

POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY AND GANDHI'S PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Gandhi with his belief in Non Violence was against all inequality in any walk of life, political, economic or social. He held that inequality ultimately led to exploitation, which for him was violence. Also he held that all work socially useful is of equal worth, whether that of a scavenger, a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant or a minister. Hence work should get, if not equal, at least equitable remuneration. In his ashram, all the inmates engaged in physical or intellectual work, were treated as equals and everyone was provided with facilities according to his or her needs.

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The status of women in any society is a true index of its cultural, social, religious and spiritual levels. A problem of paramount importance both in ethics and sociology of a people is the status assigned to women in social life. Hindu tradition has generally respected womanhood, though occasionally we find derogatory references to women. The history of ancient India may be said to commence from the period during which the Rig Veda was composed, in Rig Veda we find a great literary movement of hoary antiquity, containing a code of ethical life reflecting the thoughts and aspirations of the people. Vedic literature which is the prime source of all cultural manifestations in Indian depicts a vivid picture of ancient Indian woman hoodⁱⁱ.

One way to judge the state of a nation is to study the status of its women. In reality the status of women represents of standard of culture of any age. The social status of the women of a country symbolizes the social spirit of the age.ⁱⁱⁱ However, to draw a conclusion about the position of women is a difficult and complicated problem. It is, therefore, necessary to trace this position in the historical perspective. In the course of Indian history from prehistoric to modern times there were distinct stages of the rise and fall in the status and role of women. The literature on Indian history abounds with contradictory and conflicting views on the status of women. It can properly be understood within the socio cultural condition of the society. As Mazumdar has rightly said, The status of women in India can be more understood in the Indian ethnology than in that of religion or Brahmanism....^{iv}

The status enjoyed by the Indian woman cannot easily be assessed. The literature on Indian History abounds with contradictory and conflicting views on the status of women. It can properly be understood within the socio- cultural condition of the society. According to Mehta, there are recorded evidence to show that women were not always without rights nor was she constantly in subjection. There is however, greater evidence

to show that the contrary was equally true; for many centuries her position continued to be one in which she did not have either legal or social rights to make her independent of the family into which she was born or married^v. The changes that have taken place in their position are a part of the process of transformation of a traditional society. While the 'ideal' was worshipped, the 'real' was neglected. Cormack asserts. Traditional India has always accorded woman a high place and indeed equality.^{vi}

Gorwaney also observes that, Ideally, women were accepted as a living force in society, the embodiment of 'Shakti' and a symbol of purity, religiousness, spirituality and sacrifice.^{vii} In practice, however, they were subjected to suppression, many deprivations and were exploited by men. They were denied equal rights in marital, familial, social, educational, economic and political fields. They were assigned a sub-ordinate status.

Woman is *sabala not abala*, believed Gandhi and accordingly envisioned country's freedom with their active participation. In fact, he was convinced that women's involvement and participation was necessary for accomplishing the onerous task of national regeneration and rejuvenation. Not surprisingly, women whose activities were hitherto confined to the four walls of their homes, contributed remarkably in the struggle for India's independence under Gandhi's leadership.^{viii}

However, the role of women in the freedom movement cannot be viewed in isolation from their general position in the society, as the socio-cultural practices of a given time are bound to have an impact on their life. Therefore, it may not be out of context here to review briefly their status and position in Indian society before discussing their active participation in the nationalist movement. ^{ix}The changes that have taken place in their position are a part of the process of transformation of a traditional society.

The most authoritative text on this subject is the *Rig Veda*, the primary root from which sprang all the later developments of Hinduism, its many sects, schools and religious systems. As a matter of fact the *Rig Veda* contains the seeds and sources from which the entire course of Hindu thoughts through the ages has been derived and flowed in so many streams. The *Rig Veda* shows abundant evidence pointed to the fact that women were fully the equals of men as regards access to and capacity for the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of the absolute Brahma. The *Rig Veda* contains hymns which were revealed by women seers^x.

Altekar argues that the position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age is much better than what we ordinarily expect it to have been. He further says that even before the Aryans came to India in about 2000 B.C., there is evidence to believe that Indian women shared a responsible position with men and played an important role in evolving a definite culture and tradition. Their status excelled that of the contemporary civilization of ancient Greece, Rome and even early Christianity.^{xi}

At the dawn of civilization during the Vedic age, position of women was considered to be fairly satisfactory. The society as a whole showed proper concern and respect for women allowing them considerable freedom in different activities of the social and political life.^{xii} They used to visit fairs and festivals, attend important assemblies and take part in state functions without hindrances.^{xiii}

The position of women in society can be judged by the way in which the birth of a girl was received. We do find a frequent longing for a male child in the *Rigveda*, while during the Vedic age; there were some parents who would perform *Kanyasraddhas* on the second day of the moon; for the blessing of getting learned and capable daughters. The *Rigveda* praises the father of many daughters. Besides, it was recommended that *Matrika-puja* should take place first; the '*kumari puja*' was to be performed at the end of all Vedic rituals.^{xiv}

In the matter of education, the daughter was not distinguished from the son. Initiation of girls was common. Girls were educated like boys. Like their brothers, the girls wore the sacred thread (*Upavita-*

Dharana) and used to pass through a period of *Brahmacharya*. After this *Upavita* ceremony, the Vedic women carried on the study of the Vedas, recited Vedic mantras, performed Vedic rites and rituals; undertook Vedic vows and did whatever was necessary for the proper performance of yagayajna, just like a son. Various hymns of the *Rig Veda* were composed by women, endowed with extraordinary intellectual qualities. Famous composer of *Rig Veda* was Viswavara and Iopamudra.^{xv}

The marriages of girls used to take place at the age of understanding i.e., between 14 to 17 years and that, too, with their consent. There were also many instances of love marriages. It can be concluded that both men and women had considerable freedom in selecting their partners though parents often arranged a suitable match.^{xvi} The social or familiar status of the daughter was fairly satisfactory in the *Rig Vedic* period.

The Vedic society was patriarchal and male-dominated and a man had almost absolute power over his wife and children. The household was ruled by a household, who wielded almost absolute control over all other members of the family and to him his wife or wives were bound by a strict tie of life-long duty and obedience.^{xvii} Marriage, in fact, was a religious necessity for both men and women, but neither could reach heaven without being accompanied by his or her duty married spouse. Her social status was not only of a loving wife but also of a loving mother. She was described by the Vedic sages as an ornament of the home. Her social status was of an absolute equality with man in the eyes of religion.^{xviii}

The *Dharmashastra* has raised a chaste wife to the rank of a Goddess. Out of love and veneration, she has been placed above the father and teacher. The Panchatantra mentions that the maintenance of a home is known by the culture of the wife, without her, a home is like a dreary forest. Rigveda accords a high position to woman. As a mother the Vedic woman held a far more venerable position than a man as the father.^{xix}

Though the Hindus of the Vedic period had a patriarchal society, the women in general didn't suffer from disadvantages, which are a characteristic of later periods. Altekar argues, the position which women occupied in Hindu society at the dawn of civilization during the *Vedic age* is much better than what we ordinarily accept it to have been.^{xx} There is almost a consensus of opinion among great scholars of classical literature that during the age of the *Rig Veda* a woman's status was equivalent to that of man. We do not find any reference to sati or burning of widows in *Rig Veda*. On the other hand, Vedic hymns refer to the remarriage of widows rather than their self-immolation.... She was however, asked to come down and a prayer was offered that she be granted a prosperous life enjoying the bliss of children and wealth.^{xxi}

Women also took part in the intellectual and spiritual life of the community. Sacrifices were performed and oblations offered to the deities, jointly by the husband and wife. Some of the hymns were composed by women. Many of them became distinguished poetesses. Vishavara, Apala, Lopamudra, Ghosha, Indrani and Sachi are mentioned among others as composers of hymns.^{xxii}

Child marriage was unknown. Women could grow old in their parents' houses without public censure. Ghosha, the woman seer was unmarried and lived in her father's house. In case a man had an only daughter she was considered as good as a son and was not given away in marriage to another household. Ordinarily, a daughter did not have any right to hold, acquire or dispose of property, but the unmarried daughter who stayed on in her father's house got a share of his property.^{xxiii}

Women had the right of free movement. Women as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers had equally honoured places in the family, society and state alike. Thus, in all aspects they had equal rights with men and were their equal partners, friends, and helpers all through. The Vedic Period is aptly summed up in the words of Shakuntla Rao Shastri: women were regarded with due respect in every sphere of life and she was not subject to

any of the merciless laws of an unsympathetic society. Even when she overstepped moral laws, she was judged with sympathy. There was no discrimination between the male and the female in the anger of the gods^{xxiv}.

There were gradual changes in the position of women in *later Vedic* period. As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the *later Vedic* period women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriage also came into existence.^{xxv} The main reason for this was the development of certain notion, which led to the belief that sons alone were competent to redeem their parents from hell and daughters, were incapable of performing this spiritual function. Women was considered important only as long as she was able to bear sons. The Atharva Veda says that as for daughters, the gods were requested to give them elsewhere.^{xxvi}

With the lapse of time the position of the daughter also changes. The universal desire was for sons and the birth of a daughter was considered a misfortune. Social condemnation was becoming very strict on erring women. The important branches of later Vedic literature were the Atharva Veda, Brahmanas and Upanishads. The Brahmanas are generally more unfavourable towards women. In these texts we come across people who have started disposing of their unwanted daughters in infancy. But the Atharva Veda is not as harsh as the Brahmanas on women. Though the Atharva Veda does not favour the birth of daughters, there is no mention of infanticide.^{xxvii}

Though sons were generally preferred the desire for having a learned daughter was still there. Altekark points out, the reason why daughters were relatively less unpopular in ancient India during the early centuries are not difficult to understand. They could be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to gods; the son was not absolutely necessary for this purpose. The marriage of the daughter was not a difficult problem; the daughter herself often solved it. The dread of the possible widowhood did not very much weigh upon the mind of parents; for levirate and remarriage were allowed by society and were fairly common.^{xxviii}

During the post Vedic period there were perceptible changes in the women's status due to various reasons, among which the most important was the denial of education to the girls. During this period there was a gradual decline in women's education. Girls were not allowed to go to the houses of the preceptor or centres of education but were taught only by near relatives like father, brother or the uncle. Therefore, only the girls of rich and cultured families received religious and other training. As a result, there appeared a tendency to curtail the religious rights and privileges of women in general^{xxix}.

The desire to get a son to provide for the future, become quite intense and daughters came to be looked upon as encumbrances and the marriage age of the girls continued to be at around 16. They had some voice in the selection of their life partners. Love marriages were also common. Among the Kshatriyas, Swayamvara was fairly common in practice. The social and familial stats of the daughter deteriorated in the post-Vedic period. Her proprietary right was also the same as it was in the Vedic age. Even so far as her right in the separate property of the father was concerned, she was not altogether ignored.^{xxx}

In this period women lost their importance as partner of men in public activities, they came to be honoured merely as mothers. The reason for the deterioration of their status was the inter marriages between the Aryans and the Dravidians. The non Aryan wife, with her ignorance of the Sanskrit language and Hindu religion, obviously could not enjoy the same religious privileges as the Aryan consort^{xxxi}.

The children by the second marriage of a widow were given a social as well as religious status. Child widows, therefore, married without fear of social ostracism. During this period Niyoga was preferred to widow re-marriage. The custom of widow burning came into existence around 400 A.D. Though there are instances of

widows surviving their husbands and offering them funeral oblations, on the whole the position of widows was not so honourable before this period.^{xxxii}

The discontinuance of *Upanayana*, the neglect of education and lowering of the marriage age produced disastrous consequences regarding the position and status of women. Early marriage became a hindrance in the education of girls. Women came to be regarded as being of the same status the *Sudra*. During this period on the one hand women was being idealised and on the other she was given a very degraded status.^{xxxiii}

The appearance of Buddhism and Jainism brought some improvement in the situation of women. Both Buddhism and Jainism were a revolt against the Brahminical tyranny. The founder of both these sects were *Kshatriya* princes who lived in the sixth century B.C. the conversion of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka to Buddhism and his patronage and missionary spirit made this religion the most important one not only in India but also in the world of Asia.

The distinctive feature of Buddhism is its rejection of the infallibility of the Vedas and the efficacy of sacrificial religion. The Budha did not consider that there was much virtue in producing sons. To him it was not marrying and multiplying that marked the higher man but rather self control and celibacy. Neither the Budha nor his followers considered marriage as an inviolable sacrament. It was a secular arrangement and either partner was free to leave the home and take to religious life. The Budha does not seem to have had a very high opinion of women. At first he was not even prepared to found an order for nuns. Ultimately he allowed it on the persistent persuasion of Ananda, his favourite disciple.

The Budha's rejection of the sacramental notion of marriage had a benevolent effects on the position of Indian women. Widows were allowed to remarry or join the nunnery. Sati was not known at the time of Budha and never flourished among the Buddhists. According to P. Thomas, Buddhism and its secular notions of marriage had held in check sati, child marriage and other pernicious institutions of medieval Hinduism in all parts of India and only after the disappearance of Buddhism from India was the field left free for Braminism to enforce these social evils^{xxxiv}.

Altekar says that the period between 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D. was one of progressive deterioration in the position of women. In the history of India, these dark and depressing days of total injustice, intolerance and inequality will remain as the darkest spot for ever. There were varied and many reasons for the deterioration or fall in the position of women. The only good thing that developed during this period was the recognition of certain proprietary rights for women.^{xxxv}

Chaudhury has stated that, women of India rose in the heights of knowledge and realization; worked with men in all spheres of life and even surpassed them in many respects, and were entitled to the fullest freedom as well as to untrammelled self-dependence and self-determination. Such bold and blessed, self-confident and independent women found themselves suddenly confined within four walls of dark and dreary homes, with their minds desolate a depressing, with almost all their fundamental birthrights totally or almost cut off. They were deprived of any rights to justice, freedom, education, equality, and were degraded domestically, socially, legally, economically, politically an in every other way. They came to be called Abala (the powerless) or '*Griha pinjara kokila*' (cuckoo of the cage of the house) and subject to the most derogatory maxim : '*Putratha Kriyate bharya*' (women has to be taken in marriage for procreation only).^{xxxvi}

The position of women in all other spheres, except the proprietary rights continued to deteriorate in this period. Most of the causes responsible for the degradation of women during the last period continued to operate in this age also. The age of marriage was fixed at eight. The Upanayana ceremony of girls was completely discontinued. The commentators were of the opinion that the parents would be committing sin, if the girl's age

exceeded eight years. Only in Kshatriya families girls were married at the age of 14 or 15. Girls of rich families, however, still received education a few of them distinguished themselves as poetesses and critics. The ignorance of most girls created a tendency among men to treat them lightly and pass cynical remarks about their weakness and worthlessness.^{xxxvii}

Medieval India was not women's age. It was supposed to be the dark age for them. Medieval India saw many foreign conquests which resulted in the decline in women's status. When foreign conquerors like Muslims invaded India they brought with them their own culture. For them women was the sole property of her father, brother or husband and she does not have any will of her own. This type of thinking also crept into the minds of Indian people and they also began to treat their women like this.^{xxxviii}

In the Muslim period, the position of women further deteriorated. Women faced a number of hardships and cruelty due to evil practices like child marriages, the purdah system, sati, widowhood, prostitution and the devadasi system. Women were excluded from succession to property and were dependent on men. As Hate mentions, the advent of the Muslims arrested the progress of Hindu civilization and an era of blind faith and perpetuation of old customs followed.^{xxxix}

Hindu women, like their Muslim counterparts, adopted the purdah. In Northern Indian this practice was very rigorously enforced. As Sridevi has stated, 'Most women, being subject to purdah, had no opportunity for education. They remained somewhere in between the two portals, with no education, no special privileges but simplicity, patience, perseverance, endurance, understanding, immense love for home and children and intense religious (inclinations) adorned them.'^{xi}

The Muslim conquest led a large scale immolation of women especially among Rajputs, who considered it a lesser evil than capture by the invaders. As Krishna Basu states, until quite recently their very existence was almost merely a bare necessity and taken to be an indispensable appendage to the male population. They were totally and forcefully subjugated to male superiority physically and intellectually.^{xii}

The Muslim invasion also led to the spread of sati among the Hindus. The Hindus who were suffering defeat after defeat felt that it was better for their wives to perish in the flames rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. The practice of 'sati' or 'Jauhar' was also quite common as well as popular particularly among the Rajputs and Marathas of Marathas of Central India.^{xiii} Thousands of women died in Jauhar during the days of the Muslim invasion of India.

After sati was well established in India it became a matter of honour with the widow to mount her husband's funeral pyre. The incentive that were dangled before a 'sati' were, as Sankha and Angirasa say, that she who follows her husband in death, dwells in heaven for 3.5 crores of years.^{xiii}

The position of the daughter in Hindu society reached its nadir. As child marriage was a popular practice of the social life of the Mughal period. Hindu daughters, too, were married before the age of nine or ten and in some cases were married even before they had learnt to talk.^{xiv}

The legal position of Hindu women with regard to inheritance was again unsatisfactory. Women were excluded from succession to property and made them dependent on men.^{xv} Due to early marriage girls were deprived of education. All these social circumstances led to the further deterioration in the position of daughters.

Along with the insecurity and uncertainty which prevailed in the Mughal period, the practice of purdah became rigid and women were forbidden even to visit the holy shrines. Both Hindu and Muslim women lost all their liberal activities and became the property of their male masters. The practice of purdah, invented to protect women, had a restrictive effect. As a result, the social life of women narrowed down.^{xvi}

Widow re-marriage was prohibited in general. Altekar says that the prohibition of widow re-marriage began to be imposed from about 1000 A.D., even on the child-widows. It was totally prohibited in Hindu society from about 1100 A.D. Initially, society upper caste widows were prohibited from re-marrying whereas lower caste widows were allowed to do so.^{xlvii}

Since the last century the lower castes, due to Sanskritisation and the desire to increase their respectability, began to impose upon themselves the prohibition of widow re-marriage. The practice of tonsuring of widows was prevalent among many high castes until recently. It is believed to have come into vogue in about the 8th century A.D. This system of tonsuring of widows is believed to have been adopted by the Brahmins under the influence of Buddhism where the Buddhist nuns underwent tonsure in imitation of the monks.^{xlviii} However, Kane suggests that a widow was tonsured just as the sons of a deceased man underwent tonsure as a matter of purification and as a symbol of bereavement.^{xlix}

From 12th century A.D. onwards the tonsure of widows became prevalent all over India. It was commoner more in the South than in the North of the country. Though the cruel practice is dying out, it is still practiced by some orthodox sects of Brahmins in southern India.^l

Once widow's marriages were prohibited, society desired to make the widow as unattractive as possible to that no man could ever want to marry her. With this idea in mind, the widow was tonsured and made to wear white clothes only. The idea might probably have been borrowed from the Buddhist or Jain nuns who wore white clothes, when they renounced the worldly life, since the widow too was supposed to have renounced the world. She was forbidden to wear any jewel. She had to sleep on the bare floor and deprived her of good health and good looks, so that even if she wanted to remarry no man came forward to do so. Even Vedvyasa opines, 'if a widow does not become a sati, she should shave her head.'ⁱⁱ

Widows had to follow strict rules and restrictions. So, they frequently preferred 'Sati' to the tiresome life prescribed for them. Most widows voluntarily ascended the funeral pyres of their husbands. This cruel custom of sati was widely practiced during this periodⁱⁱⁱ.

Coupled with the Brahmanical dislike of the enjoyment of property by women, had led to the practice of 'sati' and was intended to fight the ancient rule of civil law, which made her a tenant for life in respect of her husband's property. It is also believed that the custom came into practice due to frequent wars and foreign invasions which left behind widows who preferred to commit 'sati' to leading a life of disgrace or dishonor. However, though it started as a voluntary gesture, as time went on, many cases were reported where widows were forcibly cast into the flames of the pyre much against their will.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Several Muslim emperors discouraged 'sati' and adopted measures to prevent it as far as possible, but didn't succeed. This era led not only to the degeneration of women's physical, mental and social life, but her rights in educational, social, religious and economic fields were also lowered gradually. The legal position of Hindu women with regard to inheritance rights was also unsatisfactory. Under the doctrine of Stridhana they were generally excluded from succession to property and this led to their dependence on men.^{lv}

Denial of education produced far-reaching effects on the status and role of women. The subordinate position of women became an accepted cultural norm for the majority section of society until the beginning of the nineteenth century. From time to time, protestant movements like Buddhism, Jainism, Vaishnavism, Veerashaivism and Sikhism made sincere efforts to improve the status of women. They too regarded women as mothers and wives but necessarily inferior to men. Buddhism considered male as superior to the nuns. In Jainism though women were given a respectable position in congregational life, they were condemned severely. In the 12th century Veerashaivism permitted their women the rights to divorce and re-marriage. The Bhakti

movement also played an important role in raising the status of women by allowing them to seek spiritual solace independently. The little but powerful orthodox forces in the society erased the good effects brought about by these revolutions.^{lv}

In the history of India, the 18th century was a period of all-round decline. It was the darkest period so far as women were concerned. Political decay following the disruption of the Mughal empire and disorder due to the advent of various European powers, combined with fossilized customs, tradition, superstition and irrational bigotry, ruined the nation. Under the new conditions, women lost their independent identity. They did not enjoy a separate world of their own. Until quite recently their very existence was almost merely a bare necessity and taken to be an indispensable appendage to the male population. They were totally and forcefully subjugated to male superiority physically and intellectually.^{lvi}

There had been from very early times, a steady deterioration in the position of Indian Women down the centuries. In the latter half of the 18th century, when the British came to India, women's status had dropped to the lowest level. It was the worst period in the history of the country because of child-marriages and sati system, etc. A.L. De'Souza says, social, educational, economic and political fields they were assigned a subordinate status. The marriage ideals, power and authority exercised by the joint-family and caste system, combined with illiteracy, age-old traditions, seclusion within the four walls of the house, made it difficult for them to seek fuller personality development. They had scant personal identity and few rights.^{lvii}

According to Dube, this deterioration in the status of women brought about a number of consequences. The quote his own words, with these changes in the status of women, it was inevitable that their character and personalities should also be affected. The uneducated were considered on a level with shudras, married before their characters were fully developed, transferred from the loving and sympathetic atmosphere of the parent's house to the house of the parents-in-law. Where an atmosphere of awe prevailed apprehensive of suppression, frequently forced to drag on a miserable existence in an interminable widowhood, their character suffered from forced repression in some directions and unnatural stimulation in others. They had no status in society, none in their own estimation. They were more like puppets which move when someone else pulls the strings than individual human beings with minds of their own.^{lviii}

The reasons that are responsible for the deterioration of the status of women in India were-(1) patriarchal joint family system, (2) polygamy and the sati system, (3) enforcement widowhood, denial of the right to divorce and right to remarry after widowhood, (4) child marriage and the purdah system. Because of child marriage too much older men there was an increase in the number of widows. Both child marriage and the purdah custom led to low literacy rate among women. Their entry to social, political, and religious functions was prohibited. They were depressed to such an extent that they could not comprehend their own freedom and independent personality. During this period one finds exceptional women like Chand Bibi, Jhansi Laxmibai, Kittur Rani Channamma and Rani Abbakka who made the remarkable impact in the field of administration.^{lix}

The British were the first rulers who unified the country as a whole and were liberal in their thinking. They believed that rational thinking had to be the basis for all customs and institutions and all customs and institutions not so based on reason had to be done away with. Hence, during the British rule Indian society faced significant modifications. The British government worked slowly and succeeded in providing an alternative way of life for those who wanted change, by introducing a new type of economy, state structure, and educational system and also by passing new social legislations.^{lx}

For the upliftment of women in India several factors are responsible. The first one was the direct influence of the British noted for their courtesy towards women; the general awakening of Asians in the

twentieth century and the political struggle for Indian's independence also gave considerable force to the feminist movement in India.^{lxi}

The position of girls, women and widows improved during British period. They introduced female education in India. But the system of child-marriage came in the way of the spread of female education. Hence in 1929 they passed the Child-Marriage Restraint Act. (This Act was also amended by the Acts VIII and XIX 1938, and in 1978). This Act restricted the evils of early marriage and increase in the number of girl widows. The Act not only prohibited the solemnization of child-marriages but also raised the minimum age for marriage of girls to 14. Under section 5 of the 1929 Act; the marriage of girls below 14 years and boys below 18 years of age was to be penalized. This 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act was also known as the Sarda Act. Besides removing the evils of child marriage, it promoted female education. This led to the improvement in the position of the daughter.^{lxii}

The Indians were impressed by the high standards of British society. P. Thomas observes; the freedom enjoyed by European women, their appearance or outrage to modesty, the advantages of monogamy, the soundness of material relations among Europeans inspire of the absence of the purdah, their family life, all impressed the better class of the Hindus and Muslims, who began to wonder if their notions of society with its seclusion of women were the best possible.^{lxiii}

The familial, social and legal position of the Hindu women was greatly improved during the British period, as compared to the Muslim period. Although a small section of women took advantage of these measures and privileges given, their initiation was indeed significant. During India's struggle for independence, thousands of women took part under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi Sarojini Naidu, Vijaylaxmi Pandit and Kasturba Gandhi were some of the unique women personalities. Gill has rightly observed about the achievements with regards to the status of women during the British period. If a person who died a hundred years ago comes to life today, the first and most important change but would strike him is the revolution in the position of women.^{lxiv}

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century's, important trends in thoughts and ideology such as westernization, revivalism, nationalism and modernization were concerned with the question of women of India. Due to the principles of democracy based on liberty, a woman's role began to change toward greater emancipation from man's domination. The role of wife-mother was affected by this new freedom. In India, due to efforts of social reformers and social legislations, women were brought out of the confines of their home.^{lxv}

The process of industrialization and urbanization had their share in the changes which followed.^{lxvi} It was the 20th century that brought about dynamic changes and new concepts which affected the status of women giving hem fresh dignity and importance.

The constitution of the Indian Republic has incorporated in its objectives the principle of equality and has ushered the Indian womenfolk into a new era. It has also proclaimed the equality of men and women in all domains of life.^{lxvii}

Women's role began to change towards greater emancipation from the domination of man with the advent of the British rule, democracy and liberalism all over the world in the eighteenth century. This new freedom brought about new changes in the role of women. In addition to this the processes of industrialization and urbanization also brought forth a lot of changes in the life of the people. With the efforts of a number of social reformers of the 19th century and the legislature passed after independence, women were brought out of their homes and helped in achieving equality with men. These changes have caused profound influence on different dimensions of the family system and women's status.

Gandhi's Perception of Women

It would not be incorrect to say that in the history of revolutions and national liberation struggles of the twentieth century, the Gandhi-led mass movement occupies a unique position.^{lxviii} There was a marked difference of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi's a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. She has rights as well as duties.^{lxix}

Mahatma Gandhi not only represented in himself the spirit of all the great social workers but also gave a fresh momentum and a broader perspective to the movement for women's emancipation by pertinently interlinking social reform movement with nationalist struggle. Many of our movements stop half way opined Gandhi, because of the condition of our women.^{lxx} He therefore repeatedly stressed the urgent need for curing the various ailments afflicting contemporary Indian society even before demanding swaraj. He viewed that swaraj would be impossible unless women stood side by side with men in the battle for freedom. He added that such an association on absolutely equal terms on the part of India's millions of daughters was not possible unless they had a definite consciousness of their own power.^{lxxi}

In this sense, Gandhi was far in an advance of his time. The nineteenth century consciousness of women's problem was limited to their position within the traditional family structure. Very few thought about the basic inequality and social injustice suffered by them in political economical and social sphere and there was no awareness of the woman's role as the equal partner of man nor was there any recognition of the identity of the woman as a person in her own right. Interestingly the rulers of the day a western power entirely disbelieved that women in India could ever be the equal partner of men. In sharp contrast to this Gandhi's consciousness of the problem was unparallel for its sensitivity and insight. Gandhi's approach to deal with women's problem can be better studied by discussing it into two parts his general views regarding social evils prevalent in our society and their solutions secondly his efforts for bringing women into the mainstream of the nationalist movement.^{lxxii}

According to Gandhi, intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity. In his speeches and writings Gandhi said that in many matters especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women are superior to the male.^{lxxiii}

Though Gandhi never challenged the traditional setup, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within it, and thereby changing its very essence. Women learnt from Gandhi that one can be strong, even if seemingly weak to protest against injustice. With his belief in non-violence, Gandhi was against all inequality in any work of life, political, economic or social.

The main contribution of Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal instance on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and in society.^{lxxiv} It is interesting to note that Gandhi despite his profound respect for Indian tradition and his belief that India should preserve all that is sacred and upright in its ancient heritage was not overpowered by tradition. He wanted the shastras to be read and understood in the right spirit and if they contained contradictory statements on any particular issue, his advice was to follow the ones which were favoured by reason.^{lxxv}

He tried to explain that writings generally fulfill various social, cultural and environment demands and necessities of their times and therefore in adjudging an ancient author's statements or views, the historical context should always be taken into consideration. Commenting on Manu's controversial statements Gandhi said, the saying attributed to Manu that for women there can be no freedom is not to be sacrosanct. It only

shows that probably, at the time when it was promulgated, women were kept in a state of subjection. The epithets used in our literature to describe a wife, are 'ardhangini', the better half and 'sahadharmini', the helpmate. The husband addressing the wife as 'devi' or goddess does not show any disparagement. But unfortunately a time came when the woman was divested of many of her rights and privileges and was reduced to a status of inferiority.^{lxxvi}

Moreover, Gandhi remarked that all that is published in the name of scriptures should not be taken as the word of God or the inspired word, since they often contain false interpolation and argued that in any case scriptural injunctions which are obviously in conflict with true morality need not be followed. In fact, Gandhi even went to the extent of suggesting the expurgation by some authoritative body of all those texts in the Samritis which were repugnant to the moral sense.^{lxxvii}

However, for ameliorating the condition of women, Gandhi sought and found support from the classical tradition. He frequently, emphasized upon historical evidence which established that women's lives were less restricted in ancient times and often argued for a broader social role for women in modern times on this basis.^{lxxviii} He held that inequality ultimately led to exploitation, which for him was violence. Also, he held that all work socially useful is of equal worth, whether that of a scavenger, a doctor, a lawyer, a merchant or a minister. Hence work should get, if not equal, at least equitable remuneration. In his Ashram, all the inmates, engaged in physical or intellectual work, were treated as equals and everyone was provided with facilities, according to his or her needs. Gandhi made no distinction between men and women.^{lxxix}

Gandhi remarked: it is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide.^{lxxx} These words of Gandhi in a way, sum up his entire social and political philosophy and technique of mass action. It is nowhere more apparent than in the use that he made of traditional Indian symbols to convey a contemporary socio-political message. Sita, Danyanti and Draupadi were the three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India. But the Sita or Draupadi of Gandhi was not the commonly accepted lifeless stereotype of subservience. They were symbols versatile enough to incorporate the qualities with which he chose to endow them. In fact sometimes he tended to overburden the symbols with meaning they were ill equipped to carry. For example, Sita was used as a symbol of Swadeshi, to convey an anti imperialist message.^{lxxxi}

Gandhi was against the pernicious system of child marriage. He considered such marriage closing down null and void and as such, no marriage at all. A child widow was not, therefore, in reality a widow but a maiden, and must be treated as such.^{lxxxii}

He was against all social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. Of course, in the case of adult widows, especially those with children, he would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love, rather than remarry. But, according to him this must apply equally to men. If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she had every right to remarry and society must not look down upon such marriages. Remarriage was any day better than the suppression of a legitimate desire through fear of misguided public opinion based on custom or the authority of certain quotations in the Shastras, which are against reason or humanity. Gandhi says: Voluntary widowhood, consciously adopted by a woman who was felt the affection of a partner, adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke, and defiles the home by secret vice and degrade religion^{lxxxiii}.

He was against the purdah system. It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement, and their capacity for doing work useful to society.^{lxxxiv} The Hindu women considered themselves as blessed to have the darshan of the 'Mahatma', as he undoubtedly was in their eyes. Even in

Muslim families which observed purdah, he insisted on meeting the ladies and would take no refusal. The women of such families also would want to see him not through the chinks in their doors but face to face. Gandhi said: Chastity is not a hot-house growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot 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^{lxxxv}.

It must be as defiant as Sita's. It must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men. Men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk, even as the latter are compelled to trust them. Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed. Rama would be nowhere without Sita, free and independent even as he was himself. But for robust independence, Draupadi is perhaps a better example. Sita was gentleness incarnate. She was a delicate flower. Draupadi was a giant oak. She bent mighty bhima himself to her imperious will. Bhima was terrible to everyone, but he was a lamb before Draupadi. She stood in no need of protection from anyone of the Pandavas. By seeking today to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India, we are interfering with the growth of free and independent-spirited men. What we are doing to our women and what we are doing to the untouchables' recoils upon our heads with a force thousand times multiplied. It partly accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us then tear down the purdah with one mighty effort.^{lxxxvi}

Meeting with the women of the house was necessary, as Gandhi wanted them to participate along with men in satyagraha, the nonviolent fight for the freedom of the country and to carry on the constructive programme, which was an integral part of that movement. He associated women in every activity that he undertook. He employed some of them in his secretarial work. He did not hesitate to send them to face difficult situations. This was witnessed in South Africa and more powerfully again when he asked some of them to live with the villagers, unattended by men, in riot-affected Noakhali.

He had full confidence and trust in their capacity to defend themselves and their honour and if need be to lay down their lives for its protection. He did not want them to consider themselves as the weaker sex. Gandhi said: To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is women less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then women is immeasurably man's superior. Further he said: If women would forget that they belong to the weaker sex, then no doubt they can do infinitely more than men against war.^{lxxxvii}

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 dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry.^{lxxxviii} If women wanted to resist these evils customs some of them will have to begin by remaining maidens either for life or at least for a number of years.^{lxxxix}

For the middle and poor classes it was a nightmare. It was also on this account that while there was joy on the birth of the male child, there was expressed or silent mourning on the birth of a female child. Gandhi said: Invidious discrimination against the female sex is an anachronism. I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over that of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live, and are equally necessary to keep the world going.

Gandhi was also against heavy expenditure in connection with marriages and wanted to simplify marriage ceremonials. Gandhi invited the women of India to participate in the satyagraha movement not only because they were equal to men but also because they possessed virtues which made them superior to men in a non-violent fight which requires infinite patience and uncomplaining and silent suffering. He had profoundly said that the women is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love which again means infinite

capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy 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 baby 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 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 teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith^{xc}.

How was it possible for women, particularly those coming from high families, brought up in the seclusion of their homes to participate in the struggle for national freedom where they would come in contact with men? This was made possible by the utter purity of Gandhi's character. The men folk knew that the honour of their women was safe in a non-violent struggle guided by Gandhi. They, therefore, had no hesitation in allowing their women to participate in the freedom fight.

Even as a general rule he considered that the standards observed by women in their conduct were superior to those of men. He, therefore, would advise the latter to copy the former and not vice versa. He did not consider man's wrongs to be woman's rights in her pursuit of equality. In moral conduct he believed in levelling up and not in levelling down.

Gandhi held that woman's grace lay in her character and her modesty. He did not want her to be a plaything for man. He, therefore, was against costly cloths, jewellery and make-up. Talking to women on one occasion, he said : Women must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man^{xc}.

Again, Addressing a women's meeting, he said: If I was born a women, I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything. I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart. I could not steal into my wife's heart until I decided to treat her differently than I used to do, and so I restored to her all her rights by dispossessing myself of all my so-called rights as her husband. And you see today as simple as myself. You find no necklaces, no fineries on her. I want you to be like that. Refuse to be the slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slaves of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, and don't go in for scents and lavender waters. If you (women) want to give out the proper scent it must out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man, but humanity. It is your birth-right...^{xcii}

Not surprisingly, the ideals which Gandhi consistently invoked for Indian women were Sita, Savitri, Damyanti and Draupadi and the perfect model for man-woman relations which he advocated was that of Ram and Sita. Moreover, when he wished to assert the superiority of women's inherent qualities such as spirit of strength and courage and the power of independent thinking and initiative which actuated the women of ancient India, he upheld the immortal Maitreyi and Gargi. Gandhi pertinently used these Indian traditional ideals, images and symbols to convey modern and revolutionary message, to impart strength and courage among women, to draw upon the deep resources available within women themselves and to rebuild action wherein women far from remaining passive spectators would gradually but inexorable become active participants and play a vital role in the struggle for swaraj and in the quest for sarvodaya. Gandhi asserted, the only way to transform a community was to revivify, revise and reform its established institutions and to link up the old with the new."^{xciii} Judith Brown had rightly defined Gandhi's position vis-à-vis tradition: "working in the ambience

of tradition, accepting its buoyancy and capacity for movement, using it to make progress, yet being its master rather than its victim.^{xciv}

Similarly, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph had remarked that Gandhi was one of the most conspicuous modernizers of Indian politics' who by employing tradition as an instrument of modernization 'gave familiar Indian ideas and practices new dignity and moral worth.'^{xcv}

Gandhi, thus, despite being deep rooted in and while drawing immense support from Indian tradition vehemently criticized various social practices and evils which were justified on the ground of their traditional sanctions which included the customs of child marriage, enforced widowhood, sati pratha, dowry, prostitution etc.

On the other hand Madhu Kishwar asserts that Gandhi saw women not 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 changes 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.^{xcvi}

Nobody in modern times has done more for the uplift of women than Gandhi. Their participation in the freedom struggle, based as it was on non-violence, made it possible for them to discharge their duties as citizens and, as rights flow from obligations fulfilled, Indian women after independence were given equal opportunities with men in all spheres of national life. There never has been any opposition from men in this respect. Unlike their sisters in Europe and elsewhere, Indian women did not have to undergo a separate struggle to secure their rights.^{xcvii}

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