

# M. K. Gandhi and Question of Women

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century, M. K. Gandhi became an important leader, due to growing awareness in Indian people, anger against the 'petition' method, criticisms against the British imperialism and consolidations of the Indian National Congress. He fought against British colonialism with the new technique that is non-violent struggle. His analysis of social issues brought the question of inferior status of Indian women and the existence of untouchability in the political domain. He rejected western civilization, parliamentary democracy and English education system in relation to appreciation of Indian tradition, spirituality, and morality, however, criticised negative social norms and exploitative customs (such as child marriage, dowry system, enforced widowhood and so on) that replicated the inferior status of Indian women.

Before the advent of Gandhian movement, women participation was least in the political activities. Women were given modest representation in Gandhian movement and politics. Women played an important role to make successful the constructive programme and campaign for social change like anti-untouchability campaign. In this backdrop, women's position became important in the Gandhian politics and their contribution in Gandhian nationalism that is *swaraj*. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine Gandhi's views on women and negative social norms and exploitative customs along with his contribution and method of women empowerment.

### *M. K. Gandhi and Empowerment of Women*

Gandhi introduced Indian women in the mass movement and political arena. He raised the inferior status of women in Indian society. Along with the appreciation of Indian tradition and values, he criticised negative social norms and exploitative customs. The significant features of his political movement i.e. non-violent struggle included Indian women in the public sphere. Therefore, being a political leader, his contribution towards women empowerment becomes important. Here, I describe the method and contribution of Gandhi to empower women.

### *Introduction of Women in the Mass Movement*

Massive inclusion of women was the significant aspect of Gandhian movement. Before Gandhian movement, there was least women participation in the public arena. How could women's participation in the public forum help to empower them? He challenged the British colonialism as the oppressive force in terms of de-humanisation. Women were mobilised by

Gandhian philosophy and took participation in the political sphere in favour of national political movement.

For the first time, he introduced Indian women in the mass movement of the South African *Satyagraha*. Indian women protested against the South African government and their law, which had made Indian marriage illegal. It was a non-violent protest. For the first time, Indian women went jail and proved that they were equally able to participate in the freedom movement. Gandhi had faith in women's inner qualities and abilities such as tolerance, morality, non-violence, sacrifice and so on. These qualities are important in Gandhi's political movement that is '*Satyagraha*'. Anup Taneja argues that according to Gandhi's thinking, "women were much better placed at the moral, cultural and ideological levels to attempt the method of non violent passive resistance" (Taneja, 2005: 52).

According to Gandhi, India's salvation cannot be possible until women of India do not activate in the public forum. However, for him, 'purification' and 'virtuous womanhood' were important endeavours to obtain *swaraj*. He says that, "As long as women whose body and mind tend in one direction i.e. towards the path of virtue- do not come into public life and purify it..." (Joshi, 1988:113). Furthermore, His belief was "the cord of *swaraj* is in the hands of women" and 'without women's full contribution, *Ramarajya* or *swaraj* would not be achieved' proposed the importance of women participation in the Gandhian movement (Joshi, 1988: 112-113).

His notion of *purification* is problematic to engage *all* women in the nationalist movement that was reflected in his refusal to involve sex workers in the Congress's activities. Women had come out of their domestic sphere and demonstrated on the street. Suruchi Thapar argues that even among middle class women there was distinction based on caste, religion, age etc. It made distinction between *women on the street* and *women of the street*. (Thapar, 1993). He made possible women's entry in the public sphere. However, women contributed to get political power that is self-rule for India, but it did not realise women their consciousness about their rights. Further, Gandhi did not encourage Indian women to fight for their political right i.e. franchise.

## II. GLORIFICATION OF FEMININE VIRTUES

According to Gandhi, women can be more effective and play greater part in the non-violent struggle than men can do. Because, women "are the very embodiment of renunciation and compassion i.e. of non-violence" (Joshi, 1988: 217). He recognised women as the stronger sex. Self-suffering is

important in *Satyagraha*. Women have this quality naturally. According to Gandhi, *Satyagraha* does not make distinction between the prince and pauper, the old and the young. For him, *Satyagraha* means simply “scrupulous regard for truth” (Joshi, 1988: 263-264).

The feminine virtues of sacrifice, suffering, service, dedication, simplicity and non-violence became the important features of Gandhian movement. The feminine nature of Gandhian mass movement was the best way and an appropriate method to oppose the British rule which symbolised and represented the masculine character (Taneja, 2005: 52-53). He was encouraging women to develop the moral strength in them. According to him, women should become like Sita. He had faith in women’s inherent qualities like selfless duty, sacrifice, spirituality, moral strength and so on.

### III. WOMEN EDUCATION AND WOMEN’S SPHERE

Gandhi pointed out that women should have the same right to educate themselves as men have. He emphasised on mother tongue rather than English language itself as a medium of education. It reflects his disapproval of English language as the only source to get knowledge or to be literate. He believed that the nature made distinction between man and woman. Therefore, there is need for the similar distinction of education (Gandhi, 1998). However, he was not sure about whether women’s education should be different from men’s education or not. He had the strong opinion that women should have the same facilities as men have. He also favoured the night schools for illiterate adults (Joshi, 1988: 273).

He recognised household and childcare as women’s sphere and identified a man as the earner of livelihood. According to Gandhi, man’s activities is related with the outside world while woman has right to rule inside the home. For him, childcare is mother’s duty. He said that, ‘mother is responsible for building up children’s character. “She [woman] is their [children] educator, and hence the mother of the race...” (Gandhi, 1998: 19).

He favoured household works and childcare as women’s duty. He said that “A man escapes with very little responsibility, but women have to serve their husband[s], their children and other members of family” (Joshi, 1988: 218). On the other hand, he recognised domestic slavery of women as a ‘symbol of our barbarism’. In his opinion, the “slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly”. Domestic work should not take women’s whole time (Joshi, 1988: 312). He believed that man and woman’s souls are equal. For Gandhi, women’s and men’s sphere are different. His argument was that both sexes (male and female) are equal because their soul (*atman*) is the same. That way they are equal. It reflects the ‘metaphysical and moral belief of Gandhi in sexual equality’ (Ryland, 1977: 131). He appreciated spiritual strength of women. His major contribution was to propose the notion of self-sufficiency among Indians. For the fulfilment of the purpose, he introduced the spinning wheel.

### IV. INTRODUCTION OF THE CHARKHA AND KHADI

Self-reliance is one of the important principles of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi favoured women education and literacy. However, he did believe in the specific sphere of work for man and woman. For Gandhi, *swaraj* is not only about political awakening. It should link with social, educational, moral and economic awakening (Gandhi, 1998: 96). For self-reliance of the people, Gandhi introduced the spinning wheel (*charkha*). The adoption of the *charkha* was associated with economic independency of Indian people. Later on, it became the symbol of *swadeshi* in the nationalist movement.

Gandhi emphasised the larger share of women in the *swadeshi* programme (campaign). The programme was not possible without massive participation of women. According to him, they should surrender the foreign clothes. During this time, he spoke for the use of hand span and hand woven clothes. It was the time when *khadi* acquired importance. For him, if *swaraj* has to come through *charkha* then women’s contribution in the freedom struggle is going to be greater. And if *swaraj* has to come through non-violence, then definitely, women’s role and share become valuable because women have inherent natural capacity to suffer than men have (Gandhi, 1998: 21-22).

For self-reliance and economic independency, Gandhi introduced the *charkha* and *khadi*. It was the important part of constructive programme and *swadeshi* campaign. Men and women both practiced the spinning and adopted *khadi*. The *charkha* became important in widow’s life as an instrument of self-reliance. Gandhi favoured property right of women, however, did not campaign for legality of it. He did not encourage material rights. He was always encouraging selfless service and moral virtues of women. He did not see economic dependency as one of the major causes of women’s subordinate position in human society.

### V. CONCLUSION

M. K. Gandhi’s political movement and philosophy had left significant impact on the lives of women of India. For the upliftment of women, Gandhi posited the glorifications of ancient traditional characteristics and imitation of virtues of Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi and Gargi. However, he criticised exploitative customs. His criticism of negative social norms and exploitative customs replicates his demand to reform Indian culture that points his reformist position. Along with his arduous efforts for women’s participation in the public-political sphere, his rejection of women as wage workers and appreciation of particular women’s work and duty replicates his patriarchal perception of women. Moreover, Gandhi could not locate women’s oppression in the context of Brahmanism and capitalism. In other words, structures remain unchallengeable in his schema.

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