
GANDHI'S VIEW ON WOMEN AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In accordance with the social changes and developments the necessity of women empowerment and gender issue has been becoming a burning issue day by day. Removing social disparities between men and women and bringing about equal status of women along with men at every spheres of life has become a major issue. For the full growth and the protection of humanity and the human society as a whole equal upliftment of the women is a necessary condition. Different social and religious reformers at every age and society put their attention to this issue and provided their valuable contribution in different issues regarding women upliftment and empowerment. Like many, who focused on this issue, Gandhi ji was one of them. He experimented in this field and he had shown the way for the empowerment and development of the status of the women. This made women shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rises to dignity and self esteem and entered the mainstream of national movement. Women from every sphere, rich or poor, educated or uneducated were attracted to his ideas and deeds. This paper reviews and analyses Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life and his role in drawing a large number of women into the main stream of the national movement.

In nineteenth century the "women question" loomed large. This was not a question of "what do women want?" but rather how can they be modernized?" It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the foreign rulers had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. Enamored with their "Civilizing Missions", influential British writers condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women.¹

The British were not the first outsiders with a radically different cultural tradition to conquer India. Centuries earlier Muslim dynasties had entered the sub-continent from the north-west and brought to India a new religion and a new way of organizing power relations. But significant changes that affected the lives of ordinary people first came with British rule. Traditional Hindu society was "decentred" and previous challenges from foreign invaders had allowed it to remain so. The traditional state collected the rents and demanded obeisance but did not interfere with the social order. Muslim rule did not significantly alter this structure. But the British, pursuing commercial aims, introduced new relationships and explained their action within a view of the world that was "clear, precise, instrumentalists, technical, scientific, effective, true and above all beneficial to all who came into contact with it."²

¹ Forbes, Geraldine, 2004, Women in Modern India, Cambridge University Press, p12.

² ibid. p13

This paper reviews and analyses Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life and his role in drawing a large number of women into the main stream of the national movement. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order.

The nineteenth century was a time of political, social and scientific upheaval in Europe. The British regarded their domination of the sub-continent as proof of their moral superiority. In arguments over how to best rule their colonial subjects in India, they were led to discussions of the ideal relationship between men and women. James Mill, in his book 'History of British India' (published in 1826) argued that women's position could be used as an indicator of society's advancement. According to Mill "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindu entertains for their women. They are held accordingly, in extreme degradation."

E. Storrow came to India in 1848 and pronounced Indian disunity a consequence of the low status of women. Sir Herbert Hope Risley characterized the Indian intelligentsia as interested in intellectual and political ideas, but unconcerned with reforming society.³

Gandhi's autobiography and various other accounts of his life bring out clearly how he moved a long way from his early possessiveness and tyrannical disposition towards Kasturba to a healthy respect for her autonomy. In his autobiography he remarks that he learnt his 'first lesson in Satyagraha' from his wife's capacity for silent but firm resistance to any attempt by him to impose on her. This reveals his gradual break away from the overbearing attitude of a traditional husband as he came to realize that he had no 'prescriptive right' over her. For example in response to a question as to what a congressman should do if his wife refused to wear Khadi or refused to fight untouchability, he answered that even for a good cause no man has the right to compel his wife: "Remember, your wife is not your property and more than you are hers" and therefore, a wife ought never to be compelled even to do 'the right thing'.⁴

Gandhi's arrival transformed politics and society in India. He concerned himself with the issues relating to India's women by questioning existing Hindu practices which limited the involvement of women in the national awakening. Gandhi called "Purdah" a custom which did harm to the country and was an impediment to the growth of women. He unleashed the same condemnation on the custom of sati and the dowry. Sati he denounced as blind egoism by man and the dowry as reducing women to the position of mere cattle and property to be bought and sold.⁵

Although Gandhi held high ideals of marriage, he strongly urged women to fight for their own self-development in order that they might not be seen as 'mere sex symbols, play things or dolls'. 'The Wife', Gandhi asserts, is not a slave of her husband, but a comrade, his better half, colleague and friend. She is co-sharer with him of equal rights and duties. B.R. Nanda, Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, sees Gandhi's views as not 'liberal but radical'. India's innumerable problematic customs included not only Sati and Purdah, but Child-marriage, the fact that widows were not allowed to remarry, the caste system, untouchability, and, not least of all, colonial rule. Early marriage, which was very common, made the physical, intellectual and spiritual development of women almost impossible. 'The girl-child' observes M.Fuller, from the moment of her birth to her death,

³ ibid p13.

⁴ Kishwar Madhu, 1985, Gandhi and Women, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XX, NO. 41, Oct. 12.

⁵ ibid, p. 1753.

undergoes one continuous life-long suffering as a child-wife, as a child-mother and very often as a child-widow. A survey of Calcutta in 1891 found 10,000 widows below the age of four. In Bengal 80 year old Brahmin had 200 wives, and youngest was eight year old.⁶

Gandhi's great sense of justice made work towards emancipation for all those oppressed and suppressed sectors of society including women. He declared in the February 1925 edition of young India to call women the weaker sex is against the law. If by strength is meant moral power, then women is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater-courage? Without her man could not be, if non-violence is the law of our being, then the future is with women.

However, not all women were prepared to forgo violence. According to Aparna Basu, Professor of Modern History at Delhi University there were a few women who could not accept Gandhi's creed of non-violence. Two young girls in their teens shot and killed Stevens, District Magistrate in 1931. They were arrested and given life sentences. Young college girls joined the revolutionary organizations that sprang up in the thirties. Aparna Basu suggests that "all these girls had a strong streak of idealism in them and were highly emotional and impulsive. Their contempt and hatred for the British was quite intense and contact with revolutionaries and their literature fixed their imagination and a world of heroism and romance was unfolded before their eyes."⁷

In "Gandhi and Status of Women", S.K. Bakshi suggests that Gandhi wished to awaken in as many minds of as many women as possible, a consciousness of their present condition as well as stirring them to patriotism and encouraging them to fight shoulder to shoulder with the men against the British Raj, and join the Indian National Congress. 'Gandhi had to go slowly in beginning, realizing that it was not going to be easy for women to escape from exclusion because of their own self-doubt about taking part in the national struggle. They were further hindered by their men folk, who in general were too conservative to permit them to participate in public activities. Perhaps some men were also frightened that women's emancipation would erode their power-base and shake the traditional patriarchal power they had over them. However, there were some simple unsophisticated rural women who marched side by side with women of the Nehru family, at Allahabad and the Sarabhais at Ahmedabad. There were also some Muslim and Parsi women who shed their purdah and joined Gandhi in the movement. In congress-led freedom movement, women's participation was impressive. Many shops selling foreign goods were picketed and foreign cloth was burned on bonfires.'⁸

Gandhi saw that in some respect women's strength lay in their weakness. He appealed to their non-violent strength 'against the brute masculinity of the British Power'.

Although Marx believed that change only occurred in society when the middle classes became dissatisfied, Gandhi desired to reach the masses as well as the middle classes who supported the National Social Conference and the Indian National Congress. He had therefore to appeal to people by his writings (Young India) and public addresses.

⁶ Chandra Bipin, "India's struggle for Independence", 2000, Penguin Publishers, p 79

⁷ Basu, Aparna and Bharati Roy, "Women's Struggle: A History of the all India Women's Conference", 1927-1990, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, p 87.

⁸ LYN Norvell, "Gandhi and Indian Women's Movements", p 15.

Gandhi's goals were numerous. Not only was he striving to achieve independence for India but labored tirelessly to bring 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 extreme poverty forced young girls into prostitution. The reaction concern for the poor, simplicity, revolutionary zeal, non-violence, love for humanity, and respect for basic values were some of the factors that attracted people to Gandhi, together with his fearless childlike innocence and qualities of leadership. Gandhi was able to reach out to hundred and thousand during his long life. Because those who came closest to his ideals were often the humble people, the people by the wayside, the unknown, the silent people, we shall never really know the extent of his influence.⁹

In the 1980's the British Library acquired a selection of interesting pamphlets on the 'women question' in India that looked at some of the issues from the nineteenth century through to contemporary research. Vina Mazumdar's paper Emergence of Women's Question in India and role of Women Studies suggests that the women's question in the nineteenth century grew out of a sense of an identity crisis of the new educated middle classes, products of the colonial system of education. However, the issues addressed were still confined to a woman's traditional role within the family; and social reforms were concentrated on ending the traditional customs, child marriage, purdah and the ban on widow's remarriage. Very few reformers attempted to go beyond these basic abuses or face the effect that patriarchal values had on women.¹⁰

Gandhi's idea on control of sexuality served to create a favourable social atmosphere for women to come out of their homes and participate in social and political struggles, to be able to live away from home without fear, shame or explanation. His upholding celibacy as a higher ideal than marriage also made it possible for many women to live unmarried and yet be respected in society.

While in many ways, Gandhi's view on women and their role in society are not very different from those of the 19th century reformers, in some other important ways he marks a crucial break from that tradition. The most crucial difference is that he does see women as objects of reforms, as helpless creatures deserving charitable concern. Instead, he sees them as active, self conscious agents of social change. His concern is not limited to bringing about change in selected areas of social life such as education and marriage as a way of regenerating. Indian Society, as was that of most 19th century social reformers. He is primarily concerned with bringing about radical social reconstruction. The political movement for national liberation was a means, a weapon to achieve that end. And he saw women playing a major role in the task of social reconstruction. He thought that in the process of reconstruction of society, they would also free themselves from the specific forms of bondage that affected them as women.

Yet, while the new society that he envisions is a radical departure from the past, and is based on anarchist principles of local self determination, the role that he envisages and advocates for women is based on the ideology of division of labour between the sexes which has been historically an important tool for the oppression and exploitation of women.

⁹ Ibid., p 16.

¹⁰ Forbes Geraldine, 2004, op.cit., p 3.

Gandhi saw the home as the main sphere of activity of most women, barring the exceptional woman who devotes herself to serving humanity as an extension of the domestic role of selfless service. Gandhi believes in the equal dignity of both men and women and in women's absolute freedom for self-realization. But his notion of equality does not extend to equality in employment, or in economic and political power. He wanted, first and foremost, to change the moral condition of women's lives, and to do away with the vile abuses of power by men, but not so much to alter the basic relationship from which that power was derived. He attempted to extend the power of women as wives, mothers and sisters within the household rather than to have women acquire political power in their own right. Gandhi did not envisage radical change in their social role even though he was in favour of removing all legal and juridical disabilities against them.¹¹

One of the most lasting contributions of Gandhi to the women's cause was that he gave it a moral legitimacy. He helped create a tradition and a social-political atmosphere in which even today hardly anyone will publicly stand up and explicitly oppose women's fundamental rights or will deny them participation in politics. Such was the moral legitimacy that leader like Gandhi created for the cause of women that women's entry into politics as 'equal' partners came without much overt resistance and opposition. The tradition was set for patronized entry of a handful of urban middle-class women into politics and for tailoring the movement in such a way that some women's issues could easily be accommodated within the parameters of male domination and supremacy without throwing a serious challenge to it.¹²

Slowly this legitimacy had degenerated into token representation of women, with a handful of urban, educated, middle-class women being the beneficiaries while the mass of women remain voiceless with no access whatsoever to political power at any level, especially no access to power at village level.

Women's representation in parliament has never exceeded five percent of total seats and has been on a decline. In most parts of the country, women are not allowed to participate in whatever exists by way of panchayats and other more informal institutions of political power at the village level. Gandhi's legacy in the contemporary political culture has been distorted to mean encouraging "tokenism" at very top without bringing about any real changes at the bottom. Thus the myth has come to acquire a powerful hold that Indian women have equal rights in every sphere and that if things are wrong, it is because women choose not to make use of their rights.

Despite great concern for women's rights, Gandhi did not encourage women to organize as a political force in their own right around their own issues. They were to seek their liberations by serving the national cause, in the tradition of selfless social workers. As a result, women never came to acquire any real political power within the Congress. Even the most prominent of women leaders remained peripheral to the hard core decision-making within the congress because they were not seen as representing any organized constituency of women.¹³

¹¹ Kishwar Madhu, 1985, op.cit., p 1757

¹² Ibid, p 1757.

¹³ Majumdar Vina, "Emergence of Women's question in India and Role of women's studies, 1985, Paper 07, New Delhi, p 26.

Even as women's participation grew numerically in the national movement, women did not come to play a greater role at decision-making levels. Women were more prominent in running the Ashram on a day-to-day basis by their unremitting services. They were involved in decision making only at rare and exceptional movements.

This is partly because Gandhi saw an important role for women not in political decision-making but in those parts of the movement which addressed themselves to the task of transforming people's ideas and lives as, for instance, participants in demonstrations, Satyagrahis, Boycott organizers.

Moreover, even within the movement, women were encouraged to be more active in the 'constructive programme, which had to do with social transformation and social services.

The very presence of women was seen as a disciplining force in agitations and struggles. Women were frequently preferred as leaders of picketing squads because Gandhi was afraid that it would be far more difficult to restrain men picketers from using violence. Also he felt that those against whom picketing was being practiced would be less likely to retaliate with violence against women picketers. Thus on one hand emphasis on women's participation in Satyagraha sought to ensure that the movement stayed non violent, while on other hand, emphasis on non-violence made it possible for large numbers of women to participate. Gandhi's non-violence was a powerful revolutionary weapon because it created a favourable atmosphere for participation of very large number of people, especially women, giving them all meaningful place in the struggle. It is easier for women to prove their courage and strength without resort to violence while in wielding weapons and using physical violence. In non-violence women in large number could participate and even lead, more naturally than men.¹⁴

Despite insisting on the stereo-typed women as running the household while men dominate the affairs of the outside world, in practice Gandhi encouraged a breaking away from these stereotypes. This is the most evident in his belief in the superiority of non-violent Satyagraha as a weapon of struggle.

Similarly, Gandhi insisted on every congressman taking to spinning, hitherto considered a women's occupation, as a necessary qualification. This despite resistance from within congress on the ground that this amounted to wasting the energies of men. This was indeed a radical step in breaking the hold of oppressive stereotypes and in weaning men away from aggressive 'manliness'. It was an essential step in purging violence out of society.

Gandhi's action in bringing women dignity in social life, in breaking down some of the prejudices against their participation in social and political life, in promoting an atmosphere of sympathetic awareness of their issues, goes far beyond his own view and pronouncement of women's role and places in society.

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¹⁴ LYN Norvell, op.cit., p 16.



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