



Greatest Supporter of Women's Freedom: Mahatma Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi strongly favoured the emancipation of women. He opposed purdah, child marriage, untouchability and extreme oppression of Hindu widows, up to and including salt. He especially recruited women to participate in the salt tax campaigns and the boycott of foreign products. Gandhi's success in enlisting women in his campaigns, including the salt tax campaign, anti-untouchability campaign and the peasant movement, gave many women a new self-confidence and dignity in the mainstream of Indian public life. The low status of women was the result of prejudices and adverse traditions, which were centuries old. As a woman I feel rather it was easy to change perception a little because of patient, genuine dialogue and approach.

KEYWORDS :

Gandhi revolutionised not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women. As a result of his strong principles, Gandhi created a strong current of women emancipation across India. He encouraged women to start their own movements and compete on the working field with men. In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21, October, 1936 Gandhi writes, "If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave-holder myself but I proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?" Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. While some like Sarojini Naidu, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur rose to prominence, there were thousands of unsung and unnoticed heroines of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence. Gandhi recognizes the patriarchal society in India. He acknowledges that men play a domineering role and that this is almost universally prevalent in Hindu society. But he is quoted on saying, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his". For Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Women are at par with men, one complementing the other. According to Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. When Gandhi came into political and social power, India's social evils were still lurking such as child marriages and dowry. Gandhi took on a more authoritative stance to women, unlike his contemporaries. According to Gandhi, EDUCATION of women was imperative at the time to ensure moral development. It was the key to pulling women up on the same platform as men. Women imbued all qualities needed for virtues of satyagraha; virtues like knowledge, tolerance, faith, humility and sacrifice. Women could also endure endless suffering, according to Gandhi. He felt women played a large role in establishing non-violence. He looked to ancient Indian role models such as Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti to demonstrate women's real strength. While in some spheres women have accepted Gandhi's words about shedding their role as slaves and facing patriarchal challenges, women have largely slipped away from the paths of political action that Gandhi had opened out for them during the freedom movement. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women. Swaraj uprooted age old taboos and restrictive customs. Through their participation in Indian struggle for freedom, women of India broke down the shackles

of oppression that had relegated them to a secondary position from time immemorial. Mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his country. Gandhi was able to devote himself to such a mission and formulated views on all aspects of a woman's life, political, social, domestic and even the very personal or intimate. Typically, Gandhi was able to step out of his traditional attitudes through the medium of education. When asked to write a primer for school children by Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Gandhi did it in the form of a mother teaching her child in which she explains to her son that housework was good for both mind and body and helped in character building. He realised that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation. In his opinion, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his". Gandhi was clear that "Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for men including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man". When Gandhi was asked whether a wife could go against the will of her husband to take up national service, he supported the claim of a wife to devote herself to a noble purpose. Though Gandhi never challenged the traditional set up, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within it, and thereby changing its very essence. Women learnt from Gandhi that one can be strong, even if seemingly weak, to protest against injustice. They realised that they do not have to accept the norms of male-dominated politics. It is interesting to note that Gandhi does not advise a woman to be an ideal wife or ideal mother. Deviating from the traditional framework, he advises women to be sisters. Pointing out the greatness of a sister over a wife, he maintained that a sister is to all the world, while a wife hands herself over to one man. Gandhi saw that the low status of women was the result of prejudices and adverse traditions, which were centuries old. It was difficult to get women interested in the larger problems of life and society because they knew nothing of them, having never been allowed to breathe the fresh air of freedom. The only factor that would enable women to come out of this situation was the determination and strength of the women themselves. Gandhi was of the firm opinion that if women have to work outside the home, they should do so without disturbing it. They can take up some work, which would supplement the income of the family, and spinning, according to him, was perhaps the best work they could undertake. Spinning and weaving for women were "the first lesson in the school of industry". Gandhi often presented ideals before women, drawn from Indian traditions, mythology and history. He often talked about Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti and Mirabai as great women. In Gandhi's philosophy, the women of India found a new identity. His words and deeds have inspired thousands of women, and will continue to do so, in their struggle against injustice and inequality. He realised that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for

the emancipation of the nation. Gandhi's ideas put into practice but it lacks of political power to influence change in the society around it. The fact that women have never held more than 10 percent of the seats in parliament or jobs in the decision making levels of the administration shows that there is a long way to go before gender parity is achieved.

Source

1. Empowerment of women :miles to go by Dr. Savita singh
2. Celebrating the 138th birth anniversary of Gandhi ji in association with Gandhi smmrity by Aparna Jacob
3. The making of the Mahatma by Mishal hussain(part-1)
4. Gandhi and women's empowerment by jaya jaitly
5. Breaking the shackles:Gandhi's views on women by Usha thakkar