



Insights and Implications of Gandhi's Philosophy on Women

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Abstract

The year 2020 marks the juncture of 150th year of Mahatma Gandhi and the country's progressive mission of embarking upon an auspicious journey towards becoming a Self-reliant nation. The accomplishment of such an ordeal demands optimum utilization of indigenous resources, be it material or human. But owing to the prevalence of inequalities in the genders, a significant portion of the human resources still remains unexplored thereby creating a dearth in the complete development of the nation. In spite of the laurels earned by the country in the advancement of learning and technology, women are not given their due respect in the society. Here in lies the importance of Gandhi who has ever since the days of pre-independence, immersed him in the empowerment and emancipation of women through his thoughts and ideas. This paper intends to analyze the views of Mahatma Gandhi related to the emancipation of women in India and also to evaluate the implications of such views in shaping up the future of the country. The discussions of the work have been divided into different sections based on the major aspects of Gandhian philosophy on women. The ideas of the discussion reveal Gandhi's deep empathy and sincere regard for women and true concern against social malpractices. He wanted to wipe out all those factors from the society that compelled women to lead derogatory lives. With the continuation of some inhuman practices against women and the alarmingly increasing rate of crime against them, the ideas of Gandhi for emancipation of women could be said to provide enlightening guidelines in leading towards a self-reliant future.

Keywords: Gandhi, sufferings of women ,reconstruction, autonomy, self-reliance.

I. Introduction

“When women, whom we call abala, becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful.”ⁱ

This celebrated saying of Mahatma Gandhi at All India Women’s Conference on December 23, 1936, have been providing a great impetus to the discourse of gender issues in India since many decades. It is important to mention here that the words quoted above not only summarize the essence of Gandhi’s Philosophy on women but also implies a way of life.

With the recent development in Education, Science and Technology, India is gradually and noticeably emerging as an important member of the global family. The world wide surveys and reports related to the field of education reveal great achievements on the part of India which have earned laurels to the country and marked its prominence in many sectors.ⁱⁱ But, in spite of such dazzling glories, half of the population of this country still continues to breathe under a sky of darkness. Whether from rural or urban, elite or mediocre, women are suffering from violence and exploitation in one way or the other. According to the Sustainable Development Report, 2019, published by the NitiAayog in the last week of the year, the status of the states have shown improvement in other subjects except in the status of women. It has been very unfortunately found that the states have improved in many aspects and got more than 50 points, but in terms of gender equality and malnutrition, only four states namely, Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh with 53 points out of 100, Himachal Pradesh with 52 points and Kerala with 51 points have managed to show improving trends. The worst scores have been found in case of Telengana and New Delhi with 26 and 27 respectively. Even the states securing the best scores in the list could not ensure satisfactory results as only 50% of work has been completed to improve the status of women. Thus, the immediate need of the hour is to take up action-oriented plans towards reaching the goal of 100 out of 100 points.ⁱⁱⁱ However difficult the target may be with existing inequalities in gender justice in India, the contemporary forces acting in the world compel us to strive towards better quality and quantity of representation from the citizens of the country in all sectors thereby paving the way for a productive future. Here in lies the significance of the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi who once remarked :

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” These inspiring words if interpreted in the context of gender discourse in India could go a long way in shaping the general future of the country and most particularly the future of her women-folk. Gandhi’s empathy towards women of his times has been affirmed through many of his thoughts and actions. His utmost regard for women as ‘mother’ and his belief in their sustenance-power motivated him to conceptualize and materialize them as important agents of ‘Satyagraha’.

II. Objectives

- a) To analyze the different aspects of Gandhi’s philosophy on women
- b) To evaluate the implications of such views in shaping a self-reliant India with the emancipation of women-folk.

III. Review of related literature

Among the other factors that have carved a niche for Mahatma Gandhi in the academic arena of the world, his concern for the emancipation of women-folk is one of the most discussed ones.

Women hold a revered status in the world of Gandhian thoughts. Assigning a motherly image to them, Gandhi has time and again presented them as the morally superior beings than their male counterparts. In his innumerable speeches and quotes he has expressed his utmost respect and concern for them and spoken for equal status of men and women who, he believes are complementary to each other. He also believes that if men and women equally work together, realization of 'Ram Rajya' would not remain an unattainable target. The relationship of Gandhi which he shared with his mother is one of the most influencing factors behind his respectful and exalted thoughts on women. Apart from that, he also expresses in his sayings the passive resistance approach of Kasturba Gandhi, his wife who was a real life incarnation of non-violent 'Satyagraha' for him. This inspired him to adopt the same approach in his nationalist ventures. Women really played great role in the Gandhian movements by following non-violence and Gandhi succeeded in developing new identity for them outside the purview of household affairs. In this way, he worked a great deal for the political emancipation of women. Along with some prominent personalities, innumerable women from the ordinary spheres of life were also inspired from the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi. With regards to the economic development of women, Gandhi propagated the idea of 'Khadi' which served both the purposes of nationalism as well as the self-reliance of women. For the upliftment of women, Gandhi also expressed his views against the malpractices like dowry, child-marriages, purdah etc. that led women towards living derogatory lives. Gandhi wanted to propose a system of education keeping in mind the basic or inherent aptitudes of men and women. According to him, giving equal opportunities to boys and girls was very important. For this, he suggested that home environment should be conducive to natural and spontaneous upbringing of boys and girls. However, in spite of deep concern and regard for women, Gandhi is often discussed as a passive role-setter for women as he, to some extent assigned them moral and spiritual characteristics which in a way overshadowed their energetic spirit.

IV. Methodology

This paper follows a descriptive approach. According to the data collected from the secondary sources, the major areas of discussion have been placed under separate sections to explain the importance of various dimensions related to the study of the topic under concern.

V. Discussion and Analysis

A) Women who inspired Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi's compassionate regard for the women of his times could be most importantly traced back to his early life during which time he was deeply influenced by his mother Putlibai who was a pious lady. Bapu himself 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.” Thus Gandhi’s devotion towards his mother knew no bounds. It could be interpreted that his affinity towards spiritual affairs was influenced by his mother and this in a way helped him to conceptualize women as mothers. Motherhood for him was the ideal model for liberation of the country which he perceived as motherland. He affirmed that until and unless we devote ourselves to the cause of the country many countries will try to put us down. ^{iv}

In the words of Millie Polak, a close co-worker of Gandhi in South Africa, “Gandhi’s mother was largely responsible for the extremely tolerant, religious disposition of Gandhi, with Kasturba being the second major influence.” Thus, along with his mother, Gandhi’s philosophy on women also bears the influences of his wife Kasturba Gandhi. Being married to Gandhi at the age of thirteen, she was content to live in the shadow of her illustrious husband. She was a lady of strong conviction and possessed a fiery independent spirit. Though a devoted wife she refused to be dominated by him. According to Shyama Sinha, in the early years of marriage Gandhi behaved with her tyrannically but she would not yield to it. Instead, she admonished him firmly and in a measured tone was able to shake him to his sense and realize his fault. She was the inspiration behind Satyagraha as she would often take recourse to fasting during domestic conflicts. Thus Gandhi acknowledged her in his words as, “Her determined resistance to my will on the one hand and her quiet submission to my stupidity on the other hand, ultimately made me ashamed of myself.... In the end she became my ‘teacher’ in non-violence. And what I did in South Africa was but an extension of the rule of Satyagraha she practised in her life.” ^v

B. Gandhi on the Eradication of Malpractices against Women

Gandhi believed that there was no hope for emancipation of India till her women-folk remains un-emancipated. He believed that men and women are equally important in shaping the future of a country and roles of both genders if come together could really give way to ‘Ram Rajya’. He wanted women to be free from all kinds of discrimination. So, he opposed the curses of discrimination like female-feticide, dowry system and also appealed to people that both genders have functional roles in the society. He was also against female illiteracy and in favour of women-education. He believed that ignorance was responsible for the derogatory status of women in society and thus advocated for their education. Regarding **child-marriages**, he perceived that child marriages never cared about the consent of the bride and the groom. Further, tender age is not meant for mature physical and mental behaviors. These also lead to deprivation on the part of the girls and that child-rearing in childhood is inhuman. Next, he despised the custom of **dowry** in marriages as it was against equality. He advised the parents of the girls to educate them and thereby making them realize their worth so that they may refuse to marry men who demanded dowry. He wanted the masses to raise voice against this and proposed that such men who demand dowry should be excommunicated. He was also against the system of ‘**Purdah**’ as he believed that ‘Swaraj’ became more difficult to achieve as women’s movements were restricted. He appealed to public in general and women in

particular to tear down 'Purdah'. Apart from this, Gandhi was deeply saddened by the plight of the child widows. He requested their parents that they should not treat harshly with them. For the adult ones, he proposed that they should be given right to show their opinion towards re-marriage. He wanted to ensure equal rights of re-marriage for the widows and widowers. He was also against 'Sati' system and believed that it was a custom to satisfy ego of men. Instead of following this custom he preferred to create opportunities for adding further knowledge and to cultivate renunciation and self discipline. He believed that wives were not subjects but equal partners in marriage and thus opposed the ill-practice of **polygamy**. He even advised women to raise their voice against the wrong deeds of their husbands and not follow them blindly. Regarding the protection of women from **molestation**, he advocated self-defence practices for women without indulging in violence. With regards to prostitution, he considered it as a social disease or moral leprosy. He urged to give up such profession and learn the art of using 'Khadi'. He wanted to ensure social acceptance, education and employment for such women.^{vi}

C. Women in Gandhian Movements

The 'Khadi' and 'Satyagraha' movements along with the other movements of Mahatma Gandhi were not only the symbols of political revolution but in reality, they were ideas or ways of life conceived and aimed to bring uniformity of spirit in the nationalist movement of the country by eradicating the distinctions of class, caste and even gender.

Gandhi felt that the 'Khadi' industry would not only be a medium of showing disregard for foreign cloth but it would also play a pivotal role in socializing women by bringing them out of their domestic drudgeries and oppression into the mainstream of freedom struggle. He remarked, "I swear by this form of Swadeshi (khadi) because through it I can provide work to the semi-starved, semi-employed women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn, and to clothe the people of India with Khadi which will take the impoverished women out of it."^{vii}

At the beginning of Civil Disobedience movement, Gandhi did not want women to be part of it. He thought that participation of women could be taken as an act of cowardice as the Englishmen would not touch women just as Hindus who do not kill cows. But, he had planned to make the women join the constructive programme meant for the betterment of the Indians. He wanted women to be the "Satyagrahis, so that they could participate in picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops but in case of Salt Satyagraha he did not want women to join in active demonstrations. Margaret Cousins wrote to him in protest of this and many women who were then inspired with the principles of equality also showed resentment. (Venkatraman, 2019)^{viii} This eventually led to participation of women in Satyagraha. It is reported that out of around 30,000 persons who were arrested during the Salt Satyagraha were 17000 women volunteers. Thus, women participation considerably increased in Indian nationalism during the movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Women activities were remarkably noticed in picketing of liquor, opium and foreign cloth shops during the 30s. Aristocratic women of that era were found to discard luxurious adornments and

jewelleries and joining the protest marches to prison, clad in handspun-Khadi and hand-made chappals. The names of a few exemplary women associated with the Gandhian movements are Kamala Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, Anasuya Sarabhai, Sushila Nayyar and Miraben.^{ix} This is why it has been rightly observed that, “His civil disobedience campaigns brought about, in a dramatic manner, the entry of women in large numbers into the public life of India. These became the starting points of women’s emancipation in our land.” (Bose, 1971)^x

Gandhi was deeply inspired by the words of Sarojini Naidu in her speech given at the time of becoming the 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 women as the “mother”. It was believed by him that it would go a long way in India’s development.^{xi}

D. Gandhi and the Education of Women

Gandhi believed that Sarvodaya (Welfare of all) could be attained through “Antyodaya” which means welfare of all could only be realized through transforming the roles of the weakest ones. This implied welfare of women also as they were among the most marginalized sections of the society. This is why Gandhi wanted education to play an important role in transforming the roles of women in society. He stated that women are companions and equals to men and not inferior. He also tried to suggest that men and women are equal in rank but they are not identical. Instead, he regarded them as being supplementary to one another, where each helps the other and that without the existence of one, the life of other cannot be conceived. Gandhi particularly stated that while framing scheme of women’s education this point must be considered. According to him supremacy of men in outward activities and of women in the household affairs should be kept in mind while providing educational opportunities to both the genders. However, he did not believe in maintaining watertight compartments in the field of education to keep any of the genders outside the purview of any particular discipline but in reality he suggested that unless courses of instruction are prepared keeping in mind these basic principles the fullest life of man and woman cannot be accomplished. Further, Gandhi also shared his views on imparting Education of English to women. He opined that “To introduce English education in schools meant for women could only lead to prolonging our helplessness.” He was not against English education but he believed that the few women who developed a taste for English. Literature could be provided such provisions in the schools for men. His reason behind this belief was that the same pleasure could be obtained at less cost and trouble if a more natural method was followed. Thus he said, “The world is full of many a gem of priceless beauty, but then these gems are not at all of English setting. Other language can well boast of production of similar excellence all these should be made available for our common people and that can only be done if our learned men will undertake to translate them for us in our own language.” (M.K.Gandhi, 1933)^{xii} Gandhi also stated some points regarding co-education. He was of the opinion that to run such a system of education we must begin with the changes in our families first. For this, he suggested that boys and girls should be provided

opportunities of growing together at homes freely and naturally. In this way, co-education will come by itself.^{xiii}

E. Criticism against Gandhi's Philosophy on Women

It is being observed regarding the history of freedom struggle of India that Gandhi basically wanted to assign the passive role of a nurturant to women and not active role in the demonstrations. This is particularly understood by going through Gandhi's views on the role of women where they are inspired to embody the virtues of the mythological Sita, Draupadi and the like. Further, by doing so, he also confined the strength of women to the passive realm of "moral and spiritual courage." For him, women were embodiments of suffering and sacrifice essentially made up of exemplary virtues. It seems that there was little scope for alternative forms of female strength which is particularly expressed in his preference towards dichotomy which assigned stereotyped role to men and women. However, with repeated appeals eminent women like Khurshedben Naoroji, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Margaret Cousins later got the chance of accompanying Gandhi in the Dandi March. Next, it is also being said that he only allowed a handful of women into political representation. In reality, these women were taken up as model for others and that is why they mentored the education of poor women to passive resistant approaches such as spinning. Apart from this, it is also observed that in Gandhi ashrams too, women were given 'service' roles only and had little access to decision-making.^{xiv}

F. Implications of Gandhi's Philosophy on Women in Shaping a Self-Reliant India

With the present century advancing in every field of life, it feels extremely worrisome to see that the condition of women in Indian is still not at par with their male counterparts. The relevance of Gandhi's philosophy on women, thus cannot be negated as there are ample possibilities of intervening with the current problems related to women. With the harsh statistics discovered by the population Research Institute in India, it has been found that around 15.8 million girls went missing due to pre-natal gender selection between 1990 and 2018.^{xv} Gandhi used to believe that women are not inferior to men and so he shall always remain relevant in the discourse of gender equality. His ideas on the equality of genders could go a long way in promoting equal regard for the sons and daughters.

Again the stark reality of child marriages still continues to prevail in the country. According to a study of UNICEF in 2017, 27% of females are married before attaining the age of 18 years and 7% before reaching 7th birthday.^{xvi} Gandhi's concern towards children's predicament of early marriages finds special consideration here. His disregard for the early marriage of girls by highlighting the risks of serious factors like deprivation of education and health-hazards are some of the points that deserve special mention here. By creating awareness against these concerns among the parents of the girls through different mediums, changes could be expected in the mindset of such people.

Among the most inhuman customs undergoing in the name of marriages in India, the problem of dowry is perhaps the first in list. It is disheartening to see that the National Crime Bureau of India recorded nearly 7000 deaths linked to dowry in 2017. Also, the trends show that nearly 20 women in India die every day due to harassments of dowry.^{xvii} Gandhi's urges to the parents of the girls to educate them and to make them aware of self- dignity is very important to be followed in this regard. His thought that educated girls should themselves fight against dowry by rejecting the demanding grooms needs to be followed to eradicate this social evil.

Also, the cases of sexual violence against women in India are rising with each passing day making the condition of women more deplorable. It has been reported in a study of National Health Survey, that 30% of women in the age group of 15-49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15.^{xviii} Gandhi's perception of 'women as mother' finds apt relevance in dealing with these issues. The preaching of Mahatma that speak for the revered status of women as expressed through his thoughts and practices needs to be inculcated into the social and cultural milieu of the nation thereby attempting a change in the outlook of men towards women. This could be done through various curricular and co-curricular interventions right from the formative years in school till the formation of ethical principles in adulthood through different cultural activities in the institutions of study as well as work.

All these steps, if taken towards could promote dignity of women in the country. Gandhi's aim of social reconstruction through the emancipation of women could be realized chiefly through self dependence of women. For that, re-orienting education system and promoting self-reliance in the lives of marginalized women like rural ones, women belonging to geographically and culturally isolated zones and also poor women need to be emphasized. Gandhi's concern for the rehabilitation of sex workers through training them in handicrafts could also be opted as an important measure to curb the inhuman profession of prostitution among women. If with time these interventions are employed in the lives of affected population of females, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country could be boosted up and shaping the future of a self-reliant India would be easier with 'the noble sex' walking hand in hand alongside the men.

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