

Gandhi on Women

In his message to the all India Women's Conference in 1936, Gandhi's views on the issue of women's freedom and strength in the struggle to build a humane and exploitation-free society was reflected. He pronounced without any ambiguity that women are a self-conscious subject who can become arbiters of their own destiny. But then, how do we approach to understand Gandhi on women?



Any approach that aims to evaluate Gandhi's general understanding of the nature of women's oppression in India and his views on the role of women in the society and on an ideal man-woman relationship may lay bare Gandhi's ideas about women's empowerment and their role to build a social order.



This paper aims to unravel the ideologies underlying Gandhi's perspective on women and then, traces Gandhi's views on, of and about women. Before we proceed further on the subject, a few issues need to be addressed in order to capture the subject. First, status of women and its

change over the period. Second, conceptual understanding about womanhood. Third, women's empowerment and fourth, Gandhian ideology of sexuality.

Historically viewed, the status of women in India was fairly satisfactory during the Vedic period when there was equality between the sexes in the field of religious and other social activities. Girls were given education and married at about eighteen years of age. Love marriages were in vogue and widow marriage was allowed. During the last two thousand years, general condition of the women has been deteriorating. The status of women in India has, however, varied in different periods and different classes, religion and ethnic groups. In fact, the deterioration of women's status began during the age of Sutras, the Epics, and the early Smritis. The passion for all round reform arose in the beginning of the nineteenth century, mainly on account of the impact of western culture. Pre-independence era witnessed the exploitation of the women in and outside the home. The Gandhian period and even the prior period is marked by the philosophy of the some of the brilliant social reformers and thinkers, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dyanand Saraswati who strived endlessly to bring about a change in the condition of the Indian women so that they become 'better wives' and 'better mother'.

Gandhi observed that womanhood, as distinct from motherhood and wifehood, is linked with a few traits of women by virtue of which she would find a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new self-view and a consciousness that she could fight against oppression. In short, she would become active subjects or agents of reforms not only of her own predicament but of the whole



society. Gandhi opined that empowerment is a process by which people get opportunities to realise the existence of infinite power within and with this power, they create a change in their lives, transform themselves on their own and then change the social structures. Once empowered, women will regain the spirit of strength and courage, the power of independent thinking and initiative by virtue of which, they would be able to combat the forces of social tyranny. Sexuality, according to Gandhi, is about one's sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards

other people. It includes all aspects of sexual behaviour, including gender identity, orientation, altitudes and activity.

On the basis of the concepts of four important aspects, as above let us now elaborate. Gandhi was of the view that women had been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which, she had no hand. He was opposed to the idea of inculcating the culture by which women regard themselves as slaves of men. He wanted women must realise their full status and play their roles as equals of men. He emphasised that the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhi had immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a non-violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom. They bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bars. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women. Swaraj uprooted age-long taboos and restrictive customs.



As regards the economic emancipation of women, Gandhi felt that women could take up economic activities to supplement the income of her families by using *charkas* for spinning. In the social realm, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in doing away with the force of communalism, caste system and untouchability. He realised that there were deep-rooted customs hampering the development of women, and women's freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation.

Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi were the three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India. He did not favour for women's asking for patronage. 'If women were to be free they had to be fearless.' His constant message to them was that bravery and courage were not the monopoly of men. Even if all women could not become '*Rani of Jhansi*', they could emulate the still better example of Sita whom even the mighty Ravana did not dare to touch. 'The real strength of women is their purity, chastity and virtues. Women would be as self-reliant as Draupadi was', said Gandhi. The oppressive custom of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. According to him, the only honourable terms in marriage are

mutual love and mutual consent. He preferred that women should rise above wifedom and become sisters. 'Women must not feel that they are their husband's absolute property', opined Gandhi. He did not see marriage and motherhood as the only mission in life for every young woman. He encouraged those who wanted to live a socially useful life by remaining unmarried.

In Gandhian view, 'empowerment means equal status to women and provide opportunity and freedom to develop them. Man should control the pleasure of senses and not consider the women as a sex object'. The goal of empowerment, he believes, depends on the threefold revaluation: Firstly, to change in their lives; secondly, to create a change in their lives; and thirdly, to change the social structure. In a Gandhian frame work, women have to realize their own potential and inner strength. Simultaneously they must accept truth and non-violence as their guiding principle. Women's empowerment, according to Gandhi, is not something which can be handed over to women. This is a process which involves sincerity, earnestness and capacity and the capability on the part of both men and women.

The Gandhian ideology of sexuality is based on a set of attributes together. On one hand, the male is considered a highly sexed individual and on the other, the female, does not have much needs and is a model of restraint. Sexual relationships are only to be initiated for the continuation of the species and marriage can become the only science known to human kind for relating man and woman together. In Gandhi, love and happiness is only possible through limited sexual enjoyment in marriage. Marriage is only for reproduction. Sex without reproduction is abnormal. A woman can achieve a higher moral and spiritual role if she rejects her sexuality, and devotes herself to the welfare of the people. No doubt, this ideology has its roots with Gandhi's experience and experiment with his own sexuality, but it leads to some very negative conclusions in the case of understanding women. It denies her a sexual life and simultaneously imposes on her the role of a mother which in turn places to her a certain role in the family and thus in the society. In fact, Gandhi wanted the women to be not only the mistress and keeper of the house, but also take the responsibility of bringing up the infants of her race. Such a view is tantamount to reflection of views of a patriarchal society. Besides, every sexual relationship outside of marriage was seen by Gandhi as sinful. That is why, in the case of child widows, Gandhi was emphatically in favour of remarriage. In the case of grown-up widows, the stand taken was equivocal. He said, a grown-up widow who cannot restrain herself should remarry without incurring any odium. On the other hand, however, he did not altogether reject the institution of marriage because he realised that sexuality could not be eliminated. He saw marriage as the only existing, though inadequate, restraint on

sexuality. He advocated for minimisation of sexual contact within marriage and a complete repression of it outside marriage. Gandhi never liberated women in reproductive domain. Deeply convinced with the idea that female sexuality was not as intense and powerful as the male, Gandhi strongly criticized the use of contraceptives. He rather felt that woman, the very incarnation of shakti, recognize her hidden power so that she along with her husband are able to live the life of restraint.

Conclusion

Though Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life was a departure from those of the nineteenth century reformers and he saw women as a potential force in the mainstream struggle for freedom movement to build a social order, his views on women were not devoid of contradictions. His opinions may not be termed as obtrusive, but his vision stressed the superiority of women's sufferings and self-sacrifice rather than aggressive assertion and forceful intervention to protect their interests and to gain political power. As one knows, rules of social conduct are to be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation instead of forcibly imposing on women from outside. Gandhi did not, however, make any sincere endeavour to expurgate all religious texts biased against the rights and dignity of women. Gandhi saw education as an essential means for enabling women to uphold natural rights and acquire absolute freedom. He, however, could not establish his views for implementation before his peer Congressmen. Gandhi discussed sexuality almost from the masculine point of view and expected women to be more virtuous and disciplined than men. While he agreed that divorce should be granted within well-defined limits, he could never think of carrying on propaganda in favour of it. He could not see the sex-workers (termed as prostitutes at his time) in right spirit. Gandhi declined to accept them as Congress members or even to accept their donations. The evil of prostitution received some of his bitterest diatribes. As regards economic independence of women, the necessity for independent control over economic resources was not integrated into the struggle for women's rights.

Even though Gandhi failed to evolve a concrete programme for materially altering the socio-economic condition of the mass of women, he succeeded in raising the question of their depressed condition as a moral question for society to reckon with. However, the main contribution of Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and in the society. He wanted them to assert themselves in family life and protest against being treated as sex object. 'If you want to play your part in the world's affairs, you

must refuse to deck yourselves for pleasing man’ and revolt against ‘any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything.’

Though Gandhi cannot be said to have evolved a concrete programme to tackle one of the basic causes of women’s powerlessness – their total economic dependence and lack of control over the resources of the family, the women of India found a new identity in Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi’s words and deeds have inspired thousands of women, and will continue to do so in their struggle against injustice and inequality.

