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## Considerations for Women: Gandhian Ideology on Womanhood

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### ABSTRACT

Gandhian ideology is the set of religious and social ideas adopted and developed by Father of the Nation - Mahatma Gandhi and is based on two pillars – Truth and Non-violence. The principles of 'Satyagraha' - nonviolent resistance, 'Sarvodaya' - progress of all, 'Swaraj' - self-restraint and self-rule and 'Swadeshi' - self-sufficiency are its outcome. Empowerment of women and their political, social, economic and health status are the most important goals of any nation. It is also important for achieving sustainable development. Mahatma Gandhi was a social and political reformer and he strongly struggled for this purpose. The present paper discusses the efforts made by him for the upliftment and empowerment of women. It is the finding that Gandhi emphasised that women empowerment is necessary for nation building and three important factors that can promote it: education, employment and changes in social structure. These three components are equally important and mutually related. He believed that unless women gain their respect in social, economic and political fields on the basis of education, knowledge and skills, they cannot gain self-respect for themselves nor they can be independent in any field. It is concluded that throughout his life, Mahatma Gandhi inspired Indians to take concrete and practical initiatives about the empowerment of women, which would bring them out of the centuries-old orthodox customs, rituals and rules of society which along with their social slavery have been responsible for mental enslavement. Her views regarding women empowerment are also relevant in the contemporary scene and scenario when the empowerment of women has been in the national agenda.

**Key Words:** Women Empowerment, Gandhian Ideology, Nation Building

### INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women and their political, social, economic and health status are the most important goals of any nation. Also, it is important for achieving sustainable development. Fundamentally the contribution and participation of both men and women is essential for a complete family which includes shared responsibilities for production, reproduction, child rearing and housekeeping.

Mahatma Gandhi was a social and political reformer and he strongly struggled for women empowerment. He often used to say that he would like to be born either as an untouchable or a woman. These two symbolised for him the oppressed and suppressed section of humanity.<sup>[1]</sup> He played an important role in eradicating the social evils against the women in the country. He strongly believed that a society can develop rapidly if people of all classes, rich and poor, upper and lower caste people and men

and women all come together. In this way, their ideology is related to humanity and Indian society, which directly or indirectly affects the status of women in India.

Gandhi always emphasized on women empowerment. In a letter written to Princess Amrit Kaur from Wardha on October 21, 1936, he wrote, "If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave-holder myself but 'Ba' proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?"<sup>[2]</sup>

In this way, Gandhi devoted himself to this goal and offered views on all aspects of political, social and domestic and even very personal life of a woman. He laid greater emphasis on the role of women in the political, economic and social freedom of the country. Under his guidance and leadership, women came out of their homes and joined India's struggle for independence. The present paper discusses the efforts made by Mahatma Gandhi for the upliftment and empowerment of women.

### **GANDHIAN IDEOLOGY**

Gandhian ideology is the set of religious and social ideas adopted and developed by Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi and is based on two pillars – Truth and Non-violence. The principles of 'Satyagraha' - nonviolent resistance, 'Sarvodaya' - progress of all, 'Swaraj' - self-restraint and self-rule and 'Swadeshi' - self-sufficiency are its outcome. For Gandhi, truthfulness in words and deed is relative truth, while absolute truth is God and morality - the ultimate reality. He understood Nonviolence as the highest law of humankind which is just opposite pole to violence i.e., active love along with mere peacefulness or the absence of overt violence.

Gandhian philosophy is not only simultaneously social, political and religious; it is also traditional and modern, and simple and complex, as besides numerous western influences, it is rooted in ancient Indian culture. Gandhian ideology emphasises on practical idealism, as it is a double-edged weapon. It aims to transform the individual and society simultaneously according to the principles of truth and non-violence.

Barack Obama, the former President of USA, says that in my life, I have always looked to Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration, because he embodies the kind of transformational change that can be made when ordinary people come together to do extraordinary things.<sup>[3]</sup>

### **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND GANDHI'S IDEOLOGY**

Woman, according to Gandhi, is an incarnation of 'Ahinsa' which means love and infinite capacity for suffering. Gandhi had observed his wife and mother quietly resisting their exploitation at home. He admitted that he learnt the method of 'Satyagrah' from them and he thereby put into practice as a major strategy to rebel against exploitation against British.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, he believed that an empowered women can make changes at the revolutionary stage.

Mahatma Gandhi believed there are three important factors that promote women empowerment: education, employment and changes in social structure. The three components are equally important and mutually related. His views on various aspects of women's empowerment are as follows:

## Gender Equality

Gender equality means the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men should be considered equal and valued. This does not at all mean that women and men have to become equal, rather their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born as men or women.

In this direction, Gandhi said that nature has gifted women with equal mental abilities, so they too have equal rights. However, on the basis of customs, ignorant and unauthorized men are enjoying superiority over women.<sup>[5]</sup> Women should not fall prey to any legal disabilities that men do not suffer from. Both are completely the same. Women should not spontaneously retreat from a task that belongs to men. Nature has created the sexes as a complement to each other. Their works are defined as their forms.<sup>[6]</sup> His view of equal rights for women and his high esteem can be seen in his opinion: With equal mental abilities, a talented woman is a partner of a man. She has the right to participate in the minimum details of a man's activities and has the same rights to freedom and discretion. She is entitled to the highest position in her field of activity as men.<sup>[7]</sup>

Gandhi believed in the ability, strength as well as talent inherent in women, so he wanted them to not only be considered important as housewives but society would take full advantage of their hidden abilities.

## Women Education

Promoting women education provides a great opportunity for India to grow more socially and economically. Educated women are weapons that positively impact Indian society through their contribution in the home and business sectors. They can be the reason for better condition of the country as well as society.

According to Gandhi, education enables women to get their natural rights. Man and woman are complementary to each other. Man is supreme in external activities and therefore he should have maximum knowledge. Domestic life is purely a woman's field and therefore women should have more knowledge in domestic affairs, children's upbringing and education. Unless the training method is based on a prudent appreciation of these basic principles, a full life of man and woman cannot be developed.<sup>[6]</sup>

In this way, he considered women education not only as a medium for their own empowerment but also for the progress of a family and the upbringing of children.

## Economic Upliftment of Women

Economic empowerment of women is absolutely essential for sustainable development and achieving the millennium development goals. Economic empowerment is also a right of women. This is not possible in the form of a quick solution, but this objective can be met with appropriate policies and plans as well as a holistic approach and long-term commitment.

As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned, Gandhi felt that the economic self-sufficiency of women is very important for the development of society and nation. Women in rural areas may be associated with public cottage and small scale industries such as spinning and broom, basket and rope making and oil processing etc. so that rural women can supplement their family income by their contribution. Thus, the empowerment of women should be done to improve the quality of society and the development of the economy.<sup>[7]</sup>

Therefore, he insists on the economic self-sufficiency of all women, whether they are educated or illiterate. In this direction, he has considered skill development as the key.

## Protest Social Evils

Culture is the pride of any nation or society in which traditions play a very important role. Indian culture and traditions have been unique since the beginning, but from time to time it has also merged many evils such as child marriage, widowhood, dowry, 'parda pratha', 'sati pratha' and prostitution etc.

Although Gandhi respected the traditions of the country very much, but he realized that some of the customs and traditions of Indian society were anti-policy towards the development of women of the nation. Mahatma Gandhi said, it is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but drowning in them is suicide.<sup>[7]</sup>

Thus, he was completely against social customs, traditions, norms, values and social evils which are a threat to social development.

**Opposition to Female Infanticide:** Gandhi was against female infanticide. He found that the girl's birth was usually unwanted because she had to get married and live and work in her marital home.<sup>[8]</sup> Another reason was the dowry system which made the girls a liability to their parents. He clearly believed that world needs the birth of girls, along with the boys. People should not make any difference between son and daughter and both should be welcomed equally.

Thus he believed that the evil of female infanticide is rooted in orthodox thinking and dowry and must be changed.

**Disapproval to Child Marriage:** The custom of child marriage became a target of Gandhi's criticism. According to him, marriage is a rite. It is a natural phenomenon in life.<sup>[6]</sup> Mahatma Gandhi advised the youths not to marry for 25 or 30 years. He gave priority to arranged marriage, but if the age of the young man is more than 25 years, then it was necessary for the parents to seek advice from him.<sup>[9]</sup>

Gandhi not only opposed child marriage but also advised the youth to marry at an age in which they can participate fully with the family in their marriage decision.

**Disagreement to 'Parda' System:** Gandhi thought that piousness could not be protected by making 'parda' walls around. It must develop from within and it must be able to resist every desired temptation. Why all this sickness about female identity? Have women said anything about male identity? The purity of woman or man cannot be imputed externally. It is a matter of developing from inside and thus is a personal self-effort.<sup>[4]</sup>

He considered the 'parda' system to be a completely redundant barrier to the social mobility and development of women and presented the idea that identity is an internal fact that develops from self-power.

**Condemnation to Dowry System:** Gandhi called dowry marriages as 'heartless marriages'. According to him dowry system is a product of caste system. Elimination of caste will eradicate dowry. Demanding dowry is equivalent to discrediting femininity. Youth seeking dowry should be ostracized. Parents of girls should avoid the glare of English degrees and should not hesitate to venture out of their small castes and provinces to obtain honest gentlemen for their daughters.<sup>[6]</sup>

Gandhi opposes the dowry system as well as the caste system and its limitations. For the elimination of these evils, he has encouraged inter-caste marriages.

**Discontentment to 'Sati Pratha':** Gandhi considered the practice of 'sati' as unfair, immoral and absurd because if a wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, so the husband has to prove his loyalty and dedication to his wife also, but it is never heard that a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his dead wife.<sup>[10]</sup> He believed that self-immolation on the pyre of the husband is gross ignorance as to the nature of soul which is immortal, unchangeable and imminent. It completely emancipates itself from earthly bondage. He suggested women to prove their 'Sateetva' not by the mounting the funeral pyre but by renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and the dedication to the service of her husband and his family and the country.

In this way, he not only opposed the 'sati practice', but also reminded women of their duties to the family and the nation, which will be fulfilled when they are alive.

**Resistance to Prostitution and 'Devdasi Pratha':** Mahatma Gandhi believed that prostitution is a moral leprosy. Mahatma Gandhi once said, whether they are known as 'Devadasis' or by other names, the problem is the same. It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow of deep humiliation that many women have to sell their chastity for the lust of men.<sup>[11]</sup> He said that men should hang their heads in shame, as long as there is a single woman who is dedicated to our lust. He gave a solution to overcome this terrible disease by living a pious and simple life with 'charkha'.

Thus, Gandhi however did not condemn prostitution, which was forced to live a life of sin. In his opinion, the men who visited these places were equally responsible for this evil. In his opinion, if this profession spread, the men would be as fallen as the women.

**Support to Widow Remarriage:** Gandhi believed that widowhood, imposed by religion or custom, is an unbearable burden and defiles the house by hidden demerits and violates religion. To save Hinduism, bound widowhood must be stopped. Child widows should be duly and properly married, not remarried. In fact, she was never married.<sup>[6]</sup>

In this way, Gandhi openly opposed child marriage and imposed legalism and refused to obey them. He inspired the society to take the initiative of reviving the women who were suffering by social evils.

### Decision Rights to Women

Women empowerment is possible only when the needs and ideas of women are respected and the right to take decisions in different aspects of life is given to them as well as men. Indian society has always been a patriarchal society in which rights of decision making at the level of family to nation were given to men.

Gandhi believed that women should be given equal rights in decision making. He said that men who suffer from paralysis on one side of the body cannot do any work. Similarly, if women do not take part in the work of men, then the country is ready to live in a pathetic state. Overall, he wanted that man and woman should have a peaceful co-existence. He wanted to change attitudes, values, and beliefs in favour of women.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Antagonism to Domestic Violence:** Mahatma Gandhi has criticized bad behaviour and cruelty towards women. They believed that the wives should not be dolls and objects of enjoyment, but should be regarded as respected companions in common service. Non-literate women should be educated by their husbands. The customary and legal status of women is poor and demands necessary change.<sup>[6]</sup>

He believed that women should raise their own voice against all forms of exploitation against them, including domestic violence. He encouraged the men to participate in the upliftment of women by abandoning such illusions.

**Right to Family Planning:** Gandhi said that sexual relations are only for creation. Any other use of it is a sin against God and humanity. The woman should be taught the art of saying no to her husband. She has rights and duties together. The first thing is to free her from mental slavery, to teach the purity of her body, nationality and service to humanity.<sup>[6]</sup>

Gandhi considered the use of a medium for family planning to be wrong, rather he calls it to be established by self-control in which he has considered the decision of women to be important.

**Right to Break the Relationship:** According to Gandhi, marriage does not confer the right on one partner to demand obedience by the other. However, divorce is not the only option. Marriage is a state of discipline. When one partner breaks discipline, the other can break the bond. The breakup here should be in dutifulness and not physical. It prevents divorce. Hinduism considers each to be exactly the same as the other. Hinduism gives the person complete freedom to self-interview, for which he or she is born alone.<sup>[6]</sup>



In this way, Gandhi, without taking a legal divorce and family separation, motivates women and men equally to oppose exploitation at the family level.

### **Women's Self Defence**

Self-defence has a great importance in the kind of world we are living in today, especially for women. It is generally believed that women referred to as weaker sex can be easily targeted. As cases of sexual violence are increasing over time, self-defence has become more important than ever for women.

Gandhi said that it is impossible to actually defile a woman against her will. A detestable act occurs only when she takes the path of fear or does not realize her moral strength. When a woman is assaulted, her primary duty is self-protection. God has given her nails and teeth. She should use them with all her force and die in an effort if needed.<sup>[6]</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi, who was a priest of non-violence, reminded the woman of all forms of power to protect her identity whether it is moral strength or physical force.

### **Women in Political Sector**

Gandhi wanted women to get voting rights and equal status to men.<sup>[12]</sup> He did not want women to be banned from any activity for which men had freedom. He called upon women to join the Indian National Congress and participate in the freedom struggle. She raised women politically through her speeches, writings and personal examples. Due to his efforts, the participation of women in the freedom movement became possible because of which the presence of women in the public sector in India was accepted. This was possible because men folk knew that respect for their women was safe in a non-violent struggle directed by Gandhi.<sup>[13]</sup>

Thus, due to Gandhi influence, women were allowed to enter political life because they chose a particular form of struggle, which is favourable for women. Therefore, it was only due to his efforts that women realized that the political field is not limited to men only.

### **Women's Own Participation in Empowerment**

The empowerment, development and welfare of any section of the society is possible only when the people of that class themselves take part in that efforts because in their identification at all levels, identifying the problem and presenting it to the society and the nation etc. Self-participation is always important.

Gandhi firmly believed that only women should lead organizations dedicated to women's empowerment. He knew it from his own experiences that the real progress and empowerment of women is possible only through their own efforts. It is well known that human rights violations of women have often been neglected in issues related to debate, discussion and decision due to the absence of women in the related organizations. Gandhi was aware of this problem long back and hence he always emphasized the role of women in decision making process.<sup>[7]</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi was impressed by the life of both his mother and wife. While living with her, he practically realized that women play the supreme role in women empowerment.

### **Women Empowerment and Nation Building**

Empowerment of women is essential for the all-round development of any nation and it directly or indirectly plays an important role in improving the social and economic condition of the nation. To achieve better quality governance, it is necessary to protect the interests of women and their unbiased representation at various decision-making levels of government structure.

Mahatma Gandhi said that there will be real independence and women's independence, when the girl would walk in the streets during midnight.<sup>[1]</sup> Gandhi had a clear ideology that the empowerment of

women is not only a moral imperative but also an imperative to strengthen the democratic tradition and fight against injustice and oppression. In early 1919, while addressing a women's gathering in Bombay, she expressed her sentiments: Until women in India participate equally with men in world affairs and events and in religious and political matters, we will not be able to achieve all-round development of India.<sup>[7]</sup>

From the independence of the country to the all-round development of the country, Gandhi has considered the social economic progress of women and their own participation very important.

## CONCLUSION

Empowerment of women is the most important issue of the current century. However, in fact the empowerment of women is still an illusion. In everyday life it can be seen how women fall prey to various social evils. Our Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi made some efforts in this area a century ago and showed the way for women empowerment and the development of the status of women. Gandhi believed that unless women gain their respect in social, economic and political fields on the basis of education, knowledge and skills, they cannot gain self-respect for themselves nor they can be independent in any field. Throughout his life, Gandhi inspired Indians to take concrete and practical initiatives about the education of women, which would bring them out of the centuries-old orthodox customs, rituals and rules of society which along with their social slavery have been responsible for mental enslavement. Her views regarding women empowerment are also relevant in the contemporary scene and scenario when the empowerment of women has been in the national agenda.

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