



## GANDHI ON WOMEN: SIEVING THE BENEFITS AND THE DAMAGES

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**ABSTRACT** Despite never adhering to a single ideology, Mahatma Gandhi has influenced countless schools of thought. His ideological foundations are as traceable as his beliefs, aiding one in understanding the thoughts behind actions. This paper will attempt to do the same, regarding his views on women and gender. In doing so, the objective is to assess the fruitful and the obsolete, and hopefully prove the importance of constructive discourse instead of shutting it down completely.

**KEYWORDS :****INTRODUCTION**

*"Whether old or new, everything should be tested on the anvil of reason, and anything which does not stand the test should be rejected."*  
- M.K. Gandhi, c. 1926

The identity of Mohandas K. Gandhi, or *Mahatma* Gandhi, is synonymous with that of India. The sphere of his influence went beyond that of the political realm of his times, his philosophies inspiring countless observers. *Gandhism's* influence in formulating various socio-political ideologies of post-independence India was fundamental, and its residues, though not as reflective in the customs of 21<sup>st</sup> century, still hold great relevance<sup>1</sup>.

Predictably, his pedagogies on women, specifically their politicization through involvement in the nationalist movements, were a big part of India's early flirtations with *feminism*. The importance of women's education, their 'liberation', and eliminating the perception of women as the "weaker sex" were tenets of Gandhi's ideology<sup>2</sup>.

That is not to say, that there was not anything questionable about his views on women's progression. In fact, the legacy left behind by some of his conservative notions has been rather detrimental to India's feminist movement<sup>3</sup>. The objective though, is not to villainize the Mahatma, but an attempt to rationalize the ideology left behind.

The text analyses Gandhi's contributions to women's empowerment, along-with tracing the origin of his perceptions of the community, through his relations with the women who were principal influences. Following which is an elaboration of his substantial beliefs, and where his conservativeness blocked his own drive of women's development. The attempt is to evaluate the depravity of putting one on a pedestal so high, that the only other option is a complete fall from grace.

The Father of the Nation has been subject to hero-worship across the globe, with India naturally doing it most intensely. Such devotion has resulted in creating a figure beyond criticism, or the exact opposite, where all his contributions have been disregarded due to problematic revelations. Both resulting in the same monotony, where no progressive discourse is encouraged

The objective of this paper therefore, in assessing Gandhi's ideas on women, is to present most of the facts available, and inspire a discussion where nothing is entirely rejected or accepted. Instead that which is conducive is taken up, and which is not is left behind. Not discrediting Gandhi's contribution to women's liberation, while acknowledging the derogatory beliefs that should never have been propagated.

**METHODOLOGY**

Gandhi's contribution to Modern Indian thought, penetrating every nook and cranny of the nation, is immeasurable. Apart from his infamous contributions to the freedom struggle and the principles of *Satyagraha*, the Mahatma divulged his philosophies to the field of education, industry, rural development, nation building, economics and so forth. Similarly, his contribution to accentuating Women's issues in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, as well as their inclusion in the nationalist discourse and activities was a pivotal moment in the country's feminist history. This part of the paper will briefly look into the importance of the same.

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism in India mostly comprised of imminent male personalities speaking up for women's causes. Raja Rammohan Roy, M.G. Ranade, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others rallied for issues concerning women, especially against customs and laws that restricted her liberty and right to life in general. Gandhi's fight was on a similar tangent, albeit broader, since he not only protested against discriminatory practices, but also continuously legitimized women's political activities. Along-with emphasizing the need for women to be harbingers of their own emancipation.

*"I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I hold radical views about the emancipation of women from their fetters which they mistake for adornment. My experience has confirmed me in the view that the real advancement of women can only come by and through their own efforts."*  
-M.K. Gandhi<sup>4</sup>

At a time when women were hardly considered more than ornamental sheep, Gandhi's vocalization against orthodox religious and traditional customs was bigger than it seems in hindsight. As a man of enormous socio-political strata, he stood on the podium of codifying Indian societal norms and reshaping its ideologies. Him lending weight to the movement of women's liberation therefore reveals the importance of an impressionable voice for the success of any social justice cause.

Gandhi vehemently fought against detrimental practices like *sati*, *pardah*, female infanticide, child marriage, dowry and many more which limited the intellectual and physical development of women. *"I hold that the right education in this country is to teach woman the art of saying 'no' even to her husband"*, (Prabhu & Rao, 1960) stated Gandhi, covering the notions on domestic abuse and marital rape that are debated strongly in the present.

He repeatedly claimed that in the path to ensuring India's betterment, it is essential that it is done at the behest of both men and women standing as equals. In an excerpt from his contribution to *Young India* in 1935, he declared:

*"To call women the weaker sex is a libel. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior."*

Gandhi was a staunch believer in women being in-charge of their own liberty from patriarchy. A time when India was not only grappling with its socioeconomic backwardness but also British imperialism, Gandhi speaking for women's right to freedom and agency of choice was drastic. Despite being a devoted religious man conforming to traditional values, he stood against conservative menfolk as well as secluded women who themselves blocked the way of their own progress due to internalized stereotypes.

Gandhi was strongly affected by the *British Suffragettes Movement*, which occurred in response to a Parliamentary Act of 1918 limiting women's right to vote. He expressed so in writing for *Indian Opinion*:

*"The British women who have been demanding the franchise, are putting up a wonderful show. They are not deterred by any kind of suffering. What great faith they must have! A great many women have been ruined, in this struggle, but they do not yield. We can learn quite a few things and draw much inspiration from it."*

Gandhi's motivations behind emphasis on women's advancement were also coloured by the aim of India's liberation. The call for women's political participation served both the purpose of their progress, and that of uniting India and ridding the society of inequalities. So that it could firmly stand on its feet against the colonial rule. As a propagator of *Sarvodaya*, Gandhi stressed on the need for all the weaker sections of the society to be empowered and acknowledged, if the country were to move towards freedom and further advancement.

His emphasis on women's political awakening and creating a place for them in a largely male-dominated structure has had prolonged effects. One might say that the habit of offering women room in political spheres, usually as a mode of appeasement, taken up by the country's politicians on numerous occasions till date, have a lot to do with Gandhi's proclamations. "*I would boycott that Legislature which will not have a proper share of women members*", he spoke during the Second Round Table Conference of 1931.

Indeed, Gandhi's propagation of the philosophy of Non-violence and Satyagraha as a means to fight the colonizers created relatively favourable circumstances for mass participation of women. Political protests or mass mobilizations were naturally viewed as 'masculine' activities with no room for women, being another point of their exclusion. Despite the preaching regarding women's strength and enduring ability by several leaders, very few were welcoming of their involvement in spheres of the 'male domain'. Women were only respected as far as their role as homemakers.

Which points to another important feature of Gandhi's feminism, which was to ensure that women are not restricted solely to household work. He remarked that<sup>6</sup> "*Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen. Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen, that her true spirit may be discovered*". He did not impose household work to be demeaning, but that women must have the agency to participate in constructive activities that went beyond the boundaries of domesticity. The admission and cultivation of skills of women at the *Sabarmati* and *Sewagram Ashrams* proved that Gandhi's words were backed by actions.

The 1920s marked the beginning of the formation of several women's associations and organizations. The *All India Women's Conference* (AIWC), having been closely connected with the Indian National Congress (INC), consequently maintained camaraderie with Gandhi. He ensured his coordination, encouraging women's organized participation in the nationalist movements. Which further increased conception of associations catering to and consisting of women.

Gandhi's adoption of non-violent means for resistance allowed women outside their homes and into the streets as contributors to the agitation. Since the hindrance of possible violence that would make the movement unfit for women, was absent. The *Civil Disobedience of 1930* became the first instance of women's mass participation in the struggle for India's liberation. Women's role in the infamous *Salt March*<sup>7</sup> not only displayed their determination, but also depicted how Gandhi's sermons had worked towards women developing the courage to fight.

Gandhi advocating for women's education was crucial in the erosion of limitations they faced due to illiteracy. India's patriarchal whims refused women the opportunity for education and hence, the chance to be independent and capable. As a firm believer of women's intellectual capacity, Gandhi stood for their right to equality and opportunity. He expressed so in one of his writings<sup>8</sup>:

*"I have pointed out from time to time that there is no justification for men to deprive women or to deny them equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy; but education is essential for enabling women to uphold these natural rights, the true knowledge of self is unattainable by the millions if we are without such education."*

It will be illogical, therefore, to deny the enormity of Gandhi's role in bringing women-centric issues into the national discourse. At a time when many of those in power refused to even broach these subjects, his dedication to women's emancipation acted as a much-needed push. Despite his deeply religious values often throwing off the observer due to their parallelism to conservatism, his actions were a different story. As is observed by **Madhu Kishwar**<sup>9</sup>:

*"He is one of those few leaders whose practice was at times far ahead of his theory and his stated ideas. Just as in his early years he kept insisting that he was a loyal citizen of the British Empire even while objectively cutting at the roots of British imperialism, so also he could keep in harping on women's real sphere of activity being the home even while actively creating conditions which could help her break the shackles of domesticity."*

Thus, while speaking about the positives, it is only sensible to accept that Gandhi's contribution to the history of feminism in India is quite undeniable.

## WOMEN BESIDE GANDHI

Even through a brief overview of Gandhi's ideologies, one can interpret the foundations of spiritual influence permeating throughout. Regardless of the field, Gandhi believed the incorporation of religious values or *ethics* is critical to ensure the success of any ambition, insisting on practicing morality and discipline in all walks of life. The attainment of *Self-Truth*, believed to be one's ultimate goal, must only be done through ethical means. He had not limited himself to Hinduism, instead developing knowledge of various religions through scriptures over time.

Therefore, much of Gandhi's perceptions about women carried the tone of religious and traditional bearing. It is necessary, then, while analyzing his personal beliefs and notions, to regard how deeply religion affected his life and ventures. His views on women and their role in life, in association with men and not, were usually based off scriptural and spiritual values easily observed while looking through his relations with the women in his life. This part of the paper will briefly peruse the same, in order to give a short preface on Gandhi's outlook before sifting out what was orthodox rather than progressive.

### • Kasturba Gandhi

The relationship between Gandhi and his wife Kasturba has been almost as revered as the man himself. With historians always speaking of Kasturba being his 'true companion' in every sense, accompanying him in spirit and action throughout. The traditional Indian majority has always tilted in favour of marriages portrayed as a 'sacred bond', hence there was nothing better for the devotees to worship than the one between the Father of the Nation and his life partner.

It is important to note that Gandhi and Kasturba's marriage happened when they were both around the age of 13. Therefore, it is not inaccurate to assume much of Gandhi's notions on women, would have formed with some influence from the character of his young wife, having been in her company since his formative years.

Whenever Gandhi would refer to his wife, it was normally about her 'patience and perseverance' and her unconditional support for his endeavors. He mentioned to her being resistant and 'not so submissive' as one would expect of a wife, in the early days of their marriage<sup>10</sup>. In fact, Gandhi credited Kasturba with inspiring him on the concept of 'Passive Resistance', forming the idea that the principles of his philosophy of non-violence had 'feminine' properties.

As mentioned earlier, Gandhi was not the sole victim of 'hero worship', but his marriage was idolized extensively as well. Liking the image of Kasturba, then affectionately known as 'Ba', with that of goddesses and *devis* like *Sita*, *Draupadi*, and so on. She was revered for being the perfect Indian wife, devoted to her husband in action and words, despite the challenges brought upon due to his colossal role in the freedom struggle.

### • Putlibai

One of the biggest influences in Gandhi's life was his mother, *Putlibai*. It is said he always remembered her as a woman strongly spiritual and resilient, strict in her disciplines and devoted to religion. Putlibai appeared to have conformed most of her values in life with that of religion, much like Gandhi himself. Through the information available, it is clear she played a primary role in his spiritual development, and her practices somewhere formed the base of Gandhi's innate dedication to divinity.

*"The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to Haveli—the Vaishnava temple—was one of her daily duties. As far as my memory can go back, I do not remember her having ever missed the Chaturmas. She would*

take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them. I can recall her once falling ill when she was observing the Chandrayana vow, but the illness was not allowed to interrupt the observance. To keep two or three consecutive fasts was nothing to her. Living on one meal a day during Chaturmas was a habit with her. Not content with that she fasted every alternate day during one Chaturmas. During another Chaturmas she vowed not to have food without seeing the sun. We children on those days would stand, staring at the sky, waiting to announce the appearance of the sun to our mother. Everyone knows that at the height of the rainy season the sun often does not condescend to show his face. That does not matter, 'she would say cheerfully, 'God did not want me to eat today.' And then she would return to her round of duties<sup>11</sup>.

It would be safe to interpret, especially looking at his approach to self-discipline through the principles of *satyagraha*, how much Putlibai had affected her son. His views on self-suffering and a life of minimalism, had their seeds sown in his childhood itself. Similarly, it can be assessed that Gandhi's perceptions regarding women and their path in life, were also to a great extent conceived based on the impression of his mother.

#### • Sarojini Naidu, Mithuben Petit and others who joined the fight

Much has been written and documented about the amiable camaraderie between Gandhi and the 'Bharat Kokila' and first woman to hold the office of Governor in India, Sarojini Naidu. Her support to Gandhism during the man's lifetime and after, had been impressive, and her contribution as a freedom fighter, immense. The infamous photographs of her dignified figure walking alongside Gandhi during the *salt march* have been looked upon with great pride. Yet, her determination to be undeterred in participating in the march, even in the face of a reluctant Gandhi, is usually overlooked.

It is a lesser known fact that women were excluded from the *Dandi March* during its initial period between 12<sup>th</sup> March 1930 to 6<sup>th</sup> April 1930. It is so because Gandhi's earlier intentions were not as welcoming about women participating in the march, for which he explained<sup>12</sup> that "just like it would be cowardice for Hindus to keep cows in front of them while going to war, similarly it would be considered cowardly to keep women with them on the march."

Such exclusion of women from the movement predictably upset the community, who had previously been emboldened to participate enthusiastically by the same man, including Sarojini Naidu and Mithuben Petit. Despite it all, the two women determinedly joined the march from 6<sup>th</sup> April onwards<sup>13</sup>, inspiring thousands and leading Gandhi to eventually call for women's involvement in the movement, beckoning them to "come out on the streets and picket liquor and foreign cloth shops".

Other prominent names included **Matangini Hazra**, also known as "Gandhi-buri" of Tamluk, West Bengal. Who, despite being an illiterate rural woman, much like hundreds of other women who participated, was moved by Gandhi's words regarding the usage of an unglamorous household ingredient like 'salt' being used as a symbol of resistance. Another significant leader was **Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay**, among those disappointed with Gandhi's initial decision to exclude women, who rigorously participated in the salt protests.

The juxtaposing these women in the spotlight is to focus on the fact that despite him being intellectually advanced, Gandhi was still, at times, slave to the patriarchal bias of his times. While his progressive ideals about women were way ahead of what the 19<sup>th</sup> century was used to, he was not as free of losing touch with what the women would actually benefit from. It is necessary to remember that, while it might not be with malicious intent, Gandhi was not void of inherent patriarchy. He usually conformed to ideals that would be highly frowned upon, not just in contemporary times, but during his lifetime as well.

#### • Manu and Abha

There are numerous documentations of Gandhi's great-nieces Manu and Abha, accompanying him on various occasions during his political journey, from a very young age. As expected, there's reference to the impact of his discipline and saintly habits on the girls, and how they were encouraged to practice similar values despite how young they were. Given India's culture, such retellings were absorbed with great warmth, as they were characteristic of how 'an ideal woman' should behave, as preached by Gandhi himself.

What has been rather overlooked in textbooks, or what the historians have been hush-hush about, is the involvement of Manu and Abha in Gandhi's 'chastity or celibacy experiments'. Something that was brought under scrutiny mostly after its mention by *Ramachandra Guha*, in his biographies of the Mahatma.

The recollection of this incident proved to be a sort of turning point in how Gandhi's feminism and overall approach to women and gender issues was observed. Further accounts of Gandhi indulging in similar activities with multiple impressionable women were retold. None sparked the discomfort in various historians and activists though like that of the involvement of a 19-year-old Manu.

Which brings us to another segment of this paper. That discusses how several of Gandhi's actions and ideals pertaining to women were unbecoming of his persona as a 'simple, genial godman'. Not with the intention to demonize, but to emphasize the harms of the extremely high position the man has been subjected to, rendering him infallible. The aim is to urge reflection of the same, and to understand the need to dismiss the values that were never right to begin with, regardless of the esteemed personality they came from.

#### WHAT WE SHOULD FORGET

As has been stressed repeatedly, religion was an immense 'role-model' throughout Gandhi's lifetime. He was not a believer of separating religion or ethics from politics like many modern political thinkers, but insisted that the incorporation of religious values and morality is indispensable in all walks of life, so as to understand the wrong from the right, and have a clear vision of the path to attaining one's 'truth'.

While being intensely religious does not guarantee that one is inherently devious, it cannot be ignored that the misconceptions brought on by religious traditions by a commonplace herd-mentality rather than true values, has been greatly harmful to the weaker sections of any society. Something Gandhi had referred to himself, in several writings for *Young India*<sup>14</sup>:

*"I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.. man for instance, cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side.. religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them, is no religion."*

Religion, therefore, or rather customs based on disillusioned interpretations, has seldom been a safe space for women. 19<sup>th</sup> century India was drenched in orthodox practices that vilified women, many of which Gandhi fought against himself. Though, having grown up in a conservative environment, he did not manage to let go of some inherent misogyny himself, despite most of his actions that indicated a progressive mindset.

During the twilight of his political journey, Gandhi decided to take up celibacy or *Brahmacharya*, as is documented by several historians. It has been most famously done by *Guha*, who called Gandhi's dedication to maintaining chastity 'an obsession'. Continuing the earlier subject of his great-nieces, it was reported that Gandhi's experiments with the girls were frowned upon by several associates, as is recalled by *Guha* in the biographies<sup>15</sup>:

*"At the time, many did express disapproval over this behaviour. His stenographer R. P. Parasuram, left his ashram when Gandhi refused to stop these "experiments." Two editors of his newspaper refused to print parts of his sermons on these unusual sleeping arrangements and subsequently resigned."*

What was worse, regarding the details, was how those who supported Gandhi's actions did so on the basis of underage Manu's statements, which revealed she had 'no problem with the same'. The issue here is not simply of the performed acts, but rather the justification of such behaviour between a man of insurmountable standing, with very young, impressionable girls. Or with women in general, who respected the man greatly and regarded him as their 'guru', and were his subordinates.

The revelation by *Guha* started an onslaught of criticism by activists and common observers, many of those who previously looked upon Gandhi with great respect. What was difficult for most, was the task of relating such problematic actions with the flawless, honourable man they had been accustomed to. The issue with accepting Gandhi's



wrongs has mostly been because of the practice of hero worship, putting him on a pedestal so high that anything about him which was not so welcome, was better overlooked instead of acknowledged.

Similarly, behind Gandhi's commendable fighting for women's emancipation, there were beliefs that proved detrimental instead. As was discussed earlier, Gandhi's notions regarding women were highly influenced by figures from religious scriptures and extremely high ideals of spirituality in general. "*Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi were the three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India*" wrote Kishwar (1985).

His 'ideal woman' was one who practiced 'complete purity' and was devoted to chastity, and protected herself from unfavourable advancements of men. Virtue was the armour of a woman, and Gandhi believed she may give up her life but not her virtue<sup>16</sup>. He repeatedly insisted upon women becoming 'self-sufficient' in guarding herself against any attacks on her 'virtue', and that it was her responsibility to not remain a 'mere plaything'.

"When woman, whom we call *abala* becomes *sabala*, all those who are helpless will become powerful!" declared Gandhi to the All India Women's Conference in 1936. He insisted on calling upon women to make themselves invincible and break the shackles they have surrendered themselves to. Once in a letter to his contemporaries, Gandhi wrote<sup>17</sup>:

"If you women only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full sense 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 slave and holders have become one in the crime on degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once slave holder myself but *Ba* proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission."

The general viewpoint, therefore, was that women are willing slaves to patriarchy, and the only one who can free them from these chains is themselves. In preaching so, Gandhi mostly disregarded the role men have played in subjugating womankind for centuries, falling prey to the age-old patriarchal bias he grew up with. The point behind discussing this is to reflect the harm caused by the victim-blaming rhetoric to Indian women and the feminist movement in general.

In present times, there have been constant instances of women being blamed for their own miseries. Be it a matter of sexual abuse, domestic violence, workplace harassment and more, women have been held accountable for being 'too submissive and available' by the society, and even the authorities. Putting the onus on the victims instead of the culprits has had damaging effects, and it would be untrue to say Gandhi's words had no impact on India's perception of women, despite his impressive stature.

Which might not have been his intention, but it is crucial to acknowledge the consequences. Gandhi's portrayal of an incredibly chaste, pure woman with the qualities of warrior goddesses and devotion to self-suffering, created unrealistic ideals that declare any woman unsuitable to them, as invalid. His ideals about female sexuality, has forced its way towards present societal perceptions. Where any woman who indulges in sexuality, modernity, or anything unbecoming of the *devis* he often referred to, is considered immoral.

Even on the topic of Prostitution, despite him holding men accountable for it, Gandhi was not so welcoming to the women who indulged in the profession, considering them 'too impure'. On an instance of the Congress manifesto promising them participation in social work, Gandhi had reacted rather emotively, disallowing them to partake in any such work before 'purifying themselves'. "*None could officiate at the altar of Swaraj who did not approach it with pure hands and a pure heart*" he said on the matter<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless, entirely blaming on Gandhi for Indian women's collective hardships would simply be erroneous, just like crediting him solely for their development. The purpose of this assessment is to argue that everything in the world of politics should be taken with a grain of salt, even if it's the preaching of one of the most revered men in world history. Gandhi stood up for women at a time when most refused to, but at the cost of defining her liberation on his own terms.

The Indian society has bent to 'worship culture' of influential personalities for a long time. The most harmful being that of politicians. The tendency to either coronate or denounce an individual and his philosophies, has somewhere added to the increasingly polarized society we live in today. The normalization of which, not only creates unrealistic expectations, but also destructs prospects of innovative discourse or constructive criticism.

In assessing the polarity of Gandhi's feminism, the aim of this paper was to elaborate the pointlessness of categorizing it, and that doing so will only present illusions. Instead, the appropriate knowledge gained here would be to ascertain his act of thinking beyond his times and promoting equal advancement, while shedding values that need not be accommodated.

Demoting Gandhi from his admired position is as implausible as erasing him off the banknotes, and just as fruitless. The right thing to do, therefore, is taking forward his revolutionary ideals while leaving behind those that are no more suitable today than they were then. Replacing the habit of idolizing with that of accountability, in order to grow towards a stronger democracy and awakened civic society, would only encourage better times.

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