

## **The Gandhian Approach towards Women**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, as a major social and political reformer, played an important role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the women of the country through ages. He strongly believed that a society can develop rapidly if it takes all sections of the people together into its fold, rich and poor, high society people and low caste people and both men and women. Gandhi's political ideologies are strongly based on humanitarian values, which were a reflection of his spiritual self (Barman, 2013). 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 (ibid).

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 also 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 (ibid).

Gandhi's contribution was far-reaching in bringing awareness to the masses about the need for improvement in the status of women. He stated "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I have always had a passion to serve the womankind. Ever since my arrival in India, the women have come to look upon me as one of themselves. 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”<sup>1</sup>.

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 life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted 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 (Rathi, Shubhangi 2016).

Gandhi’s goals were numerous: not only was he striving to achieve independence for India but he laboured tirelessly to bring about social change. The one injustice that hurt him the most was the branding of millions of people in the country as ‘untouchables’. This was a special problem for women in the lower-scheduled castes. Many ‘untouchable’ women lived in deplorable conditions and such extreme poverty forced young girls into prostitution. Eleanor Morton, an American quaker, recalls Gandhi’s declaration to the British Parliament that he would not agree to separate elections for the ‘outcast class’. To prove his great concern and as a protest against the division of the ‘untouchables’, he had entered a ‘fast unto death’ (<http://www.bl.uk/ebj/1997articles/pdf/article2.pdf>). Gandhi’s wife Kasturba, a valiant participator who followed him in his crusade, was like him sent to prison. The reaction in India was quite remarkable: temple doors closed to the ‘untouchables’ for centuries were suddenly open. It was while in prison that his idea for a periodical called Harijan was born. Since independence the practice of untouchability has been declared an offence in the constitution and therefore legally abolished. However, even with legislation, to remove the idea of it from people’s minds can take longer than a lifetime, and political freedom without a change of heart is meaningless. Coupled with this, discrimination was sanctioned by some Hindu religious fundamentalists (ibid).

#### **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. 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 (Ramanna and Karegouda 2015).

#### **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

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<sup>1</sup>Aloo J. Dastur and Usha H. Mehta, Gandhi’s Contribution to the Emancipation of Women (London, 1993), p. 18. quotation from M. K. Gandhi

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 participated 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" (<http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/mahatma-and-women.html>).

Regarding the role of women, Gandhiji once said, "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen." He opined and felt that, "Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered." It does not mean that women shouldn't cook, but only that household responsibilities be shared among men, women and children. In a letter written to Raj Kumari, Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21 October 1936, Gandhiji 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 now. But man has delighted in enslaving and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave- holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity" (Anuradha, V. 2016).

#### **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 ([http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/women\\_empowerment.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/women_empowerment.htm)).

#### **Political Involvement of Women:**

Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women. In his 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 non-violent 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" (Thakkar, Usha 2016).

Gandhi had tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for non-violence. 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 ([http://www.mk gandhi.org/articles/women\\_empowerment.htm](http://www.mk gandhi.org/articles/women_empowerment.htm)).

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 (ibid).

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 (ibid).

### **Women Education :**

Gandhi was in favor of promoting women education or literacy. He thought illiteracy of women as a curse of the human society. The vast number of illiterate women in society is due to the ancient norms, customs, laws, that are imposed upon women by the patriarchal society. As Gandhi quoted in Harijan...

"As for illiteracy among the women, its cause is not mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men. A more potent cause is the status of inferiority with which an immemorial tradition has, unjustly branded her. Man has converted her into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasure, instead of regarding her as his helpmate and ,better half, the result is a semi paralysis of our society. Woman has rightly been the mother of the race. We owe it to her and to ourselves to undo the great wrong that we have done her" (Garai Subhas, 2015).

But Gandhian view of women education is based on biological discrimination of men and women and on family ideals. Because he assumed that men are fit to perform outward activities and women for household ones. But men and women are supplementary to each other. Thus while formulating the principles of education and course of instruction these primary principles should be kept in mind (Garai Subhas, 2015).

As Gandhi quote "Man and woman are of equal rank but they are not identical. They are a peerless pair being supplementary to one another; each help the other, so that without one the existence of the other cannot be conceived, and therefore it follows as a necessary corollary from these facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of them both. In framing any scheme of women's education this cardinal truth must be constantly kept in mind. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair and therefore it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater

knowledge thereof. On the other hand home life is entirely the sphere of woman and therefore in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge” ([https://www.thecho.in/files/Subhas-Garai\\_4i37d66c..pdf](https://www.thecho.in/files/Subhas-Garai_4i37d66c..pdf)).

### **Economic Independence :**

Gandhi visualized a humane society, free from exploitation and in justice, built by responsible men and women. Gandhi, however, maintained that the spheres of work for woman and man were different. “She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the breadwinner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term.” 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”. The spinning wheel can be the “widow’s loving companion”, of livelihood for the poor family and a means to supplement the income of the family of Pie middle class, and for the well-to-do women, it would be a means to relate their lives to those country s poor women (Thakkar, 2016 and Govardhan, 2015).

### **Conclusion :**

It can be said without an idea of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi experimented in all these three fields a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of women and the improvement of the status of women in the country. But practically we can see completely an opposite picture of the empowerment of women. In the family, the women become the victim of domestic violence and in the society they are also exploited by the social evils like dowry system, prostitution, witch-hunting etc. Again two thirds of the world’s illiterates are females. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. Again in many countries due to the current world food price crisis a significant percentage of women eat only once. These women are already suffering the effects malnutrition, which inevitably will be their children’s fate as well. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered all of society benefits. But even today at the beginning of the 21st century Gandhi’s vision remains unfulfilled (Anuradha, 2016).

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