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Research Papers

GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF WOMEN AND HER EMANCIPATION IN HIS WRITINGS

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Abstract

The study of the changes of the modes of looking upon the positioning of women in both public and private spheres over the phases that Indian society has experienced so far is one of the most important subjects, which has significant implications on social and political transformations. The most explicit medium which has been the storehouse of the distinctive features of such changes, we can explore, is the writings of different epoch making personalities who had played definite roles in this regard. Indian English writing is an important source of the records of social, economic and political changes during the transitional periods in Indian society under the British hegemony.

Some of the personalities who were inherently involved in taking the nation ahead on its strength recorded the themes of happenings in their writings, and Aurobindo, Radhakrishna, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru are such persons who contributed equally to the intellectually of the nation by dint of their deep rooted treatise on philosophy, humanity and society with all its concerns.

M. K. Gandhi represents one of the most transitional periods in Indian history. During the time the country experienced a whole set of social, political and economic transitions. It is very pertinent to know how M. K. Gandhi viewed the position, status, and role of women in life and society against the background of patriarchal traditions. Because M. K. Gandhi was one of the most active crusaders for women's emancipation in India, and him, the freedom fight was not political alone. It was also an economic and socio reform of a national proportion. His numerous articles were published in Harijan, Young India, and his books. The story of My Experiments With truth, Hind Swaraj or India, home rule Unto This last- A paraphrase, Key of health, Satyagraha in South Africa are the treasure house of Gandhi's views on women and her role in building the society and the nation.

The position of women in this country has experienced many fluxes during various phases of the history. During the Rig Vedic age and also during the Sangram Age the status of women in Indian sub continent had been that of dignity and importance. The general position in the status of women was higher than that in any other ancient in the world including Greece and Rome. But the status of women during the years that followed, and the changes were a very profound nature. The relegation continued till the later half of 19th century, when the Western ideas motivated new ways of looking at the women question. The socio-religious movements like 'Brahmo Samaj' and

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'Arya samaj' paved the way for the process of emancipation of women. Swami Vivekananda also made his significant contribution in this aspect during the 1890s.

The arrival of M. K. Gandhi on Indian political scenario ushered a renewed era of liberation and emancipation of women. When Gandhiji assumed the leadership, only 2% of the women could receive the light of education and they did not have an identity of their own. The women were the victims of widowhood, the purdah, the dedication of girls to temples, prostitution, child marriage, the dowry system, the economic bondage and material slavery. He believed that the difference between man and women was nothing but biological. He opined that intellectually, mentally and spiritually women are equivalent to her male counterpart as she can participate in every activity. He wanted women to outgrow the traditional responsibilities and participate in the affairs of the nation. He criticized India's passion for the male progeny. He said that as long as we do not consider girls as natural as our boys our nation would be in a dark eclipse. He was very sympathetic towards the young widows and was very disturbed by the plight of the devidasis. Marriage in which girls were not consulted was declared unholy by Gandhi. He called upon the young to marry the widows and also to boycott child marriages. He never had a specific programme for women, but women had an integral role to play in all his programmes. He brought the women out of their homes and made them equal participants in all walks of life-social as well as political.

The father of the nation induced the feeling of self respect and consciousness of strength in the minds of women. In Young India (Dated 21-07-1921) Gandhi wrote, “Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for man including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man.” Again he wrote, “Refuse to be the slaves of your whims and fancies, and the slaves of man…. Come to your own and deliver your message again.”1 (Young India, 8-12-1927).He appealed to women to realize her place, “She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere to activity as man is in his. This ought to be natural condition of things as not as a result only of learning how to read and write.

“By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over which do not deserve an out not to have. Many of our movements stop halfway because of the condition of women.2 Gandhiji emphasized on the capability of woman in nation building. Indian woman are not abalas(Helpless). They are famous for the heroic deeds of he past, which they did not achieve with the help of the sword, but of character. Even today they help the nation in many ways. They can do some useful works by which they can not only help themselves, but also the nation as a whole, thereby taking the country nearer the goal.3 (Harijan, 26-1-47). There is no doubt that of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none in India has been so potent as the field of non-violent action which Gandhiji offered to women in his 'War' against British domination of India. It brought them out in their thousands form sheltered homes to stand the furnace of a fiery trial without flinching. Even socially conservative, upper caste families applauded women's participation in the non-violent Gandhian movement. Devaki Jain, in “Gandhian Contribution towards a Theory of “Feminist Ethic”, has commented that Mahatma made it possible for woman to come out of the narrow worlds of their homes to participate in a wider community. His success was less ideological than strategic; he drew on traditional symbols of female power, emphasized women strength, and appealed directly to them addressing them as self conscious arbiters of their own destiny. Gandhi sought personal and ethical transformations for women are not material ones, but regard the movement as having empowered woman all the same. Gandhi drew on a non-violent feminine strength against the brute masculinity of British power. All the observations made above are reflected in the writings of M.K. Gandhi which are spread over a massive period of time and space. The attempt of this study would be to categories the matters relating to women's question as reflected in these works.

Gandhi knew that the progress of nation could not be achieved without the progress of women. The women's question was a central issue in the most controversial debate and social reform in the early mid nineteenth century, the period which is also known as the 'Bengal Renaissance'.4 Sujata Patel's ideas on Gandhi is clearly stated in Construction and re-construction of women, in the period between 1917-1922. It is

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not only the first phase of active participation of the Indian people in the national struggle, but it also saw the emergence of Gandhi as the leader directing the struggle. It is difficult to separate analytically which preceded first, women's participation or Gandhi's advocacy of this.

Gandhi's writings of women till 1916 are couched in a framework common to reformists. Gandhi seems to have close affinity with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and his ideas on women's education with which he agreed, and whose cause he advocates. He notes with awe the manly strength they have shown in their confrontation with the police, given the fact that they were not from the same working c lass. Gandhi does not make disparaging remarks on their confrontation with police or their fight for political equality, but he draws out implications for this movement for the women in India. He only feels that the entire population should draw lesson from them. As yet in Gandhi there does not seem to be any consciousness of the distinct place of women in national awakening. We see Gandhi addressing himself more and more to the question of women in India, first by questioning existing Hindu practices that limit the involvement in India, secondly by questioning the exiting Hindu practices that limit the involvement in the national awakening like Purdah, and later by affirming and establishing for himself the distinct role woman can play in the national movement. It is a slow process that builds his ideas and makes the necessary meditation that link women to the national movement through the spinning wheel. Gandhi believes in the complementarily and indivisibility of the two sexes rooted in their distinctive biological and reproductive features and socially manifested in a romantic togetherness In a forward to a book published on women by the Bhogini Samaj in late 1917 century Gandhi condemns Hindu practices like child marriage and the legitimation it has received in contemporary shastras.

In 1917-1918 Gandhi continues to write in this vein in the context of women. He is affirming their place as thinkers and actors in modern family which in his opinion had earlier secluded women from participating in society, and perceived them as sexual objects. Women are the assets, something more than mere objects. They are subjects and people of importance. In the Harijan, he states 'Women may not look for protection to men. They must rely on their own strength and purity of character and on God and did Draupadi of old. Comparing women to mythical figures like Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi, he states legislation has been mostly the handiwork of men; and man has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task. The largest part or our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our Shastras as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women, who will attempt this and how.In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt, we will have to produce women, pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. If we do produce them, such modern sisters will receive the same homage Hindu society as being paid to their prototypes of yore. Their words will have the same authority as the Shastras. We will feel ashamed of the stray reflections on them in our Smritis, and will soon forget them. Such revolutions have occurred in Hinduism in the past, and will still take place in the future, leading to the stability of our faith". 5 He does not make any distinction between man and woman in the Harijans, he states- "I make no distinction between man and woman. Woman should feel just as independent as men. Bravery is not man's monopoly". He was for the empowerment of women. He wanted to emancipate women from the prevailing discriminations on the ground of gender. In support of women's emancipation, "Today few women take part in politics and most of these do not do independent thinking. They are content to carry out their parents, or their husbands' behests. Realizing their dependence, they cry out for women's rights. Instead of doing this, however, women worker should enroll women as voters, impart to have important or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of chaste that bind them, so as to bring about a change in them which will compel men to realize woman's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honour."7

In the Harijan Gandhi states that women must dress in a simple way. He states that- "I have a fear that the modern girl loves to be Juliet to half a dozen Romeos. She loves adventures. The modern girl dresses not to protect herself from wind, rain and sun, but to attract attention. She improves upon nature by painting herself and looking extraordinary. The non-violent way is not for such girls."8 He declares that wearing Homespun Khadi is the only solution for emancipation of woman. In an extract from Pyarelal's letter he

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mentioned, "And as a first step towards attaining purity you must wear pure Homespun khadi, just as Sita did in the days of old. And lastly you must emancipate yourselves and your daughters form the thralldom of various social abuses and tyrannies that are prevalent at present. He states that women have got a special mission i.e the duty of motherhood, rearing children and taking care of the house. In the Harijan he makes it clear this special mission of women – "The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread-earner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct.9

In my opinion – "It is degrading both for man and woman that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end. In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him own. The sin will be on man's head for tempting or compelling his companion to desert her special calling. There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there is in defending it against attack from without. 'My contribution to the great problem lies in my presenting for acceptance truth and ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this woman will be the unquestioned leader and, having this found her place in human evolution, she will shed her inferiority complex. If she is able to do this successfully, she must resolutely refuse to believe in the modern teaching that everything is determined and regulated by the sex impulse".10

In Young India, he makes an effort to emancipate the enlightened daughters of Bharat Mata. "Woman has circumvented man in a variety of ways in her unconsciously subtle ways, as man has vainly and equality unconsciously struggled to thwart woman in gaining ascendancy over him. The result is a stalemate. Thus viewed, it is a serious problem the enlightened daughters of Bharat Mata are called upon to solve. They may not ape the manner of the West, which may be suited to its environment. They must apply methods suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment. Theirs must be the strong, controlling, purifying, steadying hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejecting what is base and degrading. This is the work of Sitas, Draupadis, Savitris, and Damayantis, not of amazons and prudes".11 Gandhi believers in the proper education of women. In the Harijan he states- 'I believe in the proper education of woman. But I do believe that woman will not make her-contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with men. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man".12

Gandhi sought to bring moral reform among the dancing girls by appealing them to take to the spinning wheel. In his speech at Rajamundry (April 3, 1921) he address them- "If there is a dancing girl amidst you, I ask you to make her life not one of shame. Take up the spinning wheel and take a few pies that the work will bring you, it will being pies and God into your house.13

A series of articles indicates the trend his mind is working on. According to Gandhi no longer is education considered means for development of woman. Woman already have their strength and according to Gandhi they can intervene and act on contemporary issues. He advocates the use of the spinning wheel in a series of writings mainly man for women, wherein he gives his new message for the women in India, "Spin for the upliftment of the country". It is not only an effective strategy for increasing the involvement of women in the national struggle, but it "also made possible their involvement".14 He knows that successful implementation of the vow of Swadeshi was only possible if women were involved in the movement. It is important that women should be involved in the movement because they take decision regarding dress. If women could now show there national consciousness and their strength by taking decisions on wearing Indian clothes, they could make Swadeshi a success.From the above it seems that Gandhi has indeed travelled a lot in his understanding of the role women could play in the nation's resurgence.

Partha Chatterjee (a sociologue) states that the battle for the 'new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged at home.15 The new women as construed by the nationalized was part of a modernizing movement which shot to participate in the outside world without compromising the traditional values. Bapu created a new arena of domination for women in the domestic sphere. He is at once demolishing her

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seclusion and her image as sexual objects, and simultaneously asserting her power in all household decisions. He does this by introducing nationalist politics into the household without breaking the domestic space which defines women. The fact that he wishes to affirm and emphasized is the crucial role of women in the household as against her activity outside, comes out very clearly in his writings on women and work.

.Gandhi was regarded as the most active crusaders of women's emancipation. It needs to be seen from his writings on Harijan, Young India, Hind Swaraj, Indian Home Rule unto his last, really aimed at the progress of women. Gandhi knew that the progress of a woman is integrally related with the progress of nation. Further he was conscious of the need to counter the colonial discourses which focused on the depraved condition of Indian women and people of importance. The major writers of the later half of the 19th century and the early half of the 20th century were conscious of improving the status of women. Partha Chatterjee states that the battle for the new idea of womanhood was waged at home. The women's question was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early mid nineteenth century Bengal. During Renaissance. Vidyasagar tried his best to legalize widow remarriage and do away with Kulin polygamy.The entire structure of colonialist discourse was fundamentally constituted around the project of civilizing the Indian people. Formal education became a necessity for the new women. For the new women, it became possible to acquire refinement through education and do away with Kulin Polygamy.For the new women; it became possible to acquire refinement through education without jeopardizing her place at home. There was the concept of adulation of women's as goddess or mother. This concept facilitated women to go out in to the public world. The battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged at home. Home was the place where the new idea of womanhood initially started. The discourse of nationalism shows two separate spheres namely the outer and inner or the home and the world. This paper attempts to make an analysis of women in two distinct spheres, i.e., the outer and the inner. Gandhi defines the social roles and involvement of women in contemporary society. He asserts that women are not playthings but 'Creative individuals who have a specific space for the construction of creativity". Gandhi said that women had played an important part in the domestic space or household as mothers and wives.

Gandhi sought to emancipate women via the symbol of the spinning wheel. The spinning wheel was a powerful symbol by which women could be emancipated. From early 1919 onwards Gandhi advocates the issue of the spinning wheel in a series of writings mainly meant for women wherein he gives his message for the women of India to spin for the economic progress of the country. There was indeed a very shrewd intervention by Gandhi. It was only an effective strategy for increasing the involvement of women in the national struggle. He knew that the successful implementation of the vow of Swadeshi was only possible if women mere involved in the movement, for they look after the children and take decision regarding dress. If women could now show that their national consciousness and their strength by taking decisions on wearing clothes, they could make Swadeshi a success.

He wishes to emphasize and affirm the crucial role of women in the household as against her activity outside, comes out clearly and his writings. Thus he says to the wealthy and educated sisters of India, "If you wish to protect the chastity of the poor sisters, you must take a prominent part in the movement for hands spinning and hand weaving."16 As such this morally superior woman assumes a force in Gandhi. Women cannot think themselves as useless creatures. Sita, Draupadi and other women filled the wicked with awe. He turns the weakness of women into strength as part of the same strategy and as embodied in the conceptions of Satyagraha and ahimsa (Non-violence). The non-violent movement he asserts is to enable the weakest human being indicate his or her dignity. The women are weak personified. No doubt this weakness can be strong in soul and in spirit. Gandhi attributed mythical figures to women like Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti in order to participate in the national struggle. They were compared to female deities. Gandhi emphasized that there can be salvation, only when women became to us what Uma was to Shankar.The emphasized on the complementary roles of men and women. He said that until women become to us what – "Uma was to Shankar", 'Sita to Rama" and 'Damayanti to Nala, there cannot be progress. He brings the idea of complementary roles of men and women citing the mythological characters like Sita to Rama and to Nala to Damayanti". He strongly criticized the social practices of child

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marriage which stood as a major obstacle on the progress of women. He comments that – "As long as we have around our necks the noose of child marriage' he feels the progress of women could not be achieved. Child marriage was very much prevalent during Gandhi's time."17

Gandhi was very much against child marriage. Child marriage stood as a hindrance in the nation's progress. Small girls were married to aged people of fifty or sixty. When the husbands of these girls expired they became child widows. The condition of these child widows was deplorable. Gandhi boycotted the families who were involved in child marriage. The public was asked to boycott them socially. He observed that many girls disappeared from schools after marriage. Studies are discontinued from the very day she gets married. The mothers of these children cannot think of educating them or of otherwise making their dry life of cheerful on. In his speech at Bhogini Samaj, Bombay February 20,1918, he opines that a man who marries a young girl does not do so out of altruistic motive, but through cheer last.

For empowerment of women, Gandhi fought against the evils of Purdah system. According to Gandhi – "No serious steps can be taken for their welfare unless the veil is torn down".18 During Gandhi's time a reasoned appeal was signed by most influential people of Bihar and almost an equal number of ladies of the province, advising the total abolition of Purdah. In Gandhi's article "the doom of the Purdah" we come to know that people in Bihar played a leading role for abolition of Purdah. Gandhi had a premonition that Purdah would be a thing of the past in Bihar.He wanted the women of Bihar to be like the other states (Karnataka, Maharastra and Tamilnadu). He was all praise for the Bihari leaders on having earnestly taken up the struggle against Purdah. Gandhi felt that if women were to be excellent managers at home, and helpful companions of their husbands, and useful members of the community, then the Purdah as it exits must go. He was against the idea that women should be dependent on foreign cloth. According to Gandhi- "In the matter of cloth and other things their dependence on foreign countries was responsible for their present degradation."19He further added that women should not hanker after jewellery." There is no beauty in perforating the nose and the ears and inserting something there or in wearing ornaments around the neck".

Compared with the other political figures of his time whose visions regarding women were restricted to the symbolic representations, Gandhi's notions regarding women were different. He emancipated women to the public sphere. This was a major breakthrough, as Gandhi by bringing women to the public spheres, could make it to a mass movement. It was for him that the women could see themselves as important political subjects of the nation. They could see the importance of their roles as women, and this increased their feeling of confidence. Women in large numbers participated in national activities. They could also work for the economic upliftment of the nation by "spinning Khadi". Thus the policies and programmes Gandhi had envisioned for women, worked as important forces for bringing women to the national arena.They came to be recognized as subjects of the nation. This instilled their confidence and was the driving force in bringing about the women's movement in India. Although Gandhi's motive of bringing women to national life was political, it was to make the freedom struggle a mass movement; it did help in the emancipation of women. This brought a long lasting influence in the development of women's consciousness. They were brought into the political arena for a specific purpose like boycott of foreign cloth, picketing of shops, selling liquor and foreign cloth raising funds, and working for what Gandhi called the constructive programme in the villages. Typically after specific campaign needed the women returned to the regular lives. At no point Gandhi challenged their traditional roles. Such issue based participation has continued to characterize Indian women's involvement in politics. Since independence following Gandhi's example, women have used extra-constitutional means to publicized specific issues that affect their lives. In the 1970s women protested against the food prices and scarcity of cooking oil and kerosene.

During the last few years when urban women have come out of the comfort of their homes demonstrate against eve teasing, rape and dowry murders. These protests, unlike those during the nationalist movement were well organized and directed by autonomous groups that appeared around the country in response to specific situations. Similarly women in villages have come together to register objection to development project that ignore women's need for fodder and fuel. The most publicized were the Chippco movements to protect the forests from being filled and in the recent unsuccessful attempts

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by men and women to stop the construction of the World Bank Financed Narmada Dam. But while Gandhi may have politicized thousands of Indian women it is only recently that Indian women from different regions classes and castes have taken the initiatives themselves to fight for their rights, they tend to see their rights within the framework of the gender roles defined by Gandhi.

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