

A Gandhian Philosophy and Mahatma's views on Women Question

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ABSTRACT

The study of Gandhian Philosophy and Mahatma's views on Women Question are of great significance in the changing times unfolding itself in gender consciousness, gender parity, gender sensitization and the women empowerment. Gandhi's views on Truth, Non-violence, Human Rights, Swaraj, eradication of Untouchability, Communal Unity, Prohibition, Khadi and other village industries, Village sanitation, education in Health and Hygiene, Service of women in the constructive program as equal partners with men in the fight for Swaraj, NaiTalim or Basic Education, Adult Education, Promotion of Hindi as National language, Promotion of provincial languages, Economic equality etc. are still relevant and a guiding force not only for India but the entire humanity. Gandhi was opposed to the gender inequality, social and cultural discrimination and championed the cause for the betterment of the women. The views of Gandhi regarding duties assigned to women in social life is questioned by many feminists scholars where he favours their role only as home makers taking care of family and children. However, as a social reformer Gandhi worked for uplift of women. In this article, an attempt will be made to focus on Gandhian Philosophy and women question.

KEYWORDS: Truth, Non-violence, Human Rights, Swaraj, Uplift of women, Untouchability, Gender Parity.

More than 70 years of his death, Gandhi's life and ideas continue to inspire us. He is the most written about world personality. Scholars have characterized Gandhi in different frames such as a post-colonial nationalist, internationalist, modernist and post-modernist, liberal idealist, pragmatist, feminist and sub-altern. The present article will focus on Gandhian Philosophy and women question. The article also contains an exhaustive Reference which will help the future scholars to work on life and ideas of Gandhi.

In the first part of this article, an attempt will be made to give an overview of Gandhian philosophy and in the second part women's questions and issues in Gandhian thought and practices will be analysed.

Does Gandhi provide a solution to the multiple global problems that confront humanity today such as physical, psychological, economic, political, cultural, religious, technological and environmental violence? Gandhi shaped our Independence through his major movements in

South Africa, Champaran Satyagraha in Bihar, Kheda Farmers, Ahmedabad mill workers in Gujarat, Khilafat Movement, Non-cooperation Movement, Civil disobedience, Dandi March, Quit India Movement. Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi today is related to the ideas he propounded. Gandhi's focus is on living philosophy on how we can live a life of Satya and Ahimsa with a focus on practice.

Gandhi was an ardent advocate of non-violent method. Relevance of Non-Violence today is much more in this age of exploitation, oppression and violence, terrorism and warfare. Even in our day today life the only philosophy that ensures our longevity is non- violence. Many recent incidents prove that dialogue, discussions, and talks are more effective and lasting alternatives which Gandhi advocated.

Another Gandhian philosophy which needs to be addressed today is Truth and Satyagraha. Gandhi in his autobiography My Experiments with Truth has confessed that how he tried to discover and achieve Truth by learning from his mistakes and conducting experiments on himself. Gandhi practiced and advocated Satyagraha as a means of fighting injustice of all kinds. It is a silent and soul force arming the individual with moral power rather than physical power. Civil Disobedience non-cooperation in Satyagraha is in fact a means to secure the cooperation of the opponent consistently with truth and justice.

Gandhi is considered to be the originator and the most influential exponent of human rights of the 20th century. Gandhi's public life was a shining example of his commitment to human rights related to life, liberty, equality before they were even articulated on December 10, 1948 as UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Gandhi had raised his voice against racialism in South Africa. He sought equality for the so-called untouchables in India. He had worked tirelessly for respect of religious freedom. He was instrumental in drafting a Bill of Rights in 1931 in the Congress session at Karachi which was a model for the Fundamental Rights later incorporated in the Constitution of independent India. Today when the record of human rights is very dismal throughout the world, Gandhi had become all the more relevant.

His methods and strategies of non - violence and Satyagraha need to be studied and practiced. Gandhian Nai Talim (Basic Education) is a spiritual principle which states that knowledge and work are not separate. It was counter to the British educational system and colonialism in general, which had a negative effect of making Indian children alienated and career based only, it promoted disdain for manual work, the growth of new elite class, and the increasing problems of industrialization and urbanization. For Gandhi education is the moral development of the person which is lifelong learning. Gandhian Swaraj stands for independence from foreign rule, political liberties and democratic governance, economic equality, and, last but not least, self-control.

Economic Swaraj as freedom from economic deprivation shows Gandhi's farsightedness who perceived that without economic equality, other rights would be more or less ineffective.

Gandhian Economics focused on the need for flourishing economic self-sufficiency at the village level. His policy of Sarvodaya called for ending poverty through improved agriculture and small scale cottage industries in every village. Gandhi did not favour Nehruvian rapid industrialization and modernization on the Soviet model. For Gandhi Poverty was the worst form of violence. To him, the adoption of Khadi, or homespun cloth, was intended to eradicate evils of poverty, social and economic discrimination.

Gandhi made the issue of eradication of untouchability the focal point of his movement for Swaraj. He exhorted Hindus to condemn it as an inhuman practice. Gandhi supported and encouraged laws to abolish untouchability and strongly recommended Dr. Ambedkar's name for the chairmanship of the Constituent Assembly so that the Dalit sensibilities could be reflected in our Constitution. Gandhi was one of the greatest champions of communal Unity in India throughout his life and finally attained martyrdom at the altar of communal harmony. A civilization is to be judged by the treatment of his minorities, he said.

In Hind Swaraj and other writings like Young India, Navajivan, Harijan he talks about the good points of all religion. He questioned the one religion one state theory by stating: 'In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms, Nor has it ever been so in India.' Gandhi described his religious belief as being rooted in Hinduism and, in particular, the Bhagavad Gita. He professed the philosophy of Hindu Universalism, which maintains that all religions contain truth and non-violence and therefore worthy of toleration and respect.

Thus, Gandhi's Constructive program for attainment of Poorna Swaraj or complete Independence by truthful and non-violent means included; Communal Unity, Removal of Untouchability, Prohibition, Khadi and other village industries, Village sanitation, education in health and hygiene, Service of women in the constructive program as equal partners with men in the fight for Swaraj, Nai Talim or new or Basic Education, Adult Education, Promotion of Hindi as National language, Promotion of provincial languages, Economic equality etc.

Now coming to the second part of the article, Gandhian thoughts on women are born out of his deep concern, respect and empathy for them. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society, particularly women of all strata and worked for their awakening to shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self-esteem.

Gandhi asserts that when woman, whom we all call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful. The wife Gandhi asserts is not a slave of her husband, but a comrade, his better half, colleague and friend. She is co-sharer with him of equal rights and duties.

Though himself married at a young age of 13 he "vehemently condemned the system of child marriage and considered such marriage as null and void and no marriage at all and argued that

ancient Hindu scriptural texts with “barbaric” and “degrading” rules regarding women should be revised. Gandhi proposed minimum age of marriage, and at the first session of Women’s Conference in 1927, a Resolution was adopted and eventually enforced in 1929 where the Sarda Act fixed the age limit to 15. Gandhi stated, Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities, she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. He was against Purdah system that cut off women from social life, crippling not only their free movement but interfering with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to society. Although the purdah system has not been entirely eliminated it has significantly decreased among women in South Asia today.

He condemned custom of Sati as blind egoism by man and denounced all social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. He was against heavy expenditure in marriages and thought of dowry system as a nightmare for the middle and poor classes and reducing women to the position of mere cattle and property to be bought and sold. Though Gandhi never challenged the traditional set up, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within it, and thereby changing its very essence. Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power.

Gandhi was also opposed to prostitution and Devadasi system. However, he did not condemn prostitutes who were forced to live a life of sin. He held men equally responsible for perpetuation of this evil. He urged the prostitutes to lead a simple and chaste life through charkha. Regarding devadasis, Gandhiji 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 a number of women have to sell their chastity for man’s lust.

In Gandhian Wardha scheme, Girls basic education was to concentrate on domestic course. Gandhi states, we shall accept equality of rights for women, but I think their education should differ from men’s as their nature and function do. This contradiction in Gandhi’s work is due to his belief that, It is women’s right to rule the house. Man is master outside it, though most of us don’t agree with that statement.

Regarding women’s issues at one level Gandhi appears to be influenced by his patriarchal upbringing rooted in the firm belief about the traditional role assigned to women according to his understanding of ancient Indian scriptures. At another level, Gandhi emerges as a social reformer concerned about backwardness of women and champions the rights of women as equal partners of men. Gandhi also considers women as essential for the success of his movements, social and political and advocates their increased participation for their political emancipation.

The views of Gandhi regarding duties assigned to women in social life is questioned by feminists where he favours their role only as home makers taking care of family and children. As a social reformer Gandhi included the work for uplift of women in his constructive programs. He advocated education to empower them. He asked them to be economically self-sufficient in order to maintain their dignity.

Gandhi saw the potential of women in contributing to the success of his movements in India. Initially he confined the role of women to picketing and other non-aggressive activities during Non-Cooperation movement as he did not want to misuse them for his personal gain, later during Civil Disobedience Movement he encouraged women to take leadership roles. Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of women. He declared in *Young India* in 1925, to call women the weaker sex is a libel. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior, more self-sacrificing, and greater courage. If non-violence is the law of our being, then the future is with women.

Dandi March was a turning point in women's participation in the freedom struggle. Sarojini Naidu, Mithuben Petit ultimately joined Gandhi on the last stretch to Dandi, where he raised a fistful of salt on 6 April, 1930. And, on 10 April, Gandhi officially called upon women to come out on the streets and picket liquor and foreign cloth shops. Women joined the movement in the thousands, marking the beginning of the women's movement as a force in public space in west, east and north India. During the Civil Disobedience Movement Women started organizing *prabhatpheris*, or morning processions, on the streets of Bombay and Ahmedabad, where they sang songs about the bounty of the motherland with *VanarSenas*, or monkey brigades, consisting of children who supported activists in offering resistance to the British through Gandhi non-violence and *Satyagraha* method.

Women's entry into national politics through non-violent methods brought miraculous results. On the one hand, women became aware of their inner strength, and on the other, the process brought human and moral elements into politics. Gandhi believed in equal rights of both men and women. He also wanted women to be represented in proportion to their population in the legislatures and Panchayats and had made the statement in Round Table Conference in 1931 that he would not like to be a member of a legislature where women were not represented. We find Sarojini Naidu succeeding Gandhi as the president of the Congress Party. Constituent Assembly that drafted the Constitution of India had sizeable number of women who spoke on women issues. Some important women in Gandhi's life and movement:

Putlibai: Mother of Gandhiji. She was deeply religious and would take the hardest of vows and keep them without any relaxation. **Kasturba Gandhi:** she married Gandhiji when she was only 14 years old and Gandhi was 13 years old. She fought along with Gandhi for civil rights and Indian independence against the British. **Annie Besant:** Gandhiji was influenced by Besant who was Founder of Theosophical Society. **Manuben:** she was the grandniece of Gandhiji. Manuben was one of the two people who were by Gandhi's side when he was shot on January 30, 1948. **Sushila Nayar:** she was the younger sister of Pyarelal Nayar, personal secretary to Gandhiji. She was deeply influenced by Gandhian philosophy. **Abhaben:** she was the wife of Kanu Gandhi, the grandnephew and photographer of Gandhiji. She was also by Mahatma Gandhi's side when he was shot on January 30, 1948 by Nathuram Godse. **Miraben:** Madeleine Slade or Miraben, a British woman was named after Meera Bai, the devotee of Lord Krishna, by Gandhiji himself. **Saraladevi Chowdharani:** Gandhiji used to call her a great Shakti. **Sarojini Naidu:** Her role

in the Dharasana Salt Depot raid during Salt Satyagrah was reported the world over. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur: she was Gandhi's secretary for 17 long years and was India's first Health Minister. Kamladevi Chattopadhyay was In-Charge of Seva Dal, a Gandhian Organization set up to promote social work. Contributed to promotion of handloom and handicrafts, set up National School of Drama, headed Sangeet Natak Akademi and a member of UNESCO.

According to Thomas Weber, 'Gandhi's relationship with women has proved irresistibly fascinating to many, but it is surprising how little scholarly work has been undertaken on his attitudes to and relationships with women. His work *Going Native* details list of women who inspired him, worked with him, supported him in his political activities, or helped shape his international image. Of particular note are those women who went native to live with Gandhi his close friends and disciples, those who were drawn to him because of a shared interest in celibacy, those who came seeking a spiritual master, or came because of mental confusion'.

The commitment made in 1931 relating to women's equal rights and obligations of citizens without any bar on account for sex, the protection of women workers and special adequate provisions of leave during maternity period was embodied in the Constitution of free India. We have 1/3rd political representation of women in village panchayats and local elected bodies but still pending at Parliament level. The present Position of Women in India is a bit gloomy, NCRB report about increasing crimes against women are deplorable, there are still many social-psychological barriers facing Indian women today, hopefully people will look upon Gandhi's guidance and be motivated to abolish the prejudices that still occurs today. Let us all unite to work for women empowerment. Gandhi's quest for women empowerment becomes relevant today. Gandhi wanted women to play important role in different kinds of programmes which may be identified with today's Swachha Bharat Abhiyaan, education of girl child, against domestic violence, prohibition and equal rights and status.

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