



Gandhian Thoughts and Women Empowerment

KEYWORDS

Ghandi, Women Empowerment, Economic and Political Issues, Marriage and India.

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ABSTRACT

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers. One of them is Mahatma Gandhi. The history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Past Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition etc. In fact its credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi. In India he was involved women in Political movement first time of Satyagrah. He worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the notes worthy results of his lifework has been the awakening of women. This made them shed their deeprooted sense of inferiority and rises to dignity and self-esteem. Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. An attempt is made in the present paper to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues. This paper discuss on Gandhiji's thought on women upliftment, against child marriage, social and religious barriers to widow remarriage, purdha system, dowry system, heavy expenditure in connection to marriage, etc. As well as discuss on Gandhiji's view of women participation in politics. After Gandhi which position of women in India also focus in this paper.

Introduction:

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. From equal status with men in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the President, Prime minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition, etc. The current President of India is a woman. In fact its credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi. In India he was involved women in Political movement like Satyagraha. An attempt is made in the present paper to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues. But Main focus on Political issue. Gandhi's political ideologies are strongly based on humanitarian values, which were a reflection of his spiritual self. For him, politics could not be divorced from social factors. To Gandhi, social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. Gandhi, throughout his life, struggled very hard for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. Women under his ages took a milestone to step towards reestablishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morals and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under Gandhi's leadership they entered into the National mainstream, taking parts in the National movements. In Gandhi's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women." The views expressed by the Mahatma and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely with the current times because the times have irreversibly changed but the honesty of the Mahatma, the love and respect he had for the women, can never be doubted. He is truly the best friend of the women of the world.

There was a marked difference of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by

other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. According to Gandhi, "Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity." In his speeches and writings, Gandhi said that in many matters, especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women is superior to the male.

Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian women hood like 'Draupadi', 'Savitri', 'Sita' and 'Damayanti' to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom.

As a practical thinker, Gandhiji tried to understand the problems and sufferings of women. He had attempted to find some practical solutions of their problems. Gandhiji, while he stayed at home, tried to help his wife, Kasturba, in her daily household duties. In western countries also, these days" men are encouraged to be with their wives during the delivery and the men are supposed to pitch in with diaper changing, feeding etc. Gandhiji practiced this very modern concept 90 years ago in his own family.

Gandhiji discusses the various issues on women empowerment namely

Gandhiji's view on Women Liberty:

Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his lifework has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deeprooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self esteem. For Gandhi, "When woman, whom we all call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful". The welfare of the

weaker sections of society was dear to his heart. He had no qualms about the priority of social over political ends. In his opinion, to postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj.

Gandhiji's Influence on Women:

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. Life sketches and reminiscences of women freedom fighters give us glimpses of their crusade against injustice and inequality.

To become Self reliant in different areas

There was an urgent need to make special efforts to enable women to become self-reliant, by positive and active interventions in the direction of confidence building in the cognitive, psychological, economic and political areas. Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate to the very minutest detail 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 a man is in his.

Gandhiji's view on Women upliftment:

In Vedic times men and women are equal in all walks of life, including the religious and the intellectual. Therefore, in proclaiming the perfect equality of men & women.

Gandhiji was against.

The pernicious system of child marriage. He considered such marriage as *initio null* and void and as such, no marriage at all.

All social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. In the case of adult widows, especially those with children; He would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love, rather than to remarry. If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she has every right to remarry and society must not look down such marriage.

The *purdah* system. It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to the society.

The dowry system. For the middle and poor classes it was a nightmare. It was also on this account that while there was joy on the male child, there was expressed of silent mourning on the birth of a female child.

Heavy expenditure in connection with marriages. He wanted to simplify marriage ceremonials. He was against feasting on such occasions. Many marriages were celebrated in the Ashram. All that was done was the recitation of the simple Ashram prayer and some advice from Gandhiji to young couple on how they should live a contented and happy life of service. At the end of this simple ceremony, he would present to the couple a copy of Bhagavad Gita.

Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women

Gandhiji's View on Participation of Women in Politics:

M.K. Gandhi is known to be one of the few people who

encouraged women's active participation in the freedom struggle marking him as a rare promoter of women's liberation. In Gandhi words, "My contribution to the great problem (of women's role in society) lies in my presenting for acceptance of truth and ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, woman will be the unquestioned leader and, having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex. Women's entry into national politics through nonviolent methods brought miraculous results. On the one hand, women became aware of their inner strength, and on the other, the process brought human and moral elements into politics. Gandhi had tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for nonviolence.

And his experience of participation by women in politics from his days in South Africa till the end of his life bears testimony to the fact that they never failed his expectations. With Gandhi's inspiration, they took the struggle right into their homes and raised it to a moral level. Women organized public meetings, sold Khadi and prescribed literature, started picketing shops of liquor and foreign goods, prepared contraband salt, and came forward to face all sorts of atrocities, including inhuman treatment by police officers and imprisonment. They came forward to give all that they had their wealth and strength, their jewellery and belongings, their skills and labour all with sacrifices for this unusual and unprecedented struggle.

Gandhi's call to women to involve themselves in the freedom struggle had far reaching results in changing their outlook. "The cause of Swaraj swept all taboos and old customs before it". Many women in their individual lives shed their age old prejudices against the caste system. They had no hesitation in leaving the boundaries of their protected homes and going to the jail. They even broke their glass bangles (a sign of ill omen for married women) when they were told that they were made of Czechoslovakian glass. Women's participation in the freedom struggle feminized nationalism and the nationalist struggle helped them to liberate from age old traditions.

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. They evolved their own perspectives and formulated their own methods. In a way they presented a critique of the colonial unethical state.

Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power. When a woman wrote to him in 1946 about the political scene and the paucity of women in it, he wrote: "So long as considerations of caste and community continue to weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be well advised to remain aloof and thereby build up their prestige. Women workers should enroll women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel men to realise women's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honour. If they will do this, they will purify the present unclear atmosphere." His advice to women was to teach people in villages simple lessons of hygiene and sanitation. Seeking power would be, for them, "reversion of barbarity". And still Gandhi believed that, "Women must have

votes and an equal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation."

Status of Women in Pre Independence India

To understand in depth the role that Gandhi played in improving the position of women in society, it is essential to look at women's status, prevalent at that time. When Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario, social evils like child marriage and dowry system were rampant. Indian women had an average life span of only twenty seven years. Death of women in labor was a common phenomenon. The percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. The patriarchal nature of the society confined women to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. The purdah system was in full vogue in Northern India. Unless accompanied by their male guardians, the women were not permitted to venture out on their own. Only a handful few could avail of education and attend schools. It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society.

Gandhi's new Perception of Women; women can never be considered to be the weaker sex.

There was a marked departure of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. 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. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. These qualities were essential prerequisites for

imbibing the virtue of satyagraha. The capability of enduring endless suffering can be witnessed only in the women, according to the Mahatma. The doctrine of ahimsa as preached by Gandhi incorporates the virtue of suffering as is evident in the women. Therefore, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in establishing non-violence. Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womanhood, like Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti, to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men an equal right to freedom. To sum up in Gandhi's words; "The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows - as free as the husband to choose her own path."

Role of Women as Envisaged by Gandhi

According to Gandhi, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhi had immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a non violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. Women held public meetings, organized picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold Khadi and actively partici-

pated in National Movements. They bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bars. 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.

Gandhi's role will remain unchallenged.

The milestone of the 50th year of Republic urges India to examine its problem, progress and paradoxes. Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Swaraj in all its facets and from different perspectives has permeated the discourse on India's contemporary history. Gandhi's role will remain unchallenged. All over the world the imprint of his moral philosophy as a workable political ideology has been particularly indelible. Yet Mahatma Gandhi's positions on social, political and economic matters are transparently evolutionary, a continuing examination of reality, the human condition and truth. Gandhi's attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of comparison and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. The contradiction between his liberal feminist pronouncements, his egalitarian, loving and respectful concern for women, his belief in their role in politics and in society are sometimes difficult to reconcile. Yet Gandhi, more than anyone else, struggled with these paradoxes in the existing social milieu. Comparing his vision of women with the current status of women and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment will provide a measure of what has been achieved.

Today face of woman

Today's liberated woman would find his position almost totally unacceptable. They would argue that while women's special calling may be child nurturing, peace loving and preservationist they are capable of performing all tasks hitherto left to men. But Gandhi revealed a deep understanding of the pulse of society, and reflected its rhythm. He offered spinning and the salt agitation as nonviolent ways for women to join the political movement for swaraj. He saw it as right as well as possible for women at that time in history. By 1940, he had provided modifications to his earlier more generalized approach to women's contribution to public life. In an issue of the Harijan of that year there are questions about the rising participation of women in activities outside the home:

Despite a change in attitude he seems to have the middle class woman rather than the poor one in mind, and adheres to the position that a woman should be able to order her household duties in such a manner as to complete them and yet have enough time for public work were she to abjure vanities. The onus is still on the woman. However Gandhi was always willing to modify his own stated positions. He simply resolved his contradictions by responding instinctively and practically to a situation as he saw it. For instance, in the second set of questions and answers he tackles the male offenders thus: Liberation of woman as Gandhi saw it, was linked to a deep-seated malaise. Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy wrote a long letter to Mahatma Gandhi as far back as 1929, in which she raised some fundamental issues concerning social reform. She also questioned him as to why the Congress, which was fighting for the freedom of every nation and the individual should not first liberate their women from the evil customs and conventions that restricted their healthy all-round growth. She considered it a specific instance of social tyranny.

Indian women, with a few exceptions, have lost the spirit of strength and courage, the power of independent thinking and initiative which actuated the women of ancient India, such as **Maitreyi, Gargi, Savitri** and even today activate a large number of our own women belonging to the liberal creeds like the **Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj**, Theosophy, which is only Hinduism freed of all its meaningless customs, rites and rituals? Although Gandhi agreed with her in a rather perfunctory way, he was not prepared to tackle the issues of social and religious customs so directly at that point of time and centred his response thus, "Men are undoubtedly to blame for their neglect, nay their ill use of women, and they have to do adequate penance, but those women who have shed superstition and have become conscious of the wrong have to do the constructive work of reform. Liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of the economic condition of the masses and the like, resolve themselves by penetration into the villages, reconstruction or rather reformation of the village life." To achieve one's goal of liberation from the various shackles of society he believed that had to work for total change starting in the villages.

Women who became part of the power structure

Somewhere along the way, however, the issues close to Gandhi's heart have been largely left by the wayside by women who became part of the power structure as well as by the emancipated women's groups. Organizations involved in trade union work, social reform and development issues have in part or in whole addressed the issue of prohibition, but neither have women as a group in parliament nor through institutional structures raised this demand loudly and effectively. Prohibition is not accepted when it is presented as a moral issue alone and therefore the argument has to include developmental priorities, revenue collection, and budgetary allocations to social welfare, health and other sectors which rural women are unable to do.

Role of organizations

Many institutions and organizations representing women's rights have a high visibility in the cosmopolitan arena and have effectively expressed their concerns. Not only that, their members have decisively moved far ahead of Gandhi's vision of fearless women. Alert, active and bold, they engage in constant discussion and introspection for genuine equality. While all women's agendas prescribe peace and nonviolence, the feminisation of the military and police and, the expanding membership of women in militant groups that do not abjure the use of arms are all a sad cry away from what Gandhi viewed to be a woman's special role.

While middle class women were visibly active side by side with Mahatma Gandhi, wearing khadi, going to jail, organ-

ising resistance on the British in some creative and selfless way, the socially conscious middle class woman of today has largely shunned direct political activity, preferring to seek more secure ground in funded social work through voluntary organisations. A growing number of emancipated, educated, young women are being diverted by market oriented consumerism in the name of modernity and liberation.

Compared to the momentous work of stalwarts like Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr Muthulakshi Reddy, Lakshmi N. Menon and Annie Besant and organisations like the All India Women's conference, the Arya Samaj and many others during Mahatma Gandhi's time, the collective or individual work of women in the political arena in the post-independence era has been unremarkable. This clearly does not take into account the phenomenon of an Indira Gandhi or the many successful efforts of various women's organisations in bringing about legislation to improve the status of women. Self Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad is a fine example of 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.

Conclusion:

India is far ahead in policies and legislation favouring women. It adopted universal franchise before many other nations. Yet men in the political structure refuse to acknowledge the relationships between social justice and gender justice while women outside the political system are unable to effectively implement and integrate these two most powerful national and international agendas. The increasing criminalization of politics and the use of vast sums of unaccounted money and ugly muscle power by caste and criminal gangs present an entire hostile environment for women who wish to pursue a political vocation. With both caste and gender groups perpetuating traditional and modern divisions and indigenous human resources being replaced by western technologies the mission of Gandhi and the dreams of women are yet to be fulfilled. Lastly we can conclude that the position of woman in India compared to other countries is poor. In some villages they are considering woman as a kitchen bee. This type of attitude has to be changed. But compared to the early days, these days' women are coming out freely and participating in every field. It's a good sign of women upliftment & empowerment. So, today also need to know Gandhijan thought of women upliftment.

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