



CONTRIBUTION OF MAHATMA GANDHI TO WOMEN'S WELFARE

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Abstract: Many countries have been able to overcome this issue to some extent. But in India, the subject is still persistent and relevant because women continue to struggle in our predominantly patriarchal society. Women are considered the weaker gender and incapable of taking decision on their own. They are expected to follow and live as a dependent on their male counterpart. Mahatma Gandhi the 'Father of the Nation' was a strong votary of women empowerment in India. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the views of Mahatma Gandhi on women and foresee the relevance of his philosophy in twenty-first century India. Need for the hour is not only to educate women so that they attain their rights but to harness the thought process and understanding of males towards females not as a weak gender but of equal cadre. Issues against women like child marriages, rape, domestic violence, sexselective abortion, honour killing, trafficking, sexual harassment, dowry, etc are still prevailing in spite of already established laws against them. Indian women venture out to make careers for themselves but this freedom has made them more susceptible to crime because laws have become inadequate in controlling the situation. The solution lies in making the society more empathetic and liberal towards issues related to gender. Under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, we Indians won our freedom, it is veritable that once again by adopting his views and ways we could break the shackles of gender biases.

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Introduction:

Mahatma Gandhi played a vital role in bringing revolutionary changes in the status of women in the first half of the twentieth century. He believed in the liberalization and all-round development of humanity which was not possible without the emancipation of Indian women who were and still are the most suppressed and oppressed section of the society from various aspects of social life (Garai, 2015). Gandhi always stressed on women upliftment because they constituted the section responsible for future citizens of India. It was 'Putlibai', the mother of Mahatma Gandhi that subconsciously created the image of women as 'Ardhangani' or the better half and 'Sadadharmini' or the helpmate, for Gandhi. As per Gandhi, women are superior to men on the grounds of morality and spirituality (Mondal). Gandhi had immense faith that women have a bigger role to play in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country. Gandhi had a great conviction in women's innate competence for nonviolence (SAIN, 2016). Therefore from the very beginning of Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi strongly urged Indian women to join the independence movement.

Gandhiji's idea of Woman as Mother and "Mother India"

In the formative years, the Mahatma Gandhiji (Alia Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi) was influenced by his mother Putlibai who imparted in him strong sense of personal ethics and compassion that is conveyed in Gandhiji's favourite prayer song by the 15th century religious reformer, Narsinha Mehta (Life time: 1414-1481) "*Vaishnav Jan to tene re kahiye je peed parai jane re*" (A godlike man is one, Who feels another's pain, Who shares another's sorrow). Gandhi said: "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 daily prayer. She would take the hardest of vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them." He got his mother's permission to go to England for studies by taking an oath: "I vowed not to touch wine, women and meat." These three vows shielded him throughout his stay in England.

Gandhi married at the age of thirteen to Kasturba. But he lost no time in assuming the authority of husband to **lord over** her life (emphasis added). At

the time of conjugal conflict, Kasturba used the weapon of passive resistance of "fasting"; from which Gandhiji got inspiration to start Satyagraha in the freedom movement to resist the British Regime. Kasturba became his active partner and supporter in all his activities. She was a devoted wife who was content to live in the shadow of her illustrious husband. She had multifaceted personality. She was fiercely independent woman. Kasturba became Ba-mother of all who took care of Bapu's extended family.

Gandhi learnt much from Kasturba and perhaps even more from his mother. His spiritual bent of mind seems to have come from her. Gandhiji's devotion to women began with his devotion to his mother and Kasturba, most particularly to women as mother. 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. Even after children are grown-up her constant desire is to make herself one with them. 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.

He learnt the fundamental aspects of his soul politics from his mother and his wife but women's influence on him was not limited to his family. The *bhadra mahila* (respectable or new women), created in nineteenth century by Indian social reformers, became the model for Indian women on the nationalist era. Women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century created organizations such as All India Women's Council and Bhagini Samaj founded predominantly among the upper-middle class in urban centres. Although many associate the ideals and organizations of the "new woman" with Gandhi, as Elise Boulding indicates "well before Gandhi was calling women to practice Satyagraha, the grandmothers, mothers, wives and daughters of the educated classes in India were forming organizations providing educations and action-training for other women, in order to re-build an Indian society freed from colonial structures."

Gandhi on Social Issues against Women Widow Remarriage:

Mahatma Gandhi was against any sort of social barriers, customs or laws which were against individual freedom and were imposed forcefully by the society or law. As per Mahatma Gandhi, a widow

who has children should avoid altering marriage vows but if she wishes then she should be free to do so (Garai, 2015). However, for Gandhi, this must apply equally to men (Kripalani, 1970, p. 393). Mahatma Gandhi was firm in his views regarding child widow. If a widow is a child, that child should be duly married as he thoroughly rejects first marriage in case of a child widow (Garai, 2015). Mahatma Gandhi said "...We cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but we refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl widow. We would resent force in religion. But in the name of religion we force widowhood upon our girl widows who could not understand the importance of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily paying dearly..."(Kripalani, 1970).

Child Marriage:

Mahatma Gandhi was totally against the malicious practice of child marriage. He considered such marriages 'ab initio' null and void and as such* no marriage at all. Mahatma Gandhi said..." The reform must begin by those who have girl widows taking courage in both their hands and seeing that the child widows in their charge are duly and well married not remarried. They were never really married".....(Kripalani, 1970). As per Gandhi, child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as well as moral evil (Anuradha, 2016).

Purdah System:

Mahatma Gandhi discarded the purdah system. He regarded 'Pardah' or 'Purdah' as an irrelevant barrier that interferes unnecessarily while performing different tasks by women. As per the Mahatma, chastity comes from purity of mind and body and can only be monitored through self-control and not by veil (Garai, 2015). He said, "Chastity is not a hot-house growth. It can not be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation" (Bose). Gandhi in practice ignored the 'Purdah' system and always insisted on his being taken to the sanctum sanctorum of the family, the ladies' quarters in both cases i.e. Hindus and Muslims (Kripalani, 1970, p. 394).

Women Education and coeducation:

Mahatma Gandhi viewed women illiteracy as no better than a curse and strongly vouched for its promotion among women. (Garai, 2015). Women's mental capacity is equal to men and therefore she has equal right to have an education (Anuradha, 2016). But Mahatma Gandhi's view on women education is based on family ideals. He believed that man is

superlative in the extra-mural activities and that woman is supreme in intra-mural activities. Therefore, education provided to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life (Nandela).

Dowry System:

Mahatma Gandhi was against the dowry system and considered it as an outcome of the caste system. As per Mahatma Gandhi, the abolition of the caste system will lead to the eradication of the dowry system (Nandela). Dowry for the middle and poor class was not less than a nightmare hence the birth of girls itself becomes a burden and gives a platform for gender discrimination among society as a whole. Because of this, one could find celebrations on the birth of a male child but silent sorrow on the birth of a female child (Kripalani, 1970). Mahatma Gandhi's opinion was that if a man asks for dowry he should be excommunicated from society and parents of girls should not be dazzled by English degrees and should also not hesitate to enter matrimony outside caste and provinces to find a true match for their daughter (Nandela).

Divorce: Mahatma Gandhi condemned heavy expenditure done in the marriage ceremony. He wanted simple marriages. Gandhi regarded that divorce is not the only alternative solution when a marriage relationship is in a state of suspension. Mahatma Gandhi regarded that marriage is a state of discipline. This state of discipline can be sustained through moral upholding and repentance. So to keep a marriage relation unscathed, moral restraint should be observed so that the unanticipated situation of divorce can be averted (Garai, 2015, p. 106).

Sex, Birth Control and Sterilization:

According to Mahatma Gandhi both men and women should observe self-control and have sex only for progeny (Kapadia). In spite of opposition from women's movement, Mahatma Gandhi opposed birth control contraceptives. It does not mean that he was not having a sympathetic view towards women suffering from frequent childbearing but because he was their protector and wanted to direct them towards a higher way of life. His plain belief was that generative organs should only be used for progeneration and any other use is abuse. It is a duty of both man and woman to be self-controlled which is the surest option for birth control (Kaur). It might be that the concept of self-control and purity misted up his mind and prevented him from considering other more strong methods of birth control solutions for population explosion (Nandela).

Influence of women public figures on Gandhiji

He was profoundly influenced by Annie Besant, a British militant feminist and a Theosophist, Sarojini Naidu a trusted Gandhi's co-worker, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, a fiery Satyagrahi, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and Pushpaben Mehta. Geraldine Forbes examines the model that Sarojini Naidu developed in her speech as President of the Indian National Congress, a model with India as the "house", the Indian people as "members of the joint family and the Indian woman as the "Mother". Naidu, Gandhi, and many other advocates of women's and national liberation agreed wholeheartedly that women and India would advance together to the extent this new familial model for India was adopted by the women and men of India.

Gandhi believed women could do much to transform India on all levels. He believed that equal rights for women and men were necessary but not sufficient to create a more just social order. What good does it do to us to have equal rights if we are divided within ourselves and unable to attend true unity with others?

In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi writes, "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."

Gandhi further said: "I began work among women when I was not even thirty years old. There is not a woman in South Africa who does not know me. But my work was among the poorest. The intellectuals I could not draw ... you cannot blame me for not having organized the intellectuals among the women. I have not the gift... but just as I never fear coldness on the part of the poor when I approach them, I never fear it when I approach poor women. There is invisible bond between them and me."

The mass of poor women were those whose dignified *upliftment* he craved. Poor women understood what he was saying because he spoke in the religious pantheon and referred to the facts of caste and gender. Some times highly progressive, other times conservative, he created an empathy with his audience through this cultural fine tuning.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur echoing this aspect of Gandhiji's personality stated:

"We found him not a "Bapu" - wise father, but what is more precious, a mother, whose all embracing and understanding love all fear and restraint vanish."

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 described; "Woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and ahimsa." He further states: "A daughter's share must be equal to that of a son. The husband's earnings are a joint property of husband and wife as he makes money by her assistance."

Gandhiji firmly believed that if a husband is unjust to his wife, she has the right to live separately. He averred, "Both have equal rights over children. Each would forfeit these rights after they have grown up, and even before that if he or she is unfit for them. In short, I admit no distinction between men and women except such as has been made by nature and can be seen with human eyes."

Gandhiji preached and practiced sharing of housework by both men and women of the family. He encouraged women to do intellectual work and men to help in cooking, cleaning and caring, conventionally 'women's chores'.

Gandhi prepared a primer for the children for a primary school. This primer or *Balpothi* is the form of a mother teaching the child. In a chapter on housework,

The mother asks her son, "Dear Son, you should also help in the housework as your sister does."

Son answers: But she is a girl. I am a boy. A boy plays and studies.

Sister says: How come I also like to play and study?

Brother: I do not deny that but, dear sister, you have to do housework as well.

The mother: Why should a boy not do house work?

Son: Because the boy has to earn money when he grows up, therefore, he must study well.

The Mother: You are wrong my son. Woman also makes an earning for the family. And, there is a lot to learn in house work-house cleaning, cooking, laundry. By doing house work you will develop various skill of the body and will feel self-reliant. In good housework, you need to use your eyes, hands and brain. therefore these activities are educative and they build your character. Men and women, both need to be educated equally in housework because the home belongs to both.

Gandhi expounds this theme further. More often than not a women'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 for her own vanities. To me this domestic slavery of woman is the symbol of our barbarism mainly. It is high time that out womankind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of women's time. His policy of empowerment was that man must participate in the housework and reduce the drudgery of women's home work.

Gandhiji and Empowerment of Women

Gandhi was not only a great political leader but a passionate lover of humanity. An implacable enemy of all injustice and inequalities, 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.

The oppressive custom of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. 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: Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste. So long as the choice is limited to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist, no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated.

Injustice, like exploitation, has to be resisted wherever it is found, not only in the political field. For the fight against foreign domination, women by the thousands rallied to Gandhi's call for civil disobedience. Women set aside their traditional roles, they came out of seclusion, they cast off their purdah. They entered the public domain along with men, and offered satyagraha; they remained undaunted by police beatings and extreme hardships in prison. Even illiterate tribal women from the forests joined the freedom movement. That is the Truth-force Gandhi

urged in private matters as well. In fact, that is where he wanted it to begin. The first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of life. Perhaps it is too much to expect of human nature. I do not, however, think so. In Harijan, October 3, 1936 we find the reason for his faith: I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she will make the same effort, and have the same hope and faith.

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. 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."

Again he said:

"To 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." Women could play a significant part in the freedom fight under his inspiring leadership, his fostering care and loving guidance. According to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none has been so potent as the field of nonviolence which Gandhiji offered to women in his "war" against British domination of India. It brought them out in their hundreds from sheltered homes, to stand the furnace of a fiery trial without flinching. It proved to the hilt that woman was as much able as man to resist evil or aggression.

The greatest tragedy of present day situation is that even after almost 53 years of our development work we have not been able to clothe our women.

This problem was brought to our notice in 1917 by Mahatma Gandhi. He said: "I happened to visit a village in the Champaran district of Bihar. I found some of the women dressed very dirtily. So I told my wife to ask them why they did not wash their clothes. She spoke to them. One of women took her into her hut and said: look now there is no box or cupboard here containing other clothes. The Sari I am wearing is the only one I have. How am I to wash it? Tell Mahatmaji to get me another sari, and I shall then promise to bathe and put clean clothes everyday. This cottage has no exception, but a type to be found in many Indian villages."

He took to spinning so that every poor woman could be clothed and he promoted production of khadi as an economic activity.

Gandhiji on Women's Contribution

Fundamentally, man and woman are one; their problems must be in one essence. The soul in both is the same. each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst 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. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is bread-winner; she is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct... The division of spheres of work being recognized, the general qualities and culture required are practically the same for both the sexes....

He had profoundly said that the woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa: ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but 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. Who, again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of a man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to trade the art of peace to the warning world thirsting for nectar. She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith.

By giving an example of the bravery which a woman showed during child birth by not taking chloroform, which would have risked the child's life and undergoing a very painful operation. He further says: "Let not women, who can count many such heroines among them, ever despise their sex or deplore that they were not born men."

Gandhiji declared that we can not return our debts to Mother India or Mother Earth or women as mothers who have given us everything. We should remain loyal to them and cease to exploit. We should "rediscover" status of women and give them full respect and support needed by them in domestic and other works.

Feminist researchers differ widely in the assessment of Mahatma Gandhi's theory and practice of women's emancipation during the Indian Nationalist Movement.

Ketu Katrak maintains, for example, that "like other Indian social reformers, Gandhi reinforced British liberal and imperial policies since he did not challenge women's subordinate position in the patriarchal family structure.

On the other hand Madhu Kishwar asserts that "Gandhi saw women not as objects of reforms ... but as self-conscious subjects who could, if they choose, become arbiters of their own destiny. In this way Gandhi represents a crucial break from the attitude of many of the leaders of the reform movements of the late nineteenth century... The main contributions of the Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and society."

However, Phyllis Mack contends in his *Feminine behaviour and Radical action: Franciscans, Quakers, and the Followers of Gandhi* that St. Francis, Fox, Gandhi and their followers placed women's experience at the heart of the movement. She suggests "that we (contemporary feminist and peace activist) would do well to contemplate the virtues of these partisans of nonviolent public behaviour, and that we can find affinities with their compassionate activism very close to home to embrace our own political and spiritual struggle."

It took several years for Gandhi to overcome the forms of sexism, classicism, and racism that he internalized as a young man. The process was painful for him and for Kasturba. But from the perspective of social feminism, he made enormous progress. The new women (women engaged in feminist movement) loved Gandhi because he spoke their language, he did what they wanted men to do, and encouraged other men to follow suit. Given the stark contrast in Indian society between man and women's cultures broadly speaking men is more bellicose rigid, controlling culture and woman's more relational, egalitarian, fluid, opened peace-loving culture, it is not surprising Gandhi chose the latter. The extended family, even with its patriarchal modes of dominance, gave many women a wide scope of expression than either the British or the Indian public spheres. Gandhi's effort to model Indian public life on the joint family brought thousands of women into social and political institutions of the nation. Equity-feminism, on the other hand, seemed foreign to women during the Indian Nationalist women with the exception of a small number of middle-to-upper class women who lived primarily in cities.

Gandhi had advocated three distinct levels of women's participation in the national movement.

First, women who had familial responsibilities such as care of children and the aged were to fulfill only their primary duties which were not to be given up for the sake of the national movement.

Second, a group included women from whom he expected a sacrifice of the pleasure of house keeping and child caring. If already married these women were expected to remain celibate for the sake of the nation. He advised Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and her husband, for instance, to practice celibacy after having blessed the marriage.

Third, full time workers were expected to stay single and dedicate themselves entirely to the struggle for independence.

It is clear that Gandhi theory and practice-which unfolded over five decades on two countries were enormously complex, as the voluminous research about him has shown. Equity-feminism has been so central among western feminist that social feminism is ignored, marginalized, or seen as an earlier and less radical precursor to real (Equity) feminism. Based on an equity feminist analysis of Indian women in the nationalist era, Forbes states of Sarojini Naidu, "by linking feminism with nationalism, she and her colleagues hindered the development of a radical feminist critique of women's work."

Conclusion

Gandhiji 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, like Midas touch, anybody whom he touched became vibrant and active soldier of movement and not a lifeless idol of gold. 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 is 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.

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