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## GANDHIJI AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

*The position of women in India has varied in different periods and in different classes, religion and ethnic groups. Pre-independence era has witnessed the exploitation of women in and outside their home. The Gandhi an period and even prior to that is marked by the philosophies of some very brilliant social reformers and thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanaanda Saraswati and so on who strived endlessly to bring about a change in the condition of Indian women so that they become 'better wives' and 'better mothers'.*

**KEY WORDS:** Indian women , reform movements.

### INTRODUCTION

Gandhi however saw women not as 'objects of reform but as 'self-conscious objects' and he included women among the 'masses' in a most natural way. Women participated in mass movements led by him and this made a big break through in India women's lives for times to come. Madhu Kishwar has very well remarked that Gandhi represents a crucial break from the attitude of many of the leaders of the reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ganthiji's view on Gender Quality

Gandhi, a firm believer in the fundamental unity of all living beings held that all human beings are always responsible to themselves, the entire humanity and to God for their continual use of all the goods, and talents that fall within their domain. Hence Gandhi, not only a visionary but a man of practical wisdom; strived to bring about equality in every sphere of life, be it social, economic or political. He challenged scriptural authority and tradition, as far as prevailing on the social practices and perceptions specially relating to untouchability and racis. Besides, the most remarkable feature of Gandhi an philosophy is that Gandhi wanted to build a new society in free India – a society based on social justice and peace where freedom is a birthright for every human being. Gandhi strongly felt that his vision of Swaraj or Ramarajya could have been never completed unless one half of the Indian population. i.e, the womenfolk, were freed from the age old clutches of political, social, economic and cultural bondages. Therefore apart from the position of untouchables, it was the wretched position of women in Indian society that drew his attention. Women empowerment, felt Gandhi, is a prerequisite for a strong nation.

According to Gandhi, women is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She thereby has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. But, she is entitled to a supreme place in her own 'domain' or sphere of activity as man is in 'his'. Therefore, both boys as well as girls should be educated but it is only the primary education for the two sexes that can have much in common. "As nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equals in life, but their functions differ. It is women's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it, Man is the earner, women saves and spends.... She is her children's educator and hence, mother to the Nation. "Gandhi, therefore, felt that there must be provision for separate arrangements for the education of girls after their attaining a certain age. Without her care the race must become extinct. "Gandhi, therefore insisted that it is degrading both for man as well as woman that women should be called upon to "forsake the hearth" and "Shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth," ... in trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down".

### **GANDHI'S VIEW ON WOMEN AND CULTURE**

Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. He said while "it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide." Gandhi called himself an 'orthodox Hindu' but one who has always desired to rid Hinduism of its defects and restore it to its pristine glory. According to Gandhi, the Smritis that contain texts which do not give women her due place should not be taken as the word of God. In fact, such scriptures that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religion and morality should be revised. Gandhi strongly felt that the evils of child-marriage, dowry, purdah, the restrictions on widows and such other practices have to be wiped off. Thereby, by participating in struggles, the women were gradually able to liberate themselves from 'Purdah' and such social taboos. The purdah, Gandhi felt, is not the means of saving women from men's evil eye; the only means is men's own purity of character. Therefore, in Gandhi we find a person too revolutionary of his times who could challenge the very, ills of our traditional Hindu Society and liberate the women from the prejudicial fantasies of our customs and traditions. Too liberal in his views, Gandhi said that chastity is not a "hot-house growth." cannot be superimposed. In fact, it cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah: it must grow from within and must be capable of with standing every unsought temptation.

### **GANDHI'S VIEW ON SOCIAL EVILS AND WOMEN**

"The women in India tore down the purdah and came forward work for the nation. They saw that the country demanded something more than their looking after their homes. They manufactured contraband salt; they picketed foreign-cloth shops and liquor shops, and tried to wean both the seller and the customer from both. At late hours in the night, they pursued to drunkards to their dens with courage and charity in their hearts. They marched to jails and they sustained lathi blows as few men did."

Gandhi, therefore, wanted women to acknowledge their inner moral courage so as to a) emancipate themselves from the domination of men and b) participate in the national emancipation. To quote Gandhi, "...let them become member of legislatures in India, but the foremost duty of women is to save themselves from the intentional or unintentional tyranny of men and make India glorious and strong. "At another place Gandhi says, "A women conscious of her dignity as women sheds luster on her womanhood through soul-force."

Gandhi strongly opposed child marriage and when the Children's Protection Act was brought up, Gandhi supported it wholeheartedly. He said that the issue was not just raising the marriageable age for girls from 14 to 16, but rather not forcing marriage on any individual without their prior consent

### **WOMEN AND FAMILY**

'Gandhi, hence, strongly condemned the physical aspect of love, and instead emphasized that the spiritual feeling which lies beneath the love of husband and wife has to be cultivated. Gandhi went to the extent of criticizing the 'immoral' and the 'inhuman' institution of Devadasis which was highly prevalent in the South in those days. Both man as well as woman, said Gandhi, is equal as souls. The fact is that they forget their higher nature and being enslaved by passion, they consider themselves as mere bodies i.e. man strong in form or body and woman as a weaker sex who always needs man's protection. But if a woman recognizes her spiritual nature whereas a man does not, then the latter is the stronger of the two, "... as Sita was stronger than Ravana, and the other remains weaker, as was Ravana".

On the whole, Gandhi's consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women's moral conduct made women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women's participation in large numbers in 'mass' movements led by him made a big breakthrough in Indian women's lives. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded and in its 1889 Bombay session, ten women participated. Gandhiji's call to women and large scale participation of women in the freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of other nationalist leaders as well. Gandhiji's delineation of the role of women in society is blurred with gender-dominated patriarchal value system. Though too progressive of his times, Gandhi could foresee women's role of that of a 'producer'; women as mother and keeper of hearth and this he held, exhorts her to keep off from public life. Moreover, Gandhi's framework for women's position in social life is a "long suffering selfless and self-effacing." But this capacity for silent suffering which Gandhi idealized may be regarded as one of the key symptoms of her subordination, "a glorified cult of eternal womanhood." were much deep rooted. The change has to be brought from within, this is what he thought and worked upon until his last breath, thereby setting an example for the generations to follow. Gandhi, therefore, deeply emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone - both men as well as women.

### **WOMEN'S ECONOMIC FREEDOM**

Gandhi believed that economic freedom would play a vital role in the empowerment of women. He consistently inspired and motivated women for spinning yarn and wearing cloth. In 1919, addressing women at Nadiad, Gandhi said, 'You have two or three hours when you do nothing. You spend time in temples. Telling the beads in the temple is dharma, but at the present time real bhakti consists in this work for cloth... women in rich families should spin two or three hours everyday and pass it on to the store here or gift it Gandhi strongly emphasized that there should be no inequality in the wages paid to men and women. He could very well foresee that the success of the Swadesh movement was possible only if women spun yarn and weave cloth in large numbers. Spinning yarn would not only enable the women to be economically independent, in fact, it could add to the resources of middle class and sometimes becoming even the sole source of subsistence for lower class families.

Woman, felt Gandhi, is the personification of strength, endurance and self-sacrifice but she does not realize what tremendous strength she possesses. If only woman realizes this, she can give

the world an exhibition of the infinite strength that is latent in her. Once addressing to women, he said, "Refuse to be the slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slaves of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, and do not go in for scents and lavender waters, if you (women) want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man but humanity."

## CONCLUSION

Gandhi's remarkable faith in women's moral strength made him think that 'self-control' rather than contraceptives would be the best method for population control. Gandhi never admired the use of contraceptives or other artificial means of birth control. He said, birth control by contraceptives no doubt, regulates to a certain extent, the number of newcomers and enables persons of moderate means to the wolf from the door. But the moral harm it does to the individual and society is incalculable. For one thing, the outlook upon life of those to satisfy the sexual appetite for the sake of it is wholly changed: Marriage ceases to be a sacrament for them."

Since Gandhi believed that women had more self-restraint, the responsibility of resisting their husbands was solely handed over to women. "Women should have to resist their husbands. If contraceptives are resorted to, frightful results will follow. Men And women will be luring for sex alone. They will become soft-brained, unhinged, in fact mental and moral wrecks." Gandhi hence placed an 'extra responsibility' on the part of women to bring the entire situation of overpopulation under control. Women, Gandhi strongly believed, have to learn the art of resistance. Women have to learn this primary 'right' of resistance so that they "learn to say 'no' to their husbands when they approach them carnally." Women, said Gandhi, have to be taught that she has rights as well as duties. She is not a mere tool of her husband's lust.

Moreover, since having more children not only results in overpopulation, but it also drains away the health of the mother, women should acknowledge their moral potential lying dormant in them and exercise self-restraint. "To ask India's women to take to contraceptives is, to say the least, putting the cart before the horse. The first thing is to free her from mental slavery, to teach her the sacredness of her body and to teach her the dignity of national service and the service of humanity." The central purpose of marriage, felt Gandhi, is procreation and the ideal, therefore, is to look upon marriage as a sacrament and to lead a life of self-restraint. Marriage, therefore according to Gandhi, is a sacred union which finally leads to the spiritual development "I both the partners.

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