

# MAHATMA GANDHI AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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## Abstract

*The papers succinctly depicts the view of Mahatma Gandhi on women in India. His views on different aspects on women such as purdha system, wives, legislation, widow remarriage, divorce, women's labour women education, birth control sterilization etc has been described. The role of women in social development has also been discussed.*

*Key Words: Mahatma Gandhi, Women, Social Problems and empowerment.*

## 1. Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi popularly revered as Mahatma Gandhi who has given vital importance to the contribution of Indian women with pure, firm, tolerant and self-controlled character for getting freedom and in making an independent and Swaraj India. He feels the need of active participation of women in the development of the entire India. The thought of women empowerment in South Africa became an important part in his Satyagraha movement. A large number of women participated with him in Satyagraha there and bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bar; and many women also died in imprisonment inside the jail.

*"Yatra naryastu puhyante ramante tatra Devata,  
yatraitaastu na puhyante sarvaastatrafalaah kriyaah."*

While the above stanza is translated it reads, "Wherever women are given their due respect, even the Deities like to reside there and where they are not respected, all actions remain unfruitful."

Mahatma Gandhi has seen the unbelievable capability in the eternal love inside nonviolence to tolerate unbearable pain; and resembles the presence of these qualities inside women. As per the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi "Women stay in a prestigious place close to men as a mother, as a creator and silently take a role as a guide to show them the right path. She is created to teach the art of peace to the men in the world who are interested in the devil war."

Gandhi gives importance to women power in making "THE NEW WORLD." Women are a personification of 'ahimsa' which means love and infinite capacity for suffering. A woman 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 to freedom and liberty with him. But, she is entitled to a supreme place in her own "domain" or sphere of activity.

For Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Women are at par with men,

one complementing the other. According to Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. These qualities were essential prerequisites for imbibing the virtue of satyagraha. The capability of enduring endless suffering can be witnessed only in the women, according to the Mahatma. The doctrine of ahimsa as preached by Gandhi incorporates the virtue of suffering as is evident in the women. Therefore, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in establishing non-violence. Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womanhood, like Mandodari, Saradhamani, Arundhati, Nibedita, Draupadi, Savitri, Sita, Tara, Damayanti and Jasoda, to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom. To sum up in Gandhi's words; "The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows - as free as the husband to choose her own path."

Gandhi had expressed his views and had written on numerous qualities of women - Wife of Hindu; Answering to friend; Women in Srutisastra; Women and caste; Establishment of women; Behavior to women; Position, work and aim of India women - in his book "TO THE WOMEN."

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century. The views expressed by the Mahatma and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely with the current times because the times have irreversibly changed but the honesty of the Mahatma, the love and respect he had for women can never be doubted.

Gandhi said that women have been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. Rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. Women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. Women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of men. SHE MUST REVOLT AGAINST ANY PRETENSION ON THE PART OF MAN THAT WOMAN IS BORN TO BE HIS PLAYING.

## **2. GANDHI'S VOICE AGAINST SOCIAL EVILS TO WOMEN**

**PURDAH:** Chastity cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the Purdah. It must grow from within and it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. The Hindu Purdah or the Muslim Purdah cannot protect chastity and that only self-control and purity of mind can do that is absolutely right.

**THE DOWRY SYSTEM:** It is a product of the caste system. The abolition of caste will lead to the abolition of dowry. Demanding dowry is akin to discrediting womanhood. Young men who demand dowry should be excommunicated. Parents of girls should cease to be dazzled by English degrees and should not hesitate to travel outside their little castes and provinces to secure true, gallant young men for their daughters.

**WIVES:** Should not be dolls and objects of indulgence but should be treated as honored comrades in common service.

**LEGISLATION:** Traditional rules and regulations has been mostly done by men and has not been always fair. The blemishes represented in our Shastras should be removed by women. Women of firm, pure and self-controlled character like Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi should be produced and they will be able to

remove these blemishes from our societies. Gandhi considers these women of pure, firm and self-controlled character.

**CHILD MARRIAGE:** He vehemently opposed this and convinced parents about its harmful consequences.

**WIDOW REMARRIAGE:** Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. In order to save Hinduism, enforced widowhood must be ridden. Child widows must be duly and well married and not remarried. They were never really married. One cannot have a better view on Widow Remarriage than what the Mahatma has presented.

**DIVORCE:** Marriage confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other. However, divorce is not the only alternative. Marriage is a state of discipline. The loss of discipline is a moral breach and divorce is not a solution. Moral breach can be corrected by moral restraint and repentance. More importantly, he says that Hinduism offers the freedom of self-realization for both men and women. The Mahatma is clearly against any kind of male chauvinism.

**WOMAN'S HONOR:** It is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds in violating her.

**WOMEN'S EDUCATION:** The views of Gandhi on women's education are based on family ideals because he assumes that man is supreme in the extra-mural activities and that woman is supreme in intra-mural activities. Hence, education imparted to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life. The Mahatma's views on women's education are based on his belief in woman being a complement of man and are therefore out of sync in the modern context.

**BIRTH CONTROL:** Brahmacharya is an infallible sovereign remedy. The purpose of human creation was wholly different from that of the satisfaction of animal wants. Sex is only meant for creation. Any other use is a sin against God and humanity. Woman must be taught the art of saying no even to her husband. She has rights as well as duties. The first thing is to free her from mental slavery, to teach her sacredness of her body and to teach her dignity of national service and the service of humanity.

**STERILIZATION:** Gandhi conceded Sterilization for men because he thought that man was the aggressor, he was clearly against the use of contraceptives by women. He was convinced about the need of self control in matters of sex. The overriding belief in self control was also because of his personal success in pursuing Brahmacharya.

### **3. INDIAN HISTORY OF WOMEN**

**VEDIC ERA 2500 BC:** Vedic Indian society gives a great position to the woman. No child marriage was there. Girl's opinion was taken into consideration before her marriage. She gets the due respect as the partner of her husband.

**END OF VEDIC ERA 500 BC:** Child marriage was there and women-education was also there. Women like Gargi and Maitreyee were high educational qualified at that time.

MAGADHA ERA 500 BC - 325 BC: Woman was in respectable position as half of a man and getting opportunity to have high education.

MOURYA ERA 325 BC - 187 BC: As per the Kautilya's Arthashastra women were dominated by men in Mourya Era.

GUPTA ERA: In the next 700 years Gupta Era, woman's position in Indian society was good. Swayambar marriage was there.

END OF GUPTA ERA: Satidharm started and position of women in the society became progressively worse.

"VINDICATION OF THE RIGHT OF WOMEN" written by Merry Boltan Craft in 1792 and "MADAM BOVARY" written by Gustav Flaubert in 1857 put positive effect on the position of women in Indian society. Property of Married Women Act has added to the law in 1882.

Lord Kempbell Law was the first action in women empowerment in 1857 and Ramabai Ranade, Nibedita, Kasturba Gandhi and Mother Teresa were the leading personalities.

According to Gandhi, 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 and also donated their ornaments and saved money. Gandhi's urge to women to join India's struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women.

As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned, Gandhi felt that men and women had different spheres of work. In his opinion, women could take to economic activities to supplement the income of her families like spinning, which he believed to be a good option available to the women. In the social realm, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in doing away with the forces of communalism, caste system and untouchability; and he said "man is purely responsible for prostitutions and degradations of women."

Mahatma Gandhi came Odisha on 24th March 1921. Mrs. Sarala Devi had written names of women who supported and actively took part in the struggle of independence were Adharmani Devi, Maa Ramadevi, Arnapurna Das, Abarti Laxmibai, Abanti Devi, Ambika Devi, Indumati Das, Kiranlekha Mohanty, Kuntala Kumari, Krusnakamini Devi, Kokila Devi, Khetramani Devi, Gurubari Jani, Charulata Vatacharya, Janhabi Devi, Nishamani Devi, Parbati Giri, P. Tamma, Gurubai, Pramila Acharya, Priyambada Mohanty, Manorama Mohanty, Malati Choudhuri, Ramadevi, Sailabala Das, Saraswati Devi, Sundarmani Pattnaik, Sunamani Devi, Suryamma, Haramani Kanungo and Heimabati Mishra. They started revolution against untouchability in 1932. After the death of Kasturba Gandhi, Maa Ramadevi was appointed as the representative of THE KASTURBA TRUST for six years in 1944. Training camp was started in Bari by this trust in 1945.

In 1954, inter-caste marriages become legal in Hindu Laws; and women can give divorce and demand compensation to live. Woman has the equal right and legal heir to their ancestors like man in properties are

incorporated in law in 1955. Law against dowry is introduced in 1961. Women have reservation quota in government sector is added in 72th Amendment in 1992. In 2001, National Schemes are declared with an aim for the social and economical development of women.

Mahatma Gandhi, by far, can be considered the best friend of women in India and the world. The Mahatma's purity of thought and honest intentions are beyond question. No other man in the entire history of India or in the world had such godly ideas about women. It can be said without an iota of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his country. His faith in their immense capabilities found expression in his decisions to bestow leadership to them in various nationalistic endeavors.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Women in Indian subcontinent play a very vital role in development of the society. Just as without women the society cannot sustain, similarly without women no development in the society can be imagined. In view of the importance of women in the society Mahatma Gandhi has emphasized the empowerment of women in society. Although women in India face lot of social problems, all concerted actions are to be taken to eliminate those problems so as to see that women enjoy the equal status at par with men. Women are to be involved in every aspects social sphere so as to empower them for ensuring social development. Gandhi has closely seen Indian women as the most neglected part of Indian social system. In view of this the views of Mahatma Gandhi on women is seriously taken and necessary remedial actions are taken for upliftment of women in India.

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