

## Nationalist Imaginaries and Gendered Self-Fashioning

Mr Nitin Patil

Dept. of English

Pratap College, Amalner ( Autonomous)

### Abstract

The early twentieth century witnessed significant transformations in gender roles as nationalist and anti-caste movements redefined women's subjectivity. This paper explores how nationalism created new identities for women, positioning them as active participants in shaping the nation while simultaneously making their bodies sites of ideological contestation. It focuses on three modes of female self-fashioning: the martial nationalist, as exemplified by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, who promoted valour and militant nationalism; the Gandhian woman, embodying self-sacrifice and non-violence; and the revolutionary woman, involved in socialist and communist movements. Additionally, the paper examines how B.R. Ambedkar's vision for Dalit women redefined traditional roles, particularly in terms of motherhood and social engagement. By investigating these historical transformations, this study argues that nationalism and anti-caste discourses led to the reconfiguration of intimacy, marriage, and public roles, thereby challenging patriarchal structures.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Gender, Self-Fashioning, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit Women, Anti-Caste Movements, Colonial India, Patriarchy

One of the pivotal moments in history that prompted a critical reassessment of sexuality intersected with the rise of nationalism. Nationalist discourses, though varied in scope, contributed to the formation of new identities. Nationalists emerged as historical figures imbued with passion for their homeland, its constructed past, and its envisioned future. Within this nationalist framework, women's bodies became crucial sites for expressing nationalistic aspirations. Women not only became objects of nationalist discourse but also actively participated in reshaping their emotional and physical identities to align with these new ideals (Rege, 2006).

The broader social consequences of these changes are well-documented as women entered new professional spheres and began occupying legitimate public roles. However, the implications of these transformations in terms of emotional and sexual autonomy remain underexplored. The nationalist movement encouraged women to reimagine their present and future in ways that complicated traditional ideas of domesticity and femininity. Several modes of female self-fashioning emerged during this period, each challenging conventional notions of womanhood in distinct ways. Three prominent types of female subjectivity can be identified:

### 1. The Martial Nationalist: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) was a key figure in early nationalist movements, advocating for an assertive and militant form of nationalism that emphasized strength, discipline, and self-reliance. Unlike many of her contemporaries who promoted passive resistance, she believed that national liberation required physical and moral fortitude. She envisioned a new Indian selfhood both for men and women rooted in martial valour, rejecting the stereotype of the submissive, domesticated woman.

Sarala Devi's nationalism was deeply influenced by her family background. She was the granddaughter of social reformer Debendranath Tagore and the niece of Rabindranath Tagore. However, unlike the reformist stance of the Tagore family, which emphasized cultural nationalism through literature and the arts, Sarala Devi advocated for a more militant approach. She argued that India's subjugation under British rule was not just a political failure but also a failure of national character, particularly among Indian men, whom she saw as weakened by colonial oppression.

To counter this, she founded the Birastami Brata, a festival celebrating heroism, where young boys were encouraged to take vows of courage and discipline. She also established physical training programs for youth and advocated for the participation of women in nationalist activism beyond

traditional roles. Through her writings and speeches, she sought to cultivate a sense of patriotic duty, emphasizing that women, too, should embody strength and resilience.

Sarala Devi's influence extended beyond ideological advocacy; she actively engaged in organizing nationalist youth movements and was closely involved in the Swadeshi movement (1905-1911). She saw the boycott of foreign goods as more than an economic strategy, it was a way of cultivating self-reliance and self-respect. Her vision of nationalism challenged not only colonial rule but also gender norms, urging women to transcend their domestic roles and take on leadership positions in the fight for independence.

Sarala Devi Chaudhurani epitomized a nationalist ideal rooted in martial prowess and valour. She sought to redefine national identity for both men and women by emphasizing strength and resilience. Her activism was closely linked to the Swadeshi movement, which intensified following the 1905 partition of Bengal. Sarala Devi was at the forefront of nationalist self-reliance initiatives and rejected the notion that women were confined to traditional domestic roles. Instead, she envisioned women as active agents in shaping national consciousness (Chaudhurani, 1919).

## **2. The Gandhian Woman: Non-Violence and Celibacy**

Another significant model of selfhood was that of the Gandhian woman one dedicated to a selfless public life, embodying non-violence and serving as an ideal participant in satyagraha (passive resistance). Gandhi's advocacy of celibacy for women, though controversial, offered an alternative path outside reproductive and domestic obligations. This perspective allowed women to engage in political and social activism without being bound by conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 2000). The Gandhian model of womanhood marked a significant departure from both the traditional domestic roles assigned to women and the militant nationalism espoused by figures like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani. Mahatma Gandhi envisioned a form of female participation in the national movement that was deeply rooted in ideals of self-sacrifice, nonviolence, and spiritual strength. Unlike the martial nationalist woman, who sought empowerment through physical strength and assertive action, the Gandhian woman was defined by patience, resilience, and a commitment to passive resistance (satyagraha). Gandhi's emphasis on women as the moral backbone of the nationalist struggle redefined their roles, allowing them to move beyond the confines of the home while still adhering to the ideals of selflessness and service.

Central to Gandhi's ideology was the principle of satyagraha (truth-force or passive resistance), which relied on moral strength rather than physical aggression. Gandhi believed that women, due to their traditional social conditioning, were naturally inclined toward nonviolence, endurance, and self-sacrificial qualities that he saw as essential for the success of India's freedom movement. He argued that while men had historically engaged in violent struggles, women's ability to endure suffering with dignity made them the ideal practitioners of nonviolent resistance.

In various speeches and writings, Gandhi encouraged women to embrace satyagraha not just as a political strategy but as a way of life. This involved rejecting materialism, embracing simplicity (symbolized by khadi and self-reliance), and participating in collective acts of defiance, such as boycotts, protests, and the Salt March of 1930. Unlike previous nationalist frameworks that confined women to supportive roles, Gandhi's ideology provided them with an active, though highly moralistic, space in the movement.

A particularly radical aspect of Gandhi's vision for women was his endorsement of celibacy (brahmacharya) as a legitimate and even preferable option for them. In a society where a woman's worth was largely defined by her ability to bear children and manage a household, Gandhi's advocacy of celibacy offered a striking alternative. He argued that self-restraint and control over one's desires were essential for achieving spiritual and national liberation. By choosing celibacy, women could free themselves from the constraints of reproductive expectations and dedicate their lives to public service.

Gandhi's own experiments with celibacy, which included testing his own self-control by sleeping next to young women without engaging in sexual relations, remain controversial. However, for



many women, his endorsement of celibacy opened up new possibilities beyond marriage and motherhood. Some women in the nationalist movement, inspired by his teachings, chose to remain unmarried and devoted themselves entirely to social and political activism. This was a direct challenge to traditional gender norms, which dictated that a woman's ultimate fulfilment lay in domesticity and child-rearing.

The impact of Gandhi's vision of womanhood can be seen in the active role that women played in various nationalist movements under his leadership. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34), and the Quit India Movement (1942) saw an unprecedented number of women taking to the streets, participating in marches, picketing liquor shops, and resisting colonial authorities. Some of the most prominent female leaders in the Gandhian tradition included Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali, among others.

One of the defining moments of female participation in the Gandhian movement was the Salt March of 1930, in which thousands of women across India defied British salt laws by making their own salt. The image of women walking barefoot to the coast, collecting salt, and distributing it symbolized a powerful assertion of agency. It was an act that, while nonviolent, directly challenged colonial authority and reinforced the idea that women could be at the forefront of political struggle.

Gandhi's emphasis on women's participation extended beyond political resistance. He encouraged them to engage in constructive work, such as spinning khadi, teaching, and rural upliftment. He saw these activities as essential to the larger nationalist cause, reinforcing the idea that women could contribute to the freedom struggle through both activism and nation-building.

While Gandhi's vision of the ideal nationalist woman created new spaces for female participation in public life, it also imposed certain moralistic expectations. The Gandhian woman was expected to be selfless, nonviolent, chaste, and devoted to service. In many ways, these ideal reinforced traditional stereotypes of the pure, self-sacrificing woman rather than challenging them outright.

For instance, while women were encouraged to step outside their homes and engage in activism, they were still expected to embody humility and restraint. Unlike the revolutionary women of the 1930s and 1940s, who directly confronted British authorities and sometimes took up arms, the Gandhian woman was expected to endure suffering rather than retaliate. This meant that while Gandhi provided women with a new moral legitimacy for their political activism, he did not fully endorse a radical redefinition of gender roles.

Furthermore, the expectation that women would dedicate themselves entirely to service and sacrifice sometimes placed an undue burden on them. Women who wished to assert their independence in ways that did not conform to Gandhi's ideals such as through militant activism or more radical feminist politics found themselves constrained by this moral framework. Despite these limitations, the Gandhian model of womanhood had a profound impact on Indian society and the larger feminist movement. It legitimized women's presence in public life and political struggle, challenging the belief that they belonged solely in the domestic sphere. Women's active role in the freedom movement paved the way for their increased participation in post-independence politics, social work, and education.

Many of the ideals promoted by Gandhi's simplicity, self-discipline, and service continued to shape women's activism in independent India. His vision influenced the Chipko Movement (1970s), the anti-liquor protests, and various rural empowerment initiatives where women played leading roles. At the same time, later feminist scholars and activists critiqued the moralistic and sacrificial aspects of Gandhian womanhood, arguing that it often placed excessive expectations on women while failing to fully dismantle patriarchal structure.

The Gandhian woman represented a complex and often contradictory figure in India's nationalist struggle. On the one hand, she was a symbol of endurance, moral strength, and nonviolent resistance, providing a powerful model for female participation in the freedom movement. On the other hand, the ideal of selflessness and sacrifice sometimes reinforced traditional gender norms rather than overturning them.

Nevertheless, the Gandhian model opened up new avenues for women in public life, laying the groundwork for future struggles for gender equality. While later generations of feminists sought to push beyond the limits of Gandhian ideology, his contributions to women's empowerment through activism, nonviolence, and service remain a defining part of India's historical and social fabric.

### **3. The Revolutionary Woman: Socialist Commitments**

A third mode of self-fashioning emerged in the 1930s and 1940s with women's engagement in socialist movements, particularly in Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. These revolutionary women embraced radical ideologies and sought to dismantle both colonial rule and oppressive social structures. Their activism extended beyond nationalist struggles to encompass broader issues of economic and gender justice (Rege, 2006).

Each of these models of female selfhood subverted traditional gender norms, particularly those that defined women primarily as wives and mothers. The nationalist ideal, championed by figures like Sarala Devi, not only positioned men as protectors of the nation but also encouraged women to take on active public roles. Sarala Devi herself resisted a conventional domestic life, choosing instead to establish herself as a writer, teacher, and political organizer. Her public engagement afforded her a degree of social and emotional independence, granting her the right to be evaluated outside the restrictive norms of femininity (Chaudhurani, 1919).

#### **Sarala Devi and Gandhi: Rethinking Emotional and Political Intimacies**

Sarala Devi's political activism brought her into close collaboration with Mahatma Gandhi during the early phase of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Their relationship, characterized by mutual admiration and ideological kinship, redefined notions of loyalty, affection, and personal sacrifice within nationalist circles. Gandhi himself acknowledged the significance of this bond, referring to it as a spiritual wedding in his correspondence with Herman Kallenbach (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 2000). In his letters to Sarala Devi, he described their connection as rooted in shared ideals and aspirations, with her recognizing in him a fuller realization of their common vision (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 2000).

#### **Caste, Gender, and the Dalit Women's Struggle**

While nationalist movements reshaped the discourse on gender, the anti-caste movement, particularly as articulated by B.R. Ambedkar, introduced a different dimension to women's liberation. Ambedkar emphasized that caste oppression was deeply intertwined with patriarchy, arguing that women bore the most visible markers of caste subjugation through their attire and adornments. He urged women to discard these symbols of servitude and instead adopt clothing that signified autonomy and resistance (Rege, 2006).

Ambedkar's speeches, such as the one delivered at the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, underscored the role of Dalit women in challenging caste hierarchies. He highlighted the irony that all children, irrespective of caste, are born without stigma, yet society imposes hierarchical distinctions upon them. By redefining motherhood and urging women to actively participate in the Dalit struggle, Ambedkar proposed a radical reimagining of conjugality one centered on community upliftment rather than mere domestic responsibilities (Rege, 2006).

His call to women to seek education and engage in public vocations had far-reaching consequences. For many Dalit women, marriage ceased to be an obligatory institution, and even those who married prioritized social activism over maintaining a traditional household. This reorientation not only enabled the creation of educational opportunities for Dalit girls but also contributed to the emergence of new forms of social intimacy and solidarity (Rege, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Historical moments of socio-political upheaval often led to the interrogation and transformation of established gender norms. The nationalist and anti-caste movements in India provided women with new frameworks for self-definition, challenging conventional notions of femininity and domesticity. Whether through nationalist activism, Gandhian non-violence, revolutionary socialism, or anti-caste resistance, women redefined their roles in ways that disrupted patriarchal expectations. These shifts



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not only altered the landscape of gender relations but also paved the way for new understandings of intimacy, agency, and public life.

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