

A Comparative Study of the ideas and ideals of Bipin Chandra Pal and Gandhi on the issues of women

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Abstract

This article is trying to study the women-centric mindset of two contemporary colonial Indian Congressmen, healing from two opposite corners of 19th and 20th century colonial India. Bipin Chandra Pal was famous for his extremist ideology within the Indian National Congress and on the contrary, Gandhi was world-famous for his philosophy of 'ahimsa'. In a conventional sense, the two ideologies, extremism and ahimsa, seemed contradictory to each other, putting Pal and Gandhi into opposite quarters within the INC. But it is surprising to find out that both Pal and Gandhi had shared a very similar, if not exactly the same, mindset on the vital question of the societal upliftment of colonial Indian women. This article's sole objective is to highlight Pal and Gandhi's different opinions on different issues related to women and the similarity in their solutions on the same subject matter for a constructive outcome.

Keyword: Women, Gandhi, Bipin Chandra Pal

Date of Submission: 01-11-2022

Date of Acceptance: 12-11-2022

I. Introduction

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the few Indians with English-language educations began to gradually experience the effects of European Civilization. This was of great significance because, after a century of anarchy and stagnation, western ideas created some sense of awareness in the minds of educated Indians. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the situation was such that this awareness was emerging as the next big thing, the next new trend. Overtime in the nineteenth century, the new feeling of awareness has widened up the thought process helping the intelligentsia to engage in a convoluted critical exercise. This exercise involved clashes between indigenous customs and traditions and new emerging liberal ideas. The intelligentsia was unable to establish its own agenda with any degree of clarity since colonisation did not always make the range of issues and challenges that the colonised faced simpler. It was also an era in which nationalism was gradually emerging even in the remotest regions which is known as North East India in the present day and new wave of ideas were flooding the minds. The question of the status of women was one such issue of debate, gaining ground among the intelligentsia. The holistic growth and development of Indian women were prioritized as one of the founding stones of the "occidental nationalism" getting considerable popularity in colonial India. Some English educated social reformers were keenly interested to educate womenfolk as they believe that a nation cannot grow without the upliftment of the women in the society. The early reformers in this venture, were mostly males and their reformative measures had faced several hurdles. It was aptly visible in the activities of the social reformer starting from the heyday of Raja Ram Mohon Roy's initiative towards abolishing Sati in the year 1829 to Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and his earnest drive towards widow remarriage³. The women's question was, though not an easy endeavor because women were primarily accustomed to preserving the traditional customs and practices. However, there were concurrent discourses that portrayed a dread of modernising Indian women in the name of freedom and developing into a new type of woman as a self-indulgent, spoilt, and lazy creature that cared nothing for her family or the prosperity of the country.

Despite perceptible differences, many well-known social reformers championed the cause of women's education, the emancipation of women, widow remarriage and voiced against child marriage, infanticides, purdah, etc. They even helped the Britishers to pass many laws which will help to do away with the wretched

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³Bose, Nemaisadhan (1974). Indian National Movement on Outline, Firma K L, Mukhopadhyay, pp. 125-6, 131, 144.

condition of the women. But interestingly in their personal life, they did not follow what they preached. There was a difference between their ideals and the activities they did in personal life.

However, there were some personalities who practiced what they have tried to preach to the public (their feministic philosophies) in their personal life. Such a burning example was Bipin Chandra Pal, who hails from the Surma Valley and was the first member to represent Cachar in the Indian National Congress. Bipin Chandra Pal was born in a village called *Poila* which is in *Sylhet* district, present-day *Bangladesh*. In the history pages, Pal is famous only as one of the trio of LAL – BAL – PAL fame and as a radical leader of the extremist phase. But the other side of Pal should be given similar credit but still not mentioned widely as it should be that he belonged from present-day North-East India and was a dynamic activist and practitioner in the arena of women's emancipation.

Another leader who was on the same page with Pal on the cause of women's emancipation was the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi. The issues regarding women's social subordination were one of the central concerns of Gandhi. In all historical judgment, it must be admitted that it was *Bapu*, who made women's question one of the vital concerns of Indian politics.

This paper is trying to bring together these two personalities, grown in two opposite corners of Colonial India and contemporary to one another, on the same wavelength on the curious case of women's emancipation. The paper is also attempting to highlight and estimate the thoughts, writings, practices and similarities of Bipin Chandra Pal and Gandhi on the vital question of Women, despite having opposite general political identities. Lastly, the paper also reflects the notion that both Pal and Gandhi had a strong commitment to practice whatever things, they were preaching on women's liberation to the Nation, in their own life.

II. Review of Literature

For understanding the contribution of Bipin Chandra Pal, there is no lack of primary sources as Pal being himself a prolific writer. The nature of the texts are different but vivid. Many of his writings deal with his socio-religious and political ideas which were valuable treasury for not only to understand the contemporary situation but also to surmise his activities and practices. Pal's autobiography entitled *Sattar Vatsar – Atmajiban* reflects various aspects of his life and career right from his childhood days to initiation to Brahma Samaj with the help of his friend Sundari Mohon, joining in the Indian National Congress as a representative from Surma Valley, up to the ideas propagated by him for National Education. Pal's autobiography reveals his belief in the interdependence between society and the individual and also his grave concern of the plight situation of widows. His *Sole of India a Constructive study of Indian Thoughts and Ideals* gives ample source regarding his perspective which was intensely social and religious nationalistic in spirit and touches on some issues concerning the upliftment of womanhood. As soon as he arrived in the USA, he wrote *Markiner Charimas*. Pal travelled to the United States on a lecture tour as an invited guest of the National Temperance Association in New York. This particular work of Pal throws considerable light on the evil caused by the drinking habit of males and the subsequent sufferings of women in the family. There is a serious dearth of secondary sources on Pal.

In the context of Gandhi, the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi and the Autobiography of Gandhi have a lot of references to the dilemma of women in the traditional Indian society. Besides that, secondary sources such as Geraldine Forbes's *Women in Modern India*, *The New Cambridge History of India* (1999) and *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, and Historiography* (2005), Karuna Ahmed's *Gandhi, Women's Role and the Freedom Movement* (1984), Anup Taneja's *Gandhi Women and the National Movement, 1920-47* (2005) makes some thorough study of Gandhi's role in making the issues of women a vital topic of debate and discussion in the discourse of national movement. Regarding Gandhi's role in releasing women from their restrictions and integrating them into society, scholars come to varying interpretations. Other academics, including Tanika Sarkar, Bhikhu Parekh, and Lyn Norvell, were adamant in their assertion that Gandhi gave voice to the quietened voices of women from a wide range of circumstances. Tanika Sarkar opined that, this was altered by Gandhian activities. Peasant women, upper-caste middle-class women, upper-class Muslim women, and tribal women all joined together in nationalist protests, picketed shops selling imported goods, organised social boycotts of ardent supporters and the public burning of imported clothing, crowded prisons, and took on the role of local "dictators" during civil disobedience when their husbands were detained. Gandhian politics did not include any sexually exclusive practices.⁴ Even the fact that this owed much to the self-representation of Gandhian movements was not overlooked by her. with a leader who was regarded more as a saint than a politician.⁵

⁴ Sarkar, Tanika (2011). Gandhi and social relations. In Judith M. Brown & Anthony Parel (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, p. 185.

⁵ *Ib id*, p. 185.

Similarly, AnupTaneja's in-depth discussion of the part that women (from a variety of backgrounds) played in the country's numerous independence struggles through their affiliation with Gandhian movements like Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India. In fact, at Gandhi's urging, women started to leave the constraints of their homes to take part in positive initiatives like spinning charkha, donning khadi clothing, picketing, and boycotting imported goods, among others.⁶

From the above discussion on the existing literary sources, it can safely argue that both Pal and Gandhi separately developed well-defined perspectives on women which is amply reflected in their writings. Academicians had conducted a very thorough research of the women-centric stance of Gandhi despite the dearth of secondary data on Pal. The gap is the two personalities are never compared with each other, neither during their lifetime nor after their demise. This paper setting aside, for the time being, the common political identities, is trying to compare the thoughts, practices and similarities or dissimilarities of Pal and Gandhi, on the issue of women only, taking references from their writings and other sources.

A comparison of Pal and Gandhi on the question of women:

A Biographical Sketch of Bipin Chandra Pal:

Bipin Chandra Pal was born on 7th November 1858 in a wealthy *Vaishnava Kayastha* family. His father was Ramchandra Pal, a Persian scholar and a small landowner. His mother was Narayani Devi who was a strict, self – restraint and disciplinarian. Bipin Chandra Pal also had a sister, *kripa*. Though Pal was brought up in a conservative family ever since his childhood his young mind asked several questions encircling around believing in the caste system, religious superstitions, etc. He had a deep impression in his mind when he had *Chanakya's* proclamation – “*Swadeshe pujetta Raja, Bidyan Srvatra pujoyeta*”.

The women concernedmindset of Pal:

Right after finishing his school in Sylhet in the year 1875, Pal cleared the entrance examination of the Calcutta University. When he was in Calcutta one of his friends named *Sundari Mohon* encouraged him to join the weekly prayer meeting of *Brahmo Samaj*. Though Pal did not formally join the *Samaj* but was greatly impressed by the words and oratorical skill of *Keshab Chandra Sen*. He would sit silently for hours hearing the preaching of *Keshab*. At college, he contributed articles to Bengali Journals like “*Srihatta*” and “*Prakash*”. He was highly inspired by the literature of *Bankim's* “*Banga Darshan*”, a journal that started in 1873-74. His women-centric concern had gradually aroused by reading various novels like *Durges Nandini* and by various practices of the *brahmos*. In 1876, he met *Pundit Shivnath Shastri*, a Sanskrit scholar whose *Brahmo* ideas seemed to be filled more with the social freedom of spirit apart from many other liberal things. Social and national freedom was a vital part of *Shastri's* belief that was tempered by rationalism.⁷

In the year 1877 Pal formally entered into *Brahmo Samaj*. Although he did not inform his father about his breakage with traditional Hindu orthodoxy, nonetheless his father came to know about his new association. Pal was called back immediately but he kept on postponing. His father stopped sending him money and formally disinherited him. Thus, a rebel was already born in Pal. He did not reconcile with his ideals even he was facing severe hardship in terms of his sustaining himself. This, showing the base of a character of a true social reformer who was not reconciling at any ground. It was the year 1878 when the schism of *Brahmo Samaj* occurred, he joined the more radical wing of *Shivnath Shastri* and *Ananda Mohon Bose*, The *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj*. Unlike some other social reformers, Bipin Chandra Pal always matched his deeds with his words. He was one of the torchbearers of the Bengal renaissance and also paved the way for other social reformers at a later period to take initiative for the women's issue in colonial India. The *brahmos* were famous for leading the cause of women's question. Allowing widow remarriage and even the liberal attitude towards allowing wearing sandals by women. Marrying young widows was a common practice that Brahmo young men religiously followed in their lives. Pal being a progressive Brahmo married *Bala Bidhavasor* young widows⁸. Bipin Chandra Pal's *brahmo* marriage was the first-ever Brahmo marriage of the Bombay presidency. He married widow *Nityakali Devi* in the year 1881 in Bombay in a complete Brahmo pattern. Bipin Chandra Pal had all the opportunity to marry any other lady but he chooses to marry a widow. Though the widow remarriage act was passed in the year 1856, it was just an act by name. Very few had the interest neither the courage to marry a widow because it was still a social taboo. Social ostracism could be the result of such marriages. But Bipin Chandra Pal denying the social pattern came forward for the women in his unique way which is less known and appreciated.

⁶ Taneja, Anup (2005). *Gandhi Women and the National Movement, 1920-47*. New Delhi, India: Har-Anand Publications PVT. LTD, p. 12.

⁷ Pal, Bipin Chandra (2004), *Memories of my life and times*, New Delhi, Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust, p. 235.

⁸ Mukharjee Subrata, “The Legacy of Bipin Chandra Pal”, *India's Freedom Movement*, ed., 2007, p. 9.

After the death of *Nityakali Devi*, Bipin Chandra Pal again married for the second time in the year 1892. This time it was *Birajmohini Devi*⁹, who was again a widow. *Biraj* was a close relative to *Rashtraguru Surendranath Banerjee*. The liberal attitude of Pal as well as his social reformative measures, cannot be looked down upon. Thus, through his marriages, he challenged the superstitious attitude and prevailing attitude of contemporary society. Bipin Chandra Pal is only known in the pages of history as the radical leader of the extremist era, but another side in regards to women's question also needs and deserves due appreciation. Supporting the Age of Consent Act of 1891, Bipin Chandra Pal obtained an invitation to travel to the United States for a lecture tour from the National Temperance Association in New York. His lectures and speeches on Temperance were highly acclaimed as he pointed out about the sufferings of women in the family due to severe drinking habit of men.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, another extremist leader who was also instrumental in the political upsurge with Bipin Chandra Pal was not a supporter of women's [non-brahmins] education¹⁰. It was imminent that being politically radical did not ensure being socially radical. But Bipin Chandra Pal supported education for woman folk and showered respect towards the activities of common women of any household. He found it comfortable to interpret a mother's beauty as tirelessly affectionate and serving. He further added that the Bengalis are habituated to see their mother every morning in the kitchen with her hair piled up high busy cooking for her family which is her regular business. He further stated that once the mother arouses her sons to fight with wrath and anger then it's unstoppable because Durga reverts to Kali. Thus, he thought that there is an entire notion of social upliftment and patriotism. He highly linked Indian patriotism coming in the way of upliftment of the condition of women in India. He encouraged the participation of women in political endeavors. However, in the later period, the Gandhian movements expanded the boundaries of participation and involvement of women in organizational work. It was an unprecedented scene when women came to the streets during the Non-Cooperation movement. In that sense, it can be argued Bipin Chandra Pal also partially paved the way for reformers like Mahatma Gandhi to work for the cause of women and helped to uplift their condition in society.

Clash of the two titans:

In the year 1909, for the very first time, Bipin Chandra Pal and M.K. Gandhi spoke at a dinner at Nizam Ud Din's restaurant "The Indian Catering Company" at Bayswater.¹¹ In this meeting, Pal was in the chair. But even before this meeting, Bipin Chandra Pal responded to the questions aroused by Gandhi regarding physical violence. He [Bipin Chandra Pal] maintained that soul force should be backed by physical force. Gandhi answered that in such a case it would not deserve the name of soul force.¹² For the second time, both these titans were facing each other at the Barisal session of Congress of 1921. In his [Bipin Chandra Pal] presidential speech, Pal did not subscribe to Gandhi's plea of paralyzing the government by the scheme of Non-Cooperation. Pal announced that Gandhi was giving 'magic' but Pal himself was giving logic.¹³

The feminine side in Gandhi:

Gandhi's yearnings and evolving perceptions on the issue of rights of women right developed right from his childhood, starting from religious learnings he received from his mother, then from his wife and other western female friends to till his South African struggles. He got the initial lessons of the courage of women in the form of fasting, perseverance and vow-keeping capacities from his mother. The England's Women's suffrage movement, which also helped in the change and transformation of his ideas, perception and actions about women. All these gathered experiences played a very crucial role, in framing his spiritual and political doctrines such as *Brahmacharya* and *Satyagraha*. A very clear reflection of it can be seen in his book *Hind Swaraj* about his anticipations of women's condition under modern civilization, for instance, "Women, who should be the queens of households, wander in the streets or they slave away in factories. For the sake of a pittance, half a million women in England alone are labouring under trying circumstances in factories or similar institutions"¹⁴. The first test of all these above-mentioned experiences was the result of Gandhi's involvement of women in initiating a mass protest against the South African white colonial government's draconian laws in 1912.

⁹ Op cit., Pal, Bipin Chandra, p. 363.

¹⁰ For further reading see, Gail, Omvedt. *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 101-3.

¹¹ Hunt, James D (2012), Gandhi in London, New Delhi, Promilla and Co. Publishers, p. 126.

¹² Mukharjee, Haridas and Mukharjee Uma (1958), Bipin Chandra Pal and India's Struggle for Swaraj, Calcutta, Dey's Publishing, p. 474.

¹³ Gandhi, A K, *Bipin Chandra Pal*, Prabhat Books, New Delhi, 2008, p. 6.

¹⁴ Gandhi, K. M., *Hind Swaraj*. Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938, p. 33.

After returning to India in 1915, Gandhi started to discuss and debate publicly the issues of Indian women in the public sphere. Especially, during this time, in his writings, there are many references to his belief in gender equality and its various moral and metaphysical justifications based on the *Advaita* philosophy of *Atman* and *Brahman*. Throughout his life, Gandhi talked and practiced the same basic principle of male and female equality. In 1925, Gandhi wrote in *Young India* that if a woman does not embody selflessness and purity, she is nothing¹⁵, again in 1930, in *Young India*, he wrote the woman is incomparably superior to a man if strength is moral power.¹⁶

In *Harijan* in 1940, Gandhi wrote ahimsa is manifested in women. Since ahimsa is the Sanskrit word for boundless love, pain can also be infinite. Who else demonstrates this ability more than women, the mother of men?¹⁷ As Sujata Patel puts it, Gandhi began to focus more and more on the issue of women in India, first by challenging traditional Hindu beliefs like *pardah* that limited women's participation in the country's awakening and later by affirming and establishing for himself the unique role that women can play in the national movement¹⁸. In his writings, Gandhi strongly underlines the *Swadeshi* aspect of the *Dharma* of Indian women. During the time of the Non-Cooperation movement, Gandhi inter-woven the *Swadeshi* feeling with the women's sentiment of the then-colonial India in a very practical fashion. By the introduction of *Charkha*, weaving and *Khadi* as the new weapons of Indian nationalism and the making women the torchbearer of it, Gandhi provided a new scope of women's participation in the public sphere in a symbolic way which was truly unprecedented during that time. Gandhi wrote in *Harijan* in 1939, essentially, spinning is a gradual, rather silent operation. Women represent sacrifice and, by extension, non-violence. Therefore, given that her occupations are more favourable to peace than to conflict, she must be such.¹⁹ Besides he also vigorously criticized the Hindu Orthodoxy concerning child marriage, widow remarriage, dowry, Sati practice, child widow, polygamy, *pardah*, lack of education of girl child, etc. Additionally, he emphasises on topics like birth control, sexuality, parenthood, marriage, purity, family, celibacy, etc. To encourage women's involvement in the national cause, Gandhi also adopted a variety of political initiatives that he devised during the Civil Disobedience movement. To make women more visible in the public arena at this time, women were given auxiliary duties like picketing liquor stores and torching imported clothing. His ashram life was a prime example of his near-perfect synchronization that he developed between his Indian and a few western women associates, with special reference to the particular aspect of Gandhi's Constructive Programme and his women disciples being its flag bearers.

III. Conclusion:

In conclusion, by citing all the above mentioned historical facts about the issue of women from the lives of Bipin Chandra Pal and Gandhi, this paper argues that, though there were a lot of differences in the thought process of Pal (having the identity of an extremist) and Gandhi (non-violence) on many vital issues of the then-contemporary colonial Indian society, which is reflected very clearly in the two meetings both of them had in their lifetime, but on the issue of women their thoughts were more or less in line to each other and most importantly, on the women's question both of them were very serious for finding out suitable ways to emancipate and uplift the miserable condition of Indian women. Pal and Gandhi both grew up in two different places, but if we look closely, the initial exposure to women's issues, which was common to both, was from the native religious works of literature, which was further accentuated by the deeply religious family practices (both of them belonged from *Vaishnavite* families). During their respective lives of activism, five (5) women-related issues can be cited, which were widow remarriage, women's emancipation, political participation of women, the evil effects of drinking on the family and the glorification of motherhood. In the form of comparing and finding out similarities between Pal and Gandhi on the matter of Women and also accepting the well-established academic feminist approach of Gandhi, this paper tried to explore the possibility of establishing the feminist side of Pal, which is missing in the historical narratives of Pal and can hopefully open new avenues of research on Pal and North-East Feminism.

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¹⁵ 'A True Congressman', *Young India*, 19 November 1925.

¹⁶ 'To the Women of India', *Young India*, 10 April 1930.

¹⁷ 'What is Woman's Role?', *Harijan*, 24 February 1940.

¹⁸ Op cit., Patel Sujata, p. 333.

¹⁹ *Harijan*, 2nd December 1939, CWMG, Vol. LXX, p. 381.

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Debasish Datta, et. al. "A Comparative Study of the ideas and ideals of Bipin Chandra Pal and Gandhi on the issues of women." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(11), 2022, pp. 54-59.