

# Women in the Gandhian Philosophy: A Study from Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract:** Gandhi was remarkably forward looking in his attitude towards women. Gandhi not only allowed the social disabilities the women suffered, but also critical towards prevailing ideas of inequality such as the performance of male children, stereotypes of female timidity, exploitative male sexual attitude and the relegation of women to the home. Gandhi's view about women and their role in public life was a departure from those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers. Gandhi saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He opposed the view that women's real sphere of activity was the home, instead of it he was instrumental in creating conditions which could help women break the shackles of domesticity. In this paper an attempt is made to understand how far the Gandhian philosophy on women is able to meet the prevailing ideas of feminism and how far Gandhi was consistent in affirming his identity with keeping in view of the ideas of women empowerment.

**Key Words:** Gandhi, Philosophy, women, feminism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. It advocates gender equality for men and women, campaigns for women's right and interests. In India under the colonial influence and as a part of 19th century reform movement, the feminist idea begins to spread. During the pre independence period feminist questions revolved round some major issues like the spread of education, abolition of sati system, campaign for widow remarriage etc. Sarbani Guha Ghosal in her article 'Major trends of feminism in India' wrote that in colonial India social reform movement modernized gendered relations in some upper caste families. Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar though have made important contribution towards the emancipation of women in the country, unfortunately their efforts largely remained confined to particular echelons of society and failed to touch the grassroots (1). During the pre-independence days, it was Gandhi who played an important role in mobilizing women. He seems to have been the first public figure in India to use the idea in a feminist context by arguing that the sexes are fundamentally equal because the most important aspect of each, the soul is the same (2).

### 1.1. OBJECTIVE:

Here in this paper an attempt has been made to discuss the following objectives-

1. Ideology of Gandhi on women and how his ideology is different from that of his contemporary society.
2. How far Gandhi's philosophy on women is acceptable from feminist perspective?

## 2. DISCUSSION:

The social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the pioneers in raising discussion on women's issues like child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, *purdah*, denial of education to women etc. They felt that opening of educational opportunities to girls, legal reform and creation of awareness to the disabilities faced by women will help bring about social transformation. The social reform movement did not challenge the patriarchal value system, nor did it argue for wider participation of women. In fact the wife and the mother role was re-emphasised by the social reformers with a proviso that these roles be performed more efficiently (3). The call to women to join in public life was a far cry till the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, a new journal for women, begun in 1875, stated: "we will not discuss political events and controversies because politics would not be interesting or intelligible to women in this country of present" (4). In 1889, four years after the Indian National Congress was founded, ten women attended its annual meeting. From this time on, women attended every meeting of INC, sometimes as delegates, but more often observers. Attending with their fathers and husband, their contribution was both decorative and symbolic (5). It was Gandhiji who gave emphasis on women participation in freedom movement to lead it to a mass movement. He was of the opinion that there was no difference between man and women. Even he said that morally women are stronger than men. Gandhi's first encounter with women power took place in Africa. There he realized real strength of women and later in India he decided to involve women in struggle for independence to make it a mass movement (6).

Gandhi as the leader of the Indian national movement realized the huge political potential of the Indian womanhood and also because of his concern for sexual equality, Gandhi took a keen interest in the welfare of Indian women. He scrutinized the full course of their lives, from childhood to old age, and also focused on certain special situations in which they found themselves.

Gandhi saw education as an essential means of enabling women to uphold their natural rights, to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion. When Gandhi advocated education for women, he did not intend that it should be limited to the domestic arts. He wishes to see girls prepared for public service, particularly village uplift work. He also hoped that those who had received an education would not waste it by retiring into their homes after marriage. Indeed, he urged young women to consider remaining single so that they would be more free to serve the nation (7).

Gandhi's bill of rights for children was based on the idea that they should be equal in their parents' affection and in opportunity, regardless of his sex. He failed to see any reason for the common tendency of Indian families to express "jubilation over the birth of a son" or alternatively, to go into "mourning over that of a daughter." Both sexes, in his view were "God's gifts" and equally necessary to keep the world going." In fact, the importance of daughters to the world meant not only that they should receive the same love as sons, but also that they should not be denied educational opportunities, which parents often served to the male sex(8).

Much of Gandhi's feminism had to do with marriage. Like other reformers, he angrily denounced parents who allowed their pre-adolescent daughters to become brides. He also attacked the ban on widowers and because of the absurd hardship it imposed on child widows. When the *Sarada* Act of 1829 sought to rise the age of consent to 14, Gandhi felt it should have been raised to 16 or even 18. He was willing to overlook and disregard the religious sanctified this evil practice of child marriage (9).

In dealing with relations between husband and wife, Gandhi insisted that each should regard the other as an equal partner. Sujata Patel in her article 'Construction and Reconstruction of women in Gandhi' wrote that according to Gandhi women are not 'plaything' but creative individuals who have a specific space for the construction of this creativity. This is mainly in the arena of the household and the domestic space. They play important role as mothers and wives (10). Gandhi's believe in material equality and his general conclusion that no occupation should be reserved exclusively for one sex led him to advocate a wider range of activities for wives. According to Shane Ryland, naturally this meant no *pardah*. It was meant that husbands should help their wives to have a life outside the home, preferably in the realm of public service (11).

Gandhi spoke not only to problems common to most women, but also to the tragedies of those who had fallen from grace in the eyes of society. He took up the cause of prostitutes and urged them to adopt spinning as an alternative livelihood. The fight against prostitution and the rehabilitation of our fallen sister was an integral part of the programme for national reconstruction and purification which Gandhi urged women to take up. He asked them to "form a women's volunteer league for reclamation of the fallen women." There are quite a few instances of prostitutes having given up their calling and taken to charkha as a means of livelihood, in response to Gandhi's call. This happened at Madaripur and Noakhali in Bengal (12).

The oppressive customs of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. He preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry. Gandhi's ideal of womanhood was Sita but his message to Indian women was to rise above wifehood and become sisters. He felt a wife cold never became a sister in full sense of world. It was possible to become the world's sister only by making '*Brahmacharya* a natural condition' and being 'fired by the spirit of service' (13).

Thus Gandhi did and spoke a lot for the welfare of the Indian women. The impact of Gandhi's feminist thinking though could not be documented in detail but what is significant that it led at least to a significant increase in the public involvement of women. Saluting his efforts to the cause of women which achieved a considerable success, it is necessary to take a look into the ideological influence in developing his feminist thinking. In forming his concept of feminism he was sometimes guided by morality, sometimes by metaphysical belief and sometimes by the need of time (political cause). According to Neera Desai Gandhi's concept of women was a peculiar blend of religious and rational elements. He therefore, had immense faith in the women's inner strength and her moral appeal. But some age-old prejudices creped in his mind which was reflected in some of his virtues.

After taking the vow of *brahmacharya*, Gandhi summed up what the vow ideally meant-"From that day when I began *brahmacharya*, our freedom began. My wife became a free woman, free from my authority as her lord and master, and I became free from my slavery to my own appetite which she had to satisfy" (14).

According to him a woman can achieve a higher moral and spiritual role if she rejects her sexuality, reproduction and family life and devotes herself to the welfare of the people. Gandhi was of the view that the real strength of a woman was her consciousness of her 'purity' and 'chastity'. This dagglng purity could disarm even the most beastly of men. Woman's virtue was to be her defence. In any case, she should prefer to give up her life rather than her virtue. According to Madhu Kishwar, the prominent feminist writer this equation rape with loss of virtue reflects the age-old patriarchal bias (15). This was the Gandhi's standard advice to women for defense against male

aggression. He felt sure that a truly chaste and brave woman would not find it difficult to kill herself at the altar of her chastity. From the feminist point of view Gandhi's attitude towards women's chastity is surrendered by age-old prejudice. Like all human beings, he did find it easy to rid himself of prejudices which had become firmly established in the collective subconscious of his culture through the ages.

Despite his obsession with sexual chastity, in response to an attempt to justify pre-puberty marriages on the basis that the sexual dive of women could lead them to indulgence and sexual malpractices before marriage. Gandhi wrote-“And why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity?...why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?”(16)

### 3. CONCLUSION:

Gandhi's view on women is definitely based on the emancipation of women from the plight of misery and sufferings. From the education to occupation, from rights of girl child to a wife, from sexuality and family matter to dowry system, Gandhi fought for not only equal rights of women with their male counterpart but sometimes more than that which definitely fulfill the very essence of feminist principles. Still, from modern sense of feminist ideology Gandhi's view on women lost its feminist temperament in some cases. Gandhi talked about purity and impurity of women which is itself a biased question, his concept of ideal women and in some cases he forwarded some views on women from traditional religious thinking. Gandhi viewed that a woman can achieved higher moral and spiritual role by rejecting sexuality, reproduction and family life and at the same time by involving in welfare activities of people. Gandhi, who was well ahead in his attitude towards women, sometimes contradicted his view by adopting traditional perceptions of women. Gandhi's view on women was guided by political motive which even reflected in his argument- 'many of our movements stop halfway because of the condition of our women'. Gandhi from the time of his activities in South Africa understood that without the participation of the half of the society (womenfolk) freedom would not be possible to gain. It is therefore, he felt the need of upgrading the position of women so that they would come out from the kitchen to freedom struggle.

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