



## Mahatma Gandhi and Women Empowerment

Dr.K.S.V.Ranga Rao, Lecturer in Political Science, Sri Y.N.College (Autonomous),  
Narsapur – 534275

**Abstract :** *This article examines the importance and relevance of his views on issues that directly or indirectly impacts the status of women in India. Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his views and had written on numerous issues that concerned the Indian Society in particular and humanity in general. 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. Women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of men. According to the Mahatma Gandhi, social reforms were essential for the restructuring of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception of Indian women. Although, he had great reverence for the traditions of the country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation.*

**Key-Words:** *Deep-rooted Customs, Social Emancipation, Total Emancipation, Motherhood, Feminists, Gandhian Formula, Swaraj, Satyagraha.*

### Introduction:

Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his views and had written on numerous issues that concerned the Indian Society in particular and humanity in general. This article examines the importance and relevance of his views on issues that directly or indirectly impacts the status of women in India. 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.<sup>1</sup> According to the Mahatma Gandhi, social reforms were essential for the restructuring of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception of Indian women. Although, he had great reverence for the traditions of the

country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. Gandhi respected traditions of the society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity. His practical and dynamic advice was "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide". He never hesitated to criticize the evils which had gripped the Indian society, and tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. He realized that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation.

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few decades. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers. One of them is



Mahatma Gandhi. The history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have adorned high offices in India including that of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition, Chief Ministers in states, Cabinet Ministers etc. In fact its credit goes to Mahatma Gandhi. In India he was involved women in political movement first time of Satyagrah. He 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 notes worthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women. This made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rises to dignity and self-esteem. Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. An attempt is made in the present paper to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues.

#### Woman as Mother and "Mother India"

Gandhiji believed that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women. If we want to give any tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, the Great Soul, his ideas and ideals have to be translated into action. He saw man and women as equals, complementing each other. And he saw himself not as a visionary, but as a practical idealist. If then, men and women work together selflessly and sincerely as equals with a faith like Gandhi's, they may indeed realize *Ram Rajya*, the perfect state. Traditionally, woman has been called *abala* (without strength). In Sanskrit and many other Indian languages *bala* means strength. *Abala* means one without strength. If by strength we do not mean

brutish strength, but strength of character, steadfastness, and endurance, she should be called *sabala*, strong. His message almost six decades ago was: "When woman, whom we call *abala* becomes *sabala*, all those who are helpless will become powerful."<sup>2</sup>

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 15<sup>th</sup> century religious reformer, Narsinha Mehta "*Vaishnav Jan to tene re kahiye je peed parai jane re*"<sup>3</sup> (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. 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 multi-faceted 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.

#### **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 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. 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. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned, Gandhi felt that men and women had different spheres of work. In his opinion, women could take to economic activities to supplement the income of her families like spinning, which he believed to be a good option available to the women. So it is easy to say that Mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his country.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Gandhi's new Perception of Women; women can never be considered to be the weaker sex:**

With the emergence of Gandhi as a leader in the freedom movement, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Women are at par with men, one complementing the other. According to Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. These qualities were essential prerequisites for imbibing the virtue of Satyagraha. The capability of enduring endless suffering can be witnessed only in the women, according to the Mahatma.



The doctrine of ahimsa as preached by Gandhi incorporates the virtue of suffering as is evident in the women.

Therefore, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in establishing non-violence. Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womanhood, like Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti, to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men an equal right to freedom. To sum up in Gandhi's words; "The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows - as free as the husband to choose her own path."<sup>5</sup>

#### **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, Kamladevi 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. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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. 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." Rajkumari Amrit Kaur motivated this aspect of Gandhiji's personality stated: "We found him not a "Bapu" – a wise father, but what is more precious, a mother, whose all embracing and understanding love all fear and restraint vanish."<sup>7</sup>

#### **Gandhiji against to Gender 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. In short, he said that no distinction between men and women except such as has been made by nature and can be seen with human eyes. 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.

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.

#### **Status of Women:**

Gandhi often presented ideals before women, drawn from Indian traditions, mythology and history. He often talked about Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti and Mirabai as great women. There is nothing new for a social reformer drawing inspiration from the tradition. What is new here is the fact that this innovate interpretation of these characters gives a glimpse of the dynamic element in his thinking. He did not accept the negative elements of the Hindu tradition. 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 conveying the message of *Swadeshi*, who only wore "cloth made in India" and thus kept her heart and body pure. Moreover, she should defy the might of Ravana by sheer moral courage and she would not waste "a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charm". Implying thereby that a woman could assert herself in doing what she considered right even if the husband thought otherwise. Another ideal model presented by Gandhi was Draupadi who was not dependent on men and saved herself by an appeal to Krishna when the Pandavas failed to protect her. 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. Moreover, it is possible to become the world's sister only by making *Brahmacharya* "a natural condition" and being "fired by the spirit of service". Women have the potential to do immense service to the unfortunate, by doing this they can be "Sisters of Mercy".

#### **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. In one context Gandhiji said that "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".<sup>8</sup>

#### **Relevance of Gandhian Legacy the Contemporary Women's Movement**

Contemporary feminists' 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, and there are more moribund Gandhians





who speak in Gandhi's name but also subvert the power of his theory and practice by failing to be open to new movements. 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 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."

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Swaraj in all its facets and from different perspectives has permeated the discourse on India's contemporary history. As the most towering figure in India's freedom struggle Gandhi's role will remain unchallenged. All over the world the imprint of his moral philosophy as a workable political ideology has been particularly indelible. Yet Mahatma Gandhi's positions on social, political and economic matters are transparently evolutionary, a continuing examination of reality, the human condition and truth. Gandhi's attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of comparison and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. The contradiction between his liberal feminist pronouncements, his egalitarian, loving and respectful concern for women, his belief in their role in politics and in society are sometimes difficult to reconcile. Yet Gandhi, more than anyone else,

struggled with these paradoxes in the existing social milieu. 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.

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

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few decades. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers. One of them is Mahatma Gandhi. He 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. 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. 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.

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