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## GANDHI AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi is immeasurable undoubtedly. His life, his work, his views and his ideas have left a unique impact on every aspect of life of India as well as of the whole world. He has addressed uncountable number of issues, whether they relate to personal or social or political subjects. The whole collection of his works number nearly hundred and above. Gandhi ji worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for the liberty of the suppressed and oppressed sections of the society. One of the indispensable results of his works has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self-esteem. Gandhi ji respected traditions of the society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. He always tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. According to him, "It is good to swim in the water of tradition, but to sink in it is suicide." He worked very practically and dynamically for the freedom of women from such shackles and evils throughout his life. He realized that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women which straightaway affect the development of nation too. The present study facilitates an attempt to understand Gandhi's views and philosophies on women in the context of social, economic and political aspects. What is basically required is to take an affirmative action to eliminate this discrimination and encouraging the society for more openness and transparency for the second half population of our nation. It also suggests that by empowering women, we can cure a whole gamut of problems faced by us and reveals the significant insights coming in this scenario by way of analyzing the challenges before this suppressed sector of our country. Besides, the study is going to be a pioneering effort by way of making suggestions towards multifarious and multidimensional picture of an independent and self-reliant future of Indian women.*

## KEYWORDS

Indian society, women empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**o call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is a man's injustice to woman. If by strength it is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not more self-sacrificing, has she not great powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women."

*Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi*

The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi is immeasurable undoubtedly. His life, his work, his views and his ideas have left a unique impact on every aspect of life of India as well as of the whole world. M.K. Gandhi was a man considered as a very good minded universal person. He was held as another Buddha and even another Jesus. Indians called him the 'Father of the Nation'. People showered their love, respect and devotion on him in an unparalleled measure. They applied on their foreheads the dust on the path he had trodden. For them, he was almost an incarnation of God, who had come to break the chains of their slavery. The whole world bowed to him in reverence. Even his opponents held him in great respect. He was the politician, the philosopher, the socialist and the educationist. He lived with the accumulation of karmayoga and gyan yoga. No opposition, scorn or ridicule could affect him. Truth was his sole guiding star.

His eleven vows, his technique of Satyagraha, his constructive programme - all were meant to awaken and strengthen the soul-force. He awakened and aroused a nation from semi-consciousness. It was a Herculean task. For, India was a society where almost half of the population i.e., women, was behind purdah or confined to the four walls of houses, where one-fourth of the population - the depressed classes - was living marginalized life, where many did not have a single full meal every day. Gandhi made the oppressed sections wake up and break their chains. He addressed uncountable number of issues, whether they relate to personal or social or political subjects. The whole collection of his works count nearly hundred and above. Gandhi ji worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for the liberty of the suppressed and oppressed sections of the society.

One of the indispensable results of his works has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self-esteem. Gandhi ji respected traditions of the society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. He always tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. According to him, "It is good to swim in the water of tradition, but to sink in it, is suicide." He worked very practically and dynamically for the freedom of women from such shackles and evils throughout his life. He realized that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women which straightaway affect the development of nation too. "When Woman, whom we all call ablaa, becomes Sablaa, all those who are helpless will become powerful." These words truly show that how much he was willing to develop such a capacity in women to make them strong enough.

## BREAKING THE SHACKLES: GANDHI'S VIEWS ON WOMEN

The Mahatma said that women have been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. Rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. Women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. Women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of 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 their 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?"

What is significant here is his image of woman and his hope for her, so radically different from that of any earlier reformer. He was not the first to address women's issues in India; the great cultural renaissance, as also the ferment of political agitations for freedom had already reached a high peak in the late nineteenth century. Before the advent of Gandhi on the scene, the attitude to women, though sympathetic, was patronizing; leaders and social reform groups thought in language that made women look helpless. They wanted to protect, uplift, and bring relief to women. No doubt there was value in all of it. Yet, with Gandhi, a new and unique element emerged. Woman to him was neither man's plaything, nor his competitor, struggling to be like him.

## ➤ GANDHIJI'S IDEA OF WOMAN AS MOTHER AND "MOTHER INDIA"

Gandhiji's devotion to women as mother began with his devotion to his mother Putlibai and his wife Kasturba. Motherhood became increasingly his model for liberation of India and his own life. A mother, having brought forth a child, selflessly devotes herself to his care till he grows up and becomes independent. Unless we have feeling and devotion for our motherland many countries will be lying in wait to crush us down. He saw no hope for India's emancipation while her womanhood remained un-emancipated. He held men to be largely responsible for the tragedy. In the course of his social reform work, the realization came to him that if he wanted to reform and purify society of the various evils that had crept into it; he had to cultivate a mother's heart. Therefore, He learnt the fundamental aspects of his soul politics from his mother and his wife.

## ➤ GANDHI JI'S IDEAL MODELS

Gandhi often talked about Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti and Mirabai as great women. He visualized the Indian women as new Sitas, Draupadis and Damayantis, "pure, firm and self-controlled". For Gandhi, Sita was not a weak and dependent creature, but a strong woman who kept her heart and body pure. Another ideal model

was Draupadi who was not dependent on men and saved herself by an appeal to Krishna. Here the appeal to Krishna is to be understood as following one's own conscience. He saw Mirabai, as a symbol of courage, who followed her chosen path by defying the social norms of the time. 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 the entire world, while a wife hands herself over to one man.

#### ➤ INFLUENCE OF WOMEN PUBLIC FIGURES ON GANDHI JI

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."** 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. Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power.

#### ➤ ECONOMIC SELF-RELIANCE

Though Gandhi visualized a humane society, free from exploitation and in justice, built by responsible men and women still, he 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 woman's loving companion of livelihood for the poor family and a means to supplement the income of the family of middle class as well.

#### ➤ GANDHIJI AGAINST GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Gandhi was totally opposed to gender discrimination. Gandhi did not like Indian society's preference for a boy and a general neglect of a girl child. In fact, in most cases she is not allowed to be born. If born, her survival is not ensured. If somehow she survives she is subjected to neglect. She does not get respect and the status she deserves equal to that of a boy. He described discrimination against women as an anachronism as already stated: he said: **"I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over the birth of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going."** Gandhiji called women as the noble sex. He said that if she is weak in striking, she is strong in suffering.

#### ➤ GANDHI JI ON WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION

Fundamentally, man and woman are one; their problems must be in one essence. The soul in both is the same. The one cannot live without the other's active help. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. While both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. Woman, the mother of man, shows his capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joys in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour. But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity.

#### ➤ GANDHI JI AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Gandhi was a passionate lover of humanity. He was a friend of the lowly and the downtrodden. Harijans, women and the poor commanded his most tender attention. He had almost an instinctive understanding of women and their problems and had a deep abiding sympathy for them. He preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonored by marrying men who demanded dowry. He found dowry marriages "heartless". Gandhi wished for mutual consent, mutual love, and mutual respect between husband and wife. He said: **"I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on an equal footing of perfect equality."** Though pre-occupied with heavy responsibilities his views in this regard were clear and he tried to educate the public to accept women as equal partners.

## RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN LEGACY

### THE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Contemporary feminist's analysis on empowerment of women includes not only of sexism but also of racism, classism and imperialism as determining factors in shaping women's status in the private and public realm. This development seems consonant with Satyagraha which for Gandhi was an inclusive quest to find creative solutions for all forms of oppression. In India and elsewhere, there are healthy movements of Gandhi's followers. Feminists and other women are engaged in many forms of action that Gandhi may not have anticipated. We have much to learn from Gandhi's theory and practice, but not to the exclusion of modern ideas and movements. He was never against any idea/s coming from any quarter/s. He said: **"I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave."**

Gandhi's attitudes towards women were shaped by his innate sense of comparison and justice. 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. 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. Sometimes highly progressive, other times conservative, he created an empathy with his audience through this cultural fine tuning. 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:

**Question:** The awakening of civil and political consciousness among Indian women has created a conflict between their traditional domestic duties and their duty towards society. If a woman engages in public work, she may have to neglect her children or her household. How is this dilemma to be solved?

**Answer:** More often than not a woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. To me this domestic slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our women kind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.

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.

In the present context, we see that, on paper, 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.

**CONCLUSION**

While concluding, we must agree that Gandhi ji thought us that empowerment of women without sharing our material, financial, intellectual resources with the poor women is not possible. Sharing requires sacrifice. In short, this is the Gandhian formula (sharing and sacrifice). Nobody has done as much as Gandhi has done to bring out masses of illiterate women from the four walls of their houses. A few talented women were spotted by him who worked shoulder to shoulder with him. Many of us have to change our life style. Women have to be conscious and aware to feel and realize at every step of their life that they are builders of their nation and the peaceful world. **"The hand that rocks the cradle can also be the hand that rules the world!!!"** Let the pursuit of power be not only aim of the women empowerment. It should be "total emancipation". No one can double the efforts made by Gandhi to empower women. He had attracted so many millions of not only literate but illiterate women without the power of state, without the modern information technology and offering in return only sweat, toil, and pain, is an exceptional feat! His insistence on Women's education is the first step in right direction. We still have miles to go to achieve our cherished goal to empower 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.

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