



## REFORMING OR REINFORCING? GANDHI AND THE GENDERED POLITICS OF EDUCATION IN COLONIAL INDIA

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### Abstract

*This paper examines Mahatma Gandhi's educational philosophy through a gendered lens, analyzing how his vision for education intersected with the broader discourse on women's roles and empowerment in colonial India. While Gandhi advocated for women's education, his approach was deeply rooted in traditional gender norms. Through an analysis of his writings, speeches, and the Nai Talim (Basic Education) model, this study explores the paradox of a reformist ideology that expanded access to education for women while reinforcing patriarchal expectations (Gandhi, 1948). Gandhi conceptualized women as moral anchors of the nation, framing their education as a means to strengthen familial and societal values rather than to achieve individual autonomy (Gandhi, 1931). Although his advocacy catalyzed female participation in public life, feminist scholars argue that his vision perpetuated essentialist notions of femininity and restricted women's roles to the private sphere (Chatterjee, 1990; Forbes, 1996). By situating Gandhi within both colonial resistance and nationalist politics, the paper reveals the ambivalent legacy of his gendered politics of education. It highlights how his educational reforms laid the groundwork for women's inclusion in nation-building, even as they constrained their transformative potential. This nuanced analysis contributes to ongoing debates on gender, nationalism, and the politics of education in postcolonial contexts.*

**Keywords:** Gandhi, Gender, Education, Nai Talim, Women's Empowerment, Colonial India, Feminism.

### Introduction

**M**ahatma Gandhi remains a towering figure in India's socio-political and cultural history, particularly in discourses

concerning education and social reform. Celebrated globally for his philosophy of nonviolence and anti-colonial leadership, Gandhi also envisioned a transformative role for education in shaping the moral and ethical foundation of Indian society. Among his key contributions is the concept of *Nai Talim* or Basic Education, a pedagogical model grounded in the integration of manual work, moral development, and self-sufficiency. Introduced in the 1930s, *Nai Talim* rejected the colonial British system of rote learning and emphasized learning through productive labor, community engagement, and character formation (Gandhi, 1948). Gandhi's educational vision was thus not only a critique of colonial knowledge systems but also a tool for national regeneration.

Yet, embedded within Gandhi's progressive educational ideals are tensions and contradictions, particularly in his views on gender and the role of women in society. While Gandhi consistently advocated for women's education and participation in the national struggle, his conception of women's roles remained deeply rooted in traditional, patriarchal notions of femininity. He perceived women as inherently more moral, self-sacrificing, and spiritually superior to men, qualities which he believed made them ideal caretakers of the home and cultural values (Gandhi, 1931). This essentialist framing, though it valorized the feminine, simultaneously confined women to a narrowly defined domestic and moral sphere, limiting the radical potential of his educational reforms.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century in India was marked by a confluence of nationalist fervor and social reform movements, many of which focused on improving women's status through education. Colonial administrators, Indian social reformers, and nationalists alike recognized the symbolic and practical value of educating women as mothers of the future citizenry. However, the content and purpose of that education were contested. For many nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, education was not merely about knowledge acquisition but about molding the moral character of individuals in line with the envisioned nation-state. In Gandhi's case, this meant emphasizing discipline, simplicity, and nonviolence, traits he believed were best embodied and transmitted by women (Sarkar, 2001).

This paper interrogates the gendered dimensions of Gandhi's educational philosophy by situating his ideas within the broader socio-political currents of colonial India and emerging feminist critiques.

It asks whether Gandhi's vision for education fostered genuine empowerment for women or merely accommodated them within existing patriarchal structures under a reformist guise. Gandhi's speeches, writings, and educational experiments—especially the *Nai Talim* framework—are examined to assess the extent to which they challenged or reinforced the gender norms of his time.

Despite his commitment to women's upliftment, Gandhi's educational initiatives often drew from and reproduced conservative ideologies. For instance, while *Nai Talim* emphasized dignity in labor and self-reliance, it prescribed different types of work for boys and girls. Girls were typically taught skills such as spinning, weaving, sewing, and home management—activities that reinforced their roles within the domestic sphere (Forbes, 1996). Boys, on the other hand, were trained in agriculture, carpentry, and other crafts associated with economic production. The division of educational labor thus mirrored and legitimized the sexual division of labor in society.

Moreover, Gandhi's view of the ideal woman—as patient, non-confrontational, nurturing, and chaste—constrained the possibilities of education as a liberating force for women. He often advised women to bear suffering with grace and promoted their role as moral guardians of the nation (Chatterjee, 1990). While these ideas encouraged respect for women's moral strength, they simultaneously discouraged their participation in more assertive or disruptive forms of political activism. In this light, Gandhi's educational philosophy appears ambivalent—simultaneously empowering and restraining.

Nevertheless, Gandhi's influence on women's education and public life cannot be understated. His campaigns drew thousands of women into the public sphere, including many who had never previously stepped outside their homes. Women such as Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and others became national icons, and their activism often went beyond the limits of Gandhi's vision. While they respected his ideals, many of these women interpreted and expanded them in ways that challenged gender hierarchies and promoted feminist consciousness (Basu, 2005).

This study engages with contemporary feminist scholarship to evaluate the legacy of Gandhi's educational philosophy with regard to gender. It explores how Gandhi's vision influenced not only the content and structure of education for women but also broader cultural narratives about femininity, nationalism, and social reform.

By critically analyzing the gendered assumptions within Gandhi's pedagogical ideals, this paper contributes to the larger discourse on the intersection of education, nationalism, and patriarchy in colonial and postcolonial India.

In sum, the gendered politics of Gandhi's educational vision reveal a paradox: his initiatives expanded opportunities for women within the nationalist framework but constrained those opportunities within ideologically bounded definitions of womanhood. This paradox continues to inform contemporary debates about education and gender justice in India. By revisiting Gandhi through a gender-critical lens, this paper seeks to uncover the subtle ways in which reform can reproduce domination, and how progressivism must be tempered with structural critique to achieve true emancipation.

### *Gandhi's Educational Philosophy: Nai Talim*

Mahatma Gandhi's educational vision, popularly known as *Nai Talim* or Basic Education, marked a radical departure from the British colonial model that dominated India during the early 20th century. Introduced in the 1937 Wardha Scheme, *Nai Talim* emphasized education through productive work, moral development, and community engagement. Gandhi believed that education should not merely focus on literacy or intellectual attainment but should also cultivate self-reliance, manual skills, and ethical values. Central to this philosophy was the integration of the "three Hs"—head, heart, and hand—into the learning process. As he famously stated, "By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit" (Gandhi, 1948, p. 7).

*Nai Talim* sought to democratize education by rejecting the alienation produced by colonial pedagogy, which privileged English, abstract knowledge, and the elite class. Instead, Gandhi advocated for education in the mother tongue, rooted in local contexts and involving craft-based, experiential learning such as spinning, agriculture, and carpentry. This approach not only aimed at intellectual development but also instilled dignity in labor, linking education directly to social and economic self-sufficiency (Kumar, 1991).

However, the gendered implementation of *Nai Talim* reveals contradictions within Gandhi's egalitarian rhetoric. While he insisted on universal education, the curriculum for girls often centered on spinning, sewing, cooking, and home management—skills reinforcing

traditional domestic roles (Forbes, 1996). This division of labor mirrored societal norms and limited the transformative potential of education for women. Boys were trained in agriculture or woodworking, equipping them with skills for public engagement and economic independence. Such curricular distinctions reinforced the patriarchal division between the private and public spheres.

Although Gandhi's intentions were rooted in ethical and spiritual equality, his educational model often reproduced the very gender hierarchies it sought to overcome. The moral valorization of women as nurturers and preservers of culture aligned with nationalist ideals but constrained their individual autonomy and professional opportunities. Thus, while *Nai Talim* represented a progressive break from colonial systems, it also served as a vehicle for embedding conservative gender ideologies within the emerging national culture.

### *Gender and Education in Gandhi's Vision*

Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy for women's education was a significant departure from the entrenched patriarchal norms of his time, yet it was shaped by deeply conservative assumptions about gender roles. While he frequently emphasized women's intellectual and moral capacities, Gandhi did not envision education as a pathway to professional autonomy or political equality for women. Instead, he saw education as a means of strengthening women's roles within the family and the moral fabric of the nation. As Gandhi (1931) asserted, "A woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities... but the duty of motherhood is hers alone" (p. 29). This statement reflects his belief in essentialist gender roles, where equality was framed in spiritual and moral terms, not in socio-political or economic domains.

Gandhi consistently emphasized the importance of women's roles as mothers, caregivers, and cultural custodians. His educational prescriptions for women revolved around domestic skills, moral instruction, and religious education. In this view, educated women were not to challenge patriarchal structures, but to strengthen the family and community by embodying values of self-sacrifice, purity, and devotion (Sarkar, 2001). The ideal woman, in Gandhi's vision, was one who could endure suffering, guide the family with moral integrity, and contribute to the nation-building process through her virtue rather than activism.

This approach, though progressive in its inclusion of women in educational discourse, ultimately reinforced traditional norms. Gandhi's vision offered women visibility within the nationalist movement but constrained their agency to culturally sanctioned roles. His model did not challenge the public-private divide that excluded women from political and economic participation but instead legitimized it through spiritual rhetoric.

Feminist scholars argue that while Gandhi's efforts opened up spaces for women's participation in public life, his framework limited the scope of their empowerment (Chatterjee, 1990; Forbes, 1996). By valuing women for their moral superiority rather than their political or intellectual potential, Gandhi inadvertently upheld the gendered hierarchies he sought to reform. His contribution to women's education, therefore, lies in initiating the conversation, but not in dismantling the structures of inequality embedded within it.

### *Tensions between Reform and Patriarchy*

Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy for women's literacy and inclusion in the nationalist movement marked a pivotal shift in early 20th-century India. However, his educational philosophy simultaneously reproduced patriarchal values under the guise of cultural reform. While Gandhi called for the education of women, his conception of femininity remained rooted in essentialist ideals. He consistently depicted women as inherently moral, self-sacrificing, and spiritually superior, casting them as the custodians of cultural purity and national virtue. Feminist scholars have noted that such portrayals, though affirming on the surface, effectively confined women to the private sphere and moral domains, limiting their scope for critical thought and leadership (Forbes, 1996; Sarkar, 2001).

This contradiction was most evident in the gendered implementation of *Nai Talim*, Gandhi's model of Basic Education. While the scheme was intended to democratize education through experiential learning and vocational training, it prescribed different roles and activities for boys and girls. Girls were typically engaged in spinning, sewing, hygiene, and home management—tasks that reinforced traditional domestic expectations. Boys, in contrast, were introduced to agriculture, carpentry, and craftwork associated with public labor and production. The curriculum thus failed to offer girls the same tools for

public engagement and self-determination that were afforded to boys (Kumar, 1991).

Gandhi's framing of women as moral exemplars paradoxically hindered their political and intellectual development. By emphasizing their spiritual strength and role as caretakers, he created a conservative model of empowerment—one that valorized women's sacrifice rather than their agency. In doing so, Gandhi's reforms accommodated patriarchal norms instead of challenging them. The result was an ambivalent legacy: while Gandhi helped bring women's education into public discourse, he also reinforced gender hierarchies through selective inclusion and symbolic recognition.

This tension between reformist intention and patriarchal practice continues to be a critical concern in feminist analyses of nationalist movements. As scholars like Chatterjee (1990) argue, the nationalist project often appropriated women's emancipation to serve broader cultural agendas, subordinating feminist goals to nationalist ideals. Gandhi's vision, while transformative in some respects, ultimately exemplifies how reform can coexist with the reinforcement of conservative social structures.

### *Women Followers and Educational Mobilization*

Despite the conservative underpinnings of Mahatma Gandhi's views on gender, his political and educational campaigns had the unintended effect of propelling many women into public life. Gandhi's emphasis on self-reliance, moral responsibility, and service to the nation resonated with numerous women who went on to become educators, reformers, and political leaders. Women such as Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay not only participated in nationalist struggles but also extended Gandhi's educational vision in directions that were more progressive and feminist in scope.

Kasturba Gandhi played a critical role in mobilizing rural women through literacy initiatives and health campaigns, especially during Gandhi's satyagraha movements. Though she often worked within traditional gender expectations, her grassroots efforts reflected a significant shift in women's engagement with public welfare and community education (Forbes, 1996). Similarly, Sarojini Naidu, a poet and nationalist leader, pushed the boundaries of Gandhi's moral framing of womanhood by advocating for women's political rights and higher education. Naidu's vision of empowered, articulate

women participating in public discourse marked a departure from the domestic-oriented model endorsed by Gandhi (Ray, 1995).

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay perhaps most vividly exemplified this evolution. A staunch advocate for women's education, she worked to institutionalize vocational training for women, emphasizing autonomy, leadership, and economic participation. While inspired by Gandhian ideals of *swadeshi* and community development, Kamaladevi expanded their application to promote women's emancipation beyond domesticity (Sarkar, 2001). These women leaders often transformed Gandhi's symbolic and moralistic framework into a platform for concrete socio-political action.

This divergence suggests that while Gandhi's ideology laid the groundwork for women's inclusion in nationalist and educational spheres, it was his women followers who radicalized and reinterpreted that vision. Their efforts highlight the fluidity and adaptability of Gandhian thought, as well as the agency of women who navigated and negotiated its limitations. Rather than being passive recipients of reform, these women became active agents in reshaping the contours of education and empowerment in India.

### *Gandhi in Contemporary Feminist Critique*

Contemporary feminist scholarship offers a nuanced and often ambivalent assessment of Mahatma Gandhi's legacy concerning gender and education. On one hand, Gandhi is credited with initiating a discourse around women's education and social participation during a time when female literacy and mobility were severely restricted. On the other hand, feminist critiques underscore the limitations of his vision, particularly the paternalism and moral essentialism embedded in his approach to women's roles in society (Chatterjee, 1990; Basu, 2005).

Gandhi's model of empowerment emphasized virtues like chastity, self-sacrifice, and moral strength, portraying women as symbols of cultural resilience rather than as autonomous individuals. While this valorization offered a space for women's inclusion in nationalist movements, it also imposed restrictive gender expectations that prioritized national service over personal liberation. Feminist scholars argue that such framing allowed for *access* to education but failed to promote *empowerment* in the fuller sense of intellectual, political, and economic agency (Kumar, 1991; Sarkar, 2001).

Moreover, the Gandhian ideal of womanhood, though presented as spiritually equal to man, was still tied to roles of caregiving, domesticity, and moral guardianship. This depiction, according to critics, foreclosed the possibility of imagining women as leaders, decision-makers, or intellectual equals within the public sphere (Forbes, 1996). As Basu (2005) notes, Gandhi's influence must be read "not merely in terms of participation, but in terms of the kind of participation women were encouraged to undertake" (p. 58).

However, feminist re-readings also acknowledge Gandhi's historical specificity. Operating within the constraints of colonial patriarchy, Gandhi succeeded in making women's education a matter of national importance, thus creating a foundation that later reformers could build upon. His role as a catalyst is significant, even if his ideological framework did not encompass modern feminist aspirations. In this regard, Gandhi's contributions are seen as both enabling and constraining—an impetus for progress that also necessitates critical interrogation.

### *Conclusion*

Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to women's education in colonial India represents a complex legacy of both empowerment and constraint. His philosophy of *Nai Talim* and his broader educational vision undeniably challenged colonial paradigms by emphasizing indigenous knowledge, self-reliance, and moral development. By advocating for female literacy and encouraging women's participation in the nationalist movement, Gandhi created unprecedented opportunities for women to enter educational and public life (Forbes, 1996). Yet, these advances were bounded by his deeply rooted beliefs in traditional gender roles and moral essentialism.

Gandhi envisioned women primarily as nurturers, moral anchors, and custodians of Indian culture. While this symbolic elevation of womanhood provided a platform for visibility and influence, it also restricted women's roles to the private and moral domains, excluding them from full political and intellectual agency (Chatterjee, 1990; Basu, 2005). The educational opportunities Gandhi supported were often tied to domesticity and self-sacrifice rather than autonomy and leadership, revealing a conservative bias within his progressive framework.

A critical feminist re-reading of Gandhi's legacy reveals a duality: he was both a reformer and a preserver of patriarchal norms. Recognizing

this ambivalence allows for a more balanced understanding of his impact. Gandhi's vision, though limited, laid the groundwork for future generations of women reformers who extended his ideals toward more radical ends. Thus, while Gandhi's contributions to gender and education should be acknowledged and appreciated, they must also be interrogated through contemporary feminist lenses.

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