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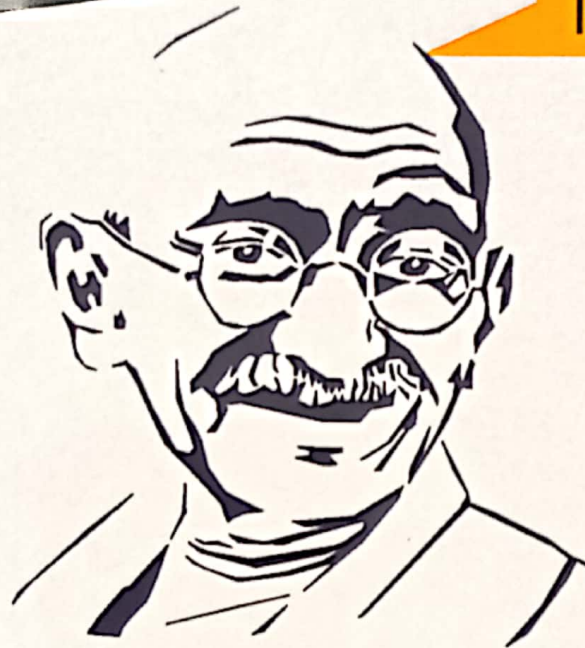
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Special Issue on

MAHATMA GANDHI IN THE CHANGING TIMES

(Book 1)

✦ EDITOR IN CHIEF ✦

DR. M. RAGHIB DESHMUKH



Issue Editors

**Dr. Kalyan Gangarde
Mr. Rahul Salve
Dr. Sachin Bhumbe**



MAHATMA GANDHI
EDUCATION & WELFARE SOCIETY

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SPECIAL ISSUE

ON

MAHATMA GANDHI
IN THE CHANGING TIMES

(BOOK 1)

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Mahatma Gandhi and Women Empowerment: A Review

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Introduction: The status of Women in India was never been a constant. In ancient period, though women enjoyed equal status along with men, in medieval period it came down drastically. In modern era she continues with the subordinate status. Reformers have worked a lot for women upliftment. Education is the key for her empowerment. Mahatma Gandhi, to some extent also thought alike. This paper is an attempt to take a review of Gandhiji's thoughts about women empowerment/ emancipation.

Mahatma Gandhi and his Ideals about Women

Indian society basically did not possess positive and liberal ideas about women. They were offered secondary position along with strong set of restrictions and thus were compelled to persist in seclusion. On this background Gandhiji's socio-political philosophy is feminist, directing towards gender equality but still based on patriarchal values.¹ Gandhiji's first real encounter with women was with his wife, Kasturba. They were married in 1882, when she was thirteen and he was twelve years old. With a pre conception that a wife must always be subjugated to her husband's will, he acted as a dominating husband, but was challenged by his strong and spirited wife, who stood by him for her rights with dignity and self-respect, which, in the early years he thought of as stubbornness, and later adorned as moral courage.² He looked upon women as 'the mother, maker and silent leader of man' and got disturbed to see them lost to become a mere property of man.³

In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi writes "If you women only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full sense of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slave and holders have become one in the crime on degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once slave holder myself but Ba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?"⁴

In his words "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by men. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality."⁵ The idea of equality has been expressed.

In his own institutions and program of work he paid equal attention and gave equal place to girls and women. At any of the ashrams, whether it is Sabarmati or at Sevagram, they had freedom and were self-confident. Nothing delighted him more than the success of women in any sphere of life.⁶

'The economic and the moral salvation of India rest mainly with you,' he said in message to 'the women of India in 1921.' "The future of India lies on your knees for you will nurture the future generation. You can bring up the children of India to become simple, God-fearing and brave men and women or you can pamper them to be weaklings unfit to brave the storms of life."⁷ These quotes gives idea of his approach towards Indian women.

Gandhiji advocated equal status to women in society, education and property. He opposed all ill practices detrimental to women including female infanticide, illiteracy, child marriage, dowry, purdah, enforced widowhood, polygamy, molestation and prostitution; to name a few.

- **Female infanticide:** He was against the practice of female infanticide. Girl was unwanted as she need to get married and that too with dowry; making the girl child liability for her parents.⁸
- **Female illiteracy:** Gandhiji believed that illiteracy was the root cause of all the evils against women. He therefore advocated that education is necessary for women.
- **Child marriage:** Gandhiji opposed child marriages as there is no consent of concerned boy and girl. Child marriages made innocent girls objects of man's lust; ruined their health and sometimes resulted in enforced widowhood.⁹
- **Dowry:** Gandhiji held that the custom of dowry turned young girls into mere goods to be bought and sold. He advocated women education and also stressed the need of drastic measure like organizing youth movements and Satyagraha against those practicing the ill custom.¹⁰
- **Purdah (Veil):** Gandhiji regarded Purdah as inhuman and immoral, for it restricted women's free movements, breathing etc. He believed that the veil results in insecurity among women and affects their health adversely. He appealed all to tear down purdah.¹¹
- **Enforced Widowhood:** Gandhiji was sorry for the condition of child widows who were denied the rights to re-marry and also suffered other social and legal disabilities. He advised the parents to see that the child widows are duly and well married.¹² Regarding adult widows, he felt that the decision to re-marry should rest with the widow, but he was against any wrong doing to the widows. He advised every family to treat widow with utmost respect.¹³
- **Sati:** Gandhiji found the sati custom is a result of men's blind egoism. To him sati was a useless exercise as instead of restoring the dead husband to life, it takes away one more life.
- **Polygamy and subjugation of wives:** To Gandhiji wife was not the slave of the husband but his better half and

friend. If a husband is unjust to his wife, she has the right to get separated.

- **Molestation:** He wanted girls to learn the art of protecting themselves against indecent behaviour of men. "When a woman is assaulted she may not stop to think in terms of himsa or ahimsa. Her primary duty is self-protection..."¹⁴
- **Prostitution:** He regarded prostitution as a social disease promoted by men who lack morality. He felt it as a bitter shame, sorrow and humiliation that a woman have to sell their chastity for men's lust.¹⁵ In his writings and speeches he vehemently opposed all these evil practices and tried to banish these blockades and concentrated all energies towards freedom movement.

Women and Gandhiji's Satyagraha and National Movement : Gandhiji believed that Satyagraha was the most powerful weapon in non-violent movement which can be used by both men and women in the struggle for freedom. It involves defiance-willful, peaceful, breaking of unjust laws by picketing, protesting, squatting, obstructing, challenging and publicly resisting. Since women were the most non-violent and ardent lovers of peace; it could be sharpened and extended as a weapon in struggle against the unjust.

Gandhiji said that women "strengthen my belief in Swadeshi and Satyagraha...if I could inspire in men devotion as pure as I find in the women, within a year, India would be raised to a height impossible to imagine. As for Swaraj it was the easiest thing in the world."¹⁶

Gandhiji realized that women's involvement in the Indian national movement was a life-saving force which would prevent the movement from getting degenerated by senseless violence. He felt the important role women could play in purifying public life and hence constructed feminist politics and he became an epithet of feminine virtues.¹⁷

Women were always participating in Gandhiji's all the constructive activities. Rashtriya Mahila Sangh, Nari Satyagrahi Committee were formed to give training to women Satyagrahis. Singing propaganda songs, sanitation, first aid, spinning was there major programs. Similarly they started taking out processions. Women from Bombay, Bengal, Punjab, Madras and Delhi showed the remarkable skills during the Civil Disobedience Movement. A few of them managed various Ashrams on the basis of his philosophy at Sabarmati and Sevagram. Besides his wife, many distinguished women like Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Sushila Nayar, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sucheta Kriplani etc. all were his associates.

According to Gandhiji, during this period, some of them manufactured contraband salt, picketed foreign cloth and liquor shops and discouraged both the seller and the customer from using these products. At late hours in the night some of them pursued the drunkards to their retreats with audacity and kindness. Some of them even marched to jails, and also sustained lathi blows.¹⁸ Thus women had a remarkable contribution in the struggle for Independence.

Women as Shakti : Gandhiji believed that women have been gifted by God but their amazing power has been lying unutilized. If they realize their power they can astound the world.¹⁹

Conclusion : As compared to many other countries, India lags far behind on the front of "Women upliftment/emancipation and empowerment" though it has improved a lot over the time.

Gandhiji can't be labeled "feminist" or "anti - feminist" but it is sure that he was the true friend of women and always thought of their equality and development. He wanted them to play an important role in social, political and economic life of India. He tried his best to bring in positive changes in the lives of Indian women.

Considering his timeline of about 70 to 80 years ago, the prevalent society conditions, customs and traditions; advocating for gender equality and gender non-violence was an uphill task. Over and above this, he also promoted them as main force in Satyagraha and movement for independence.

His literature sure will continue to inspire people towards women emancipation for many more years to come.

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Prabhavathi Prabhakaran

