousands of women from varied social backgrounds commenced their participation in the salt *Satyagraha* by manufacturing and selling salt, organizing meetings, talking out *prabhat pheries* and procession, picketing schools, colleges, foreign cloth and liquor shops and hoisting the national flag. Many notable women resigned from their posts as a mark of protest against the Government. Anusuyaben Kale resigned from the central Provincial Legislative Council.<sup>xxiii</sup> Mrs Dickson, an English woman, member of Bombay Legislative Council, resigned not only from her seat but also renounced the Kaiser-i- hind gold medal.<sup>xxiv</sup>

As the movement snowballed British Government found them in a situation of mass civil unrest which compelled them to formulate some sort of policy to deal with women *Satyagrahis*. Women's activism during the movement varied in different provinces like Bengal, Gujarat, Bihar, Madras Delhi, Orissa etc. in large scale. The participation of women in Civil Disobedience Movement in such large number inspired other Indian Women to participate in National Movement. As a result many Indian women have participated in National Freedom Movement. They not only participated indirectly but also come forward to bear the torture of jail. Men and women equally participated in freedom movement and as a result India got freedom on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947.

<sup>i</sup> Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India, IV. 2: Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 129.

<sup>ii</sup> Anup Taneja, *Gandhi Women and National Movement, 1920-47*, Har Anand, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 118-19.

<sup>iii</sup> Manmohan Kaur, *Women in India's Freedom Struggle*, Sterling, New Delhi, 1985, p. 151.

<sup>iv</sup> Simi Jain, *Encyclopedia of Indian Women through the Ages*, Vol. 3, Kalpaz Publication, 2003, p. 144.

<sup>v</sup> M. Desai. *The Story of Bardoli*, Navajiven Publishing House, 1957, p. 154.

<sup>vi</sup> C. W. M. G., vol.37, p. 200.

<sup>vii</sup> Rajan Mahan, *Women in Indian National Congress 1921-1931*, Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 1999, pp. 261-62.

<sup>viii</sup> *Young India*, January, 30, 1930.

<sup>ix</sup> Bharti Thakur, *Women in Gandhi's Mass Movement*, Deep and Deep Publication, New Delhi, 2006, p. 72.

<sup>x</sup> Anup Taneja, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>xi</sup> Rajan Mahan, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>xii</sup> P. G. Gosh, *Mahatma Gandhi As I Saw Him*, S. Chand, New Delhi, 1968, p. 137.

<sup>xiii</sup> Aruna Asaf Ali, *The Resurgence of Indian Women*, Radiant Publisher, New Delhi, 1991, p. 100.

<sup>xiv</sup> Aparna Basu, 'The role of Women in the Indian Struggle for Freedom', in B. R. Nanda ed., *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1976, p. 23.

<sup>xv</sup> D. G. Tendulkar, *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. II, Bombay, 1940, P. 20.

<sup>xvi</sup> Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1979, P. 39.

<sup>xvii</sup> C. W. M. G., vol.43, p. 12.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Young India*, April 10, 1930.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*

- xx Aparna Basu, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- xxi Anup Taneja, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- xxii *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- xxiii *Young India*, July 3, 1930.
- xxiv *Young India*, June 12, 1930.

