

WOMEN FREEDOM MOVEMENT IN INDIA: A ROLE OF GANDHI



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ABSTRACT:

For the period of freedom Struggle in the motherland, women were not staying at the back. The role of women in freedom struggle is extremely significant and they also participated in Indian struggle for Independence. The Women in the brigade were certain the similar preparation seeing that it was given to men also. Still their uniform was comparable to the men warriors. In keeping with this tradition, burden of tears and toils of the long years of struggle for India's freedom was borne by the wives, mothers, and daughters, silently and cheerfully. The programme of self-imposed poverty and periodical jail going was possible only because of the willing co-operation of the family women. In the various resistance movements in the villages, the illiterate women played this passive but contributory part as comrades of their men folk.

This article reviews and analyses the role of Gandhi in drawing a large number of women into the mainstream of the freedom movement. Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life was a departure from those of the 19th century reformers. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He consciously attempted to articulate connections between private and public life in order to bring women into the struggle. And in this papers discuss on Gandhiji's thought on Women upliftment, contribution of women in India and present Position of women in India etc, As well as discuss on Gandhiji's view of women participation in politics. After Gandhi which position of women in India also focus in this paper.

KEYNOTES:

Role of Women Freedom
Movement, Women and Gandhi, Gandhi's

perception of women, Views on Women Upliftment, Contribution for Betterment of Women in India, Present Position of Women in India.

I. INTRODUCTION:

“We record our homage and deep admiration for the Womanhood of India who in the hour of peril for the motherland forsook the shelter of their homes and with unflinching courage and endurance stood shoulder to shoulder with their men folk, in the frontline of India’s national army to share with them the sacrifices and triumphs of the struggle.”

The history of Indian Freedom Struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn us freedom. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. The list of great women whose names have gone down in history for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India is a long one.

Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self-esteem. For Gandhi, "When woman, whom we all call *abala* becomes *sabala*, all those who are helpless will become powerful". The welfare of the weaker sections of society was dear to his heart. He had no qualms about the priority of social over political ends. In his opinion, to postpone

social reform till after the attainment of *Swaraj* was not to know the meaning of *Swaraj*.

Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. While some like Sarojini Naidu, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur rose to prominence, there were thousands of unsung and unnoticed heroines of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence. Life sketches and reminiscences of women freedom-fighters give us glimpses of their crusade against injustice and inequality.

Women under his aegis took a milestone step towards reestablishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morale and helped them to rediscover their self esteem. Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under Gandhi's leadership, they entered into the national mainstream, taking parts in the National Movements. In Gandhi's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women." Gandhi's reformist spirit seasoned the role that he played in uplifting the status of women in India. This paper attempts to examine a role of Gandhi bringing women in freedom movement, perception and views about of women, and their contribution for betterment women in India.

II. ROLE OF WOMEN IN FREEDOM MOVEMENT

The entire history of the freedom movement is replete with the saga of bravery, sacrifice and political sagacity of great men and women of the country. This struggle which gained momentum in the early 20th century, threw up stalwarts like

Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, Abul Kalam Azad, C. Rajagopalachari, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chander Bose. Their number and stature often gives us an erroneous impression that it was only a man's movement. But it is not so. Many prominent women played a leading role in the freedom movement. The important place assigned to women in India dates back to the time of the *Vedas* and *Smritis*. Manu declared that where women were adored, Gods frequented that place, During the Vedic age the position of women in society was very high and they were regarded as equal partners with men in all respects. Who had not heard of Maitri, Gargi, Sati Annusuya and Sita?

In keeping with this tradition, burden of tears and toils of the long years of struggle for India's freedom was borne by the wives, mothers, and daughters, silently and cheerfully. The programme of self-imposed poverty and periodical jail going was possible only because of the willing co-operation of the worker's family. In the various resistance movements in the villages, the illiterate women played this passive but contributory part as comrades of their men folk.

Woman's participation in India's freedom struggle began as early as in 1817. Bhima Bai Holkar fought bravely against the British colonel Malcolm and defeated him in guerilla warfare. Many women including Rani Channama of Kittur, Rani Begam Hazrat Mahal of Avadh fought against British East India company in the 19th century; 30 years before the "First War of Independence 1857". The role played by women in the War of Independence (the Great Revolt) of 1857 was creditable and

invited the admiration even leaders of the Revolt. Rani of Ramgarh, Rani Jindan Kaur, Rani Tace Bai, Baiza Bai, Chauhan Rani, Tapasvini Maharani daringly led their troops into the battlefield.

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi whose heroism and superb leadership laid an outstanding example of real patriotism. Indian women who joined the national movement belonged to educated and liberal families, as well as those from the rural areas and from all walk of life, all castes, religions and communities. Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Vijayalakmi Pundit and Annie Beasant in the 20th century are the names which are remembered even today for their singular contribution both in battlefield and in political field.

Let us elucidate the role of Indian women who participated in the freedom struggle against British East India Company and British Empire and made great and rich contributions in various ways.

III. GANDHI AND WOMEN.

Women were urged to give up the *purdah*, and to liberate themselves from their family-centred roles to participate in the country's struggle for freedom. Gandhi viewed women's oppression as historic and nearly universal. He lamented (a) their non-participation in social and political affairs, (b) their sexual subjugation to their role as 'man's plaything', (c) their lack of autonomy in the use of their bodies, and (d) their backward consciousness which made them accept their low social position. But he also believed that women had the courage, the endurance and the moral strength to deal with these oppressions. In his view, these qualities made women "natural leaders of a non-violent struggle against an unjust socio-political system. He wanted to feminise politics because women had the potential

to give a blow to the established socio-political power structure and they could be the vanguards of a non-violent struggle for a just and non-exploitative socio-political order."

In the first non-cooperation movement, women were called to participate within the limitations of their social conditions. Gandhi placed emphasis on spinning because it could be carried out within the home. Women were encouraged to tear down the veil, come out to attend street meetings and join processions. 1000 women marched in a procession in Bombay to oppose the visit of the Prince of Wales in November 1921. In the Bardoli Satyagraha in 1928, women were not seen at first. Yet, from April on, they outnumbered men in political gatherings and even held their own separate meetings. The year 1930 began with a pledge for Independence.

In March, Gandhi announced that he would launch a civil disobedience movement by breaking the Salt Law. His plan was to walk from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a deserted village on the sea coast 200 miles away to make salt on the beach there. He did not include women in the first batch of 79 refusing their request to take four or five women with him. But as Gandhi walked towards Dandi, women were everywhere on the way to greet him and to hear him speak. At Abhrama on April 10, 1930, there were 2000 women in an audience of 5000. 560 women received him when he arrived at Dandi. But some women refused to be restrained in this manner. Khurshedbehn Naoroji and Mridula Sarabhai jumped into the struggle despite strict orders not to do so. They were both arrested in Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad witnessed a grand procession of khadi-clad women on April 23. The procession

stretched to half a mile, and was managed by saffron-saree-clad volunteers of Videshi Kapade Bahiskar Samiti. On 1st June 1930, 11 women took part in the Wadala raid organised by the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee in which Lilawati Munshi took an active part. They were all arrested and detained in the Salt Prevention office at Wadala.

Men were not opposed to Gandhi drawing their women out onto the streets to participate in the nationalist movement. Because Gandhi did not really challenge the established patriarchal order. He did not disturb the *status quo* of the conventional Indian family. He did not ask women to break their fetters. He held that woman was not inferior to man but that her role was different. Political participation was not to be at the cost of domestic duties. Service to her husband, family and country was a woman's primary duty. Gandhi advised women who wished to dedicate themselves totally to the cause of freedom to remain unmarried. Dr. Susheela Nayar and Ushabehn Thakkar are examples of this Gandhian rule. For couples who were similarly dedicated, he advised celibacy and no children. Acharya J.B. Kripalani and his wife Sucheta followed this ideal to the letter.

Men, therefore, did not find Gandhi's appeal to women threatening their own dominant position within the family. The power-equation within the home remained undisturbed. Gandhi still spoke of Sita as the ideal wife. His aim was to use the traditional role of the Indian woman to extend these to the wider political sphere. The logic was simple if not simplistic: she was used to sacrificing for her husband, her children, her family; therefore, she was now

being asked to sacrifice for her country's freedom.

Gandhi critiqued women leaders for 'foolishly' thinking that any law or code could solve the problems of rural women. Many elite women seemed to agree. Yet, they continued to work for the reform of the legal system. They were neither foolish nor selfish. They did not agree with Gandhi about the direction of social change. They aimed at gaining legal measures to grant women some degree of equality. Measures were designed to (a) equalise women's right to divorce, (b) systematize marriage, (c) give protection in the case of desertion, (d) grant them guardianship over their children, and (e) make it possible for females to obtain a share in the family property. Though the gains were less than originally hoped for, there was victory in terms of organisation and systematisation of the law.

Gandhi was certainly a catalyst in bringing women into the nationalist movement on a mass scale. His approach appealed to women whose long experience in passive resistance and silent suffering he acknowledged, and to men who were willing to entrust women into his guardianship. Gandhi needed women to convert the campaign into a mass movement. But he liked to be in control of the women's actions and got angry when they stepped out of line. One must grant Gandhi his skill in holding women's discontents within the overall nationalist cause. He effectively mediated these discontents so that they remained targeted exclusively at imperialism. He did this not only with the masses of women who came out onto the streets to campaign but also with the mass of peasants and working class men whose caste and class grievances he

kept in check. Gandhi recognised the power of the women and the lower castes and contained it for the cause of Independence, uniting the nation behind the freedom struggle at the expense of injustices within caste, class and gender relations.

All this sums up Gandhi's ambivalence on the political role of women in pre-Independence India. The leadership was against the excessive subordination of women by men. But not to the fact that women generally played a socially subordinate role. Both liberals and radicals in the nationalist movement regarded women's political participation as an extension of their filial roles within the home. Women were mobilised to participate in the freedom movement because they were ideally suited to carry on non-violent, passive resistance, which the hierarchical structure of the traditional family had moulded them into. The Gandhi leadership urged women to function in the order of husband, family and country. If there was a conflict between family and country, filial responsibilities would come first. Women's political participation was *not* to be at the cost of their domestic duties.

III. GANDHI'S PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

There was a marked departure of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. 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 Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti, 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."

IV. GANDHIJI'S VIEW ON WOMEN UPLIFTMENT:

➤ In Vedic times men and women are equal in all walks of life, including the religious and the intellectual. Therefore, in proclaiming the perfect equality of men & women.

➤ Gandhiji was against-

1. The pernicious system of child marriage. He considered such marriage as initio null and void and as such, no marriage at all.

2. All social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. In the case of adult widows, especially those with children; he would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love, rather than to remarry. If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she have every right to remarry and society must not look down such marriage.

3. The purdah system. It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to the society.

4. The dowry system. For the middle and poor classes it was a nightmare. It was also on this account that while there was joy on the male child, there was expressed of silent mourning on the birth of a female child.

5. Heavy expenditure in connection with marriages. He wanted to simplify marriage ceremonials. He was against feasting on such occasions. Many marriages were celebrated in the Ashram. All that was done was the recitation of the simple Ashram prayer and some advice from Gandhiji to young couple on how they should live a contented and happy life of service. At the end of this simple ceremony, he would present to the couple a copy of Bhagavad-Gita.

6. Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women

V. GANDHIJI'S CONTRIBUTION FOR BETTERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

As we look back at the Indian history and compare the conditions of women before Gandhi's rise, and now, the progress we have made is quite enormous. A whole generation of women leaders came up influenced by Gandhi's vision. If today in

India so many women can go to work in offices, educational institutions, and factories without fear or hesitation, the roots for such system were laid 90 years ago by Gandhiji and his followers.

As mentioned earlier, Gandhiji formulated India's freedom struggle as a comprehensive plan for women's development. Even though a lot of inequalities remain in our society, there is a fundamental agreement that men and women are equal. As Indians, we can be very proud that the same cannot be claimed even by so called "advanced nations". In Britain as well as in the U.S.A., women could not vote 75 years ago. But women's voting came very naturally to us from the beginning. About 100 years ago, the western woman could not own property, get a divorce or take the custody of her children. We just have to look at the life and struggles of Dr. Annie Besant to understand the status of western women during Gandhiji's time. The western women had to take to streets, overcome many stereotypes to establish themselves voting and other rights. But for us, political, economic and voting rights came so naturally through the constitution.

VI. PRESENT POSITION OF WOMEN IN INDIA:

➤ A 1997 report claimed that at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry deaths, and at least a dozen die each day in 'kitchen fires' thought to be intentional.

➤ According to UNICEF's "State of the World's Children-2009" report, 47% of India's women aged 20–24 were married before the legal age of 18, with 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India.

➤ The National Crime Records Bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. Earlier, many cases were not registered with the police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases.

➤ Through the Panchayat Raj institutions, over a million women have actively entered political life in India. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Although the percentage of women in various levels of political activity has risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision making positions.

CONCLUSION:

Lastly we can conclude that the position of woman in India compared to other countries is poor. In some villages they are considering woman as a kitchen bee. This type of attitude has to be changed. But compared to the early days, these days' women are coming out freely and participating in every field. It's a good sign of women upliftment & empowerment. So, today also need to know Gandhijan thought of women upliftment.

In short, this is the Gandhian formula (sharing and sacrifice). Nobody has done as much as Gandhi has done to bring out masses of illiterate women from the four walls of their houses. A few talented women were spotted by him who worked shoulder to shoulder with him, like Midas touch, anybody whom he touched became vibrant and active soldier of movement and not a lifeless idol of gold. Many of us have to change our life style. Women have to be conscious and aware to feel and realize at every step of their life that they are builders of their nation and the peaceful world.

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