Introduction
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Society in any country has generally been patriarchal in nature. The natural consequence has been the subjugation of woman in every sphere over centuries. She has been made to accept the fact that she is to play second fiddle to man, and toe his line always, for she is the weaker sex. She has rarely had her say in matters of importance. This situation more or less prevailed with the woman unquestioningly accepting her inferior position, till the nineteenth century. With the advances made in scientific knowledge and an emerging rational outlook, both enlightened men and women began to voice a protest against the unjust attitude of the society towards women, and women began clamouring for equal status with men individually as well as through organized movements.

The Indian situation has not been dissimilar, although it is on record that during the Vedic period women seem to have enjoyed a respectable status. But they seem to have lost this status later. By the time the British came to colonise India, the social position of the Indian woman, vis-a-vis her male counterpart, was pathetic, to say the least. But developments in the nineteenth century, as elsewhere, saw the emergence of reformers and reform movements, in India as well.
Not that there were no earlier attempts made to uphold the dignity of women. Over two thousand years ago Buddha and Mahaveer founded religions where women were treated with respect. There have, indeed, been spirited men and women, from the very early times, who protested against the treatment meted out to women. Sanskrit scholars and writers like Varahamihira, Bana, Virata, Medhatithi and Devabhatta were outspoken critics of injustice against women. Draupadi in Mahabharatha, Shivasharane Akkamahadevi, Rani Durgadevi, the Rathod queen of Jodhpur, Ahalyabai Holkar of Indore, Rani of Jhansi, Kittur Channamma and the celebrated Mirabai exercised their individuality and rose above the obstacles of their times. But these are honourable exceptions. Women in general, the housewife for instance, rarely enjoyed a position of importance.

Twelfth century, which saw the advent of Basaveshwara in south India, witnessed under his influence almost an overhauling of the society in Karnataka, cleansing it of all social evils, in particular the belief in the inequality of sexes. Basaveshwara, the great social reformer, rejected most of the traditional beliefs of the Hinduism of his time. He advocated absolute equality of sexes for the first time. He based his doctrine of sexual equality upon the Hindu traditional belief that the individual human soul (Atman) is identical with the universal soul or ultimate reality (Brahman). He
had an abiding faith in God and the absolute values of truth, love, justice and sacrifice. According to him men are not superior to women; women must be treated with respect. He denounced caste system and untouchability. Many sharanes (women saints) composed vachanas during this period.

The impact of Basaveshwara, however, was not felt all over the country, and it was not long before men asserted themselves again. The nineteenth century saw reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others standing for the cause of women, but it was after Gandhi came on the national scene that committed and widespread activities in social reform got the needed impetus. Gandhi was of the firm belief that unless India got rid of its weaknesses and social evils, it would not be fit enough for swaraj. Removal of untouchability and securing for woman her rightful status at home and in society were among his primary concerns.

Gandhi and Religion

Any stand of Gandhi, including on women, or his philosophy, cannot be appreciated without understanding his views on religion. Hence, it may not be irrelevant here to consider in some detail his views on religion. The essence of Gandhi's life and philosophy is religion. Gandhi's attitude to religion holds the key to the understanding of his life and thought. For him religion is an
indissoluble whole which cannot be separated from other spheres
of life. Gandhi asserted, "I do not conceive religion as one of the
many activities of mankind... For me every, (even) the tiniest,
activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion."¹ For
Gandhi religion is rooted in morality and the essence of morality
lies in love and non-violence. To lead a religious life, therefore, is to
lead a moral life. True religion and true morality are inseparably
bound up with each other.

Gandhi had a certain objective of life and all his actions were
ultimately determined by it. He believed that the ultimate end of
life is the liberation of soul. For him realization of the self was the
final objective of life. It is only in the light of this objective that one
can appreciate and understand Gandhi's non-violence, his fasts,
his trusteeship of the rich and his social reform. He stated his
objective in these words:

What I want to achieve - what I have been striving
and pining to achieve these thirty years, - is self-
realization, to see God face to face, to attain
MOKSHA. I live and move and have my being in
pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of
speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the
political field, are directed to this same end.²
Gandhi was more sure of God's existence than of anything else. And for him there is no other God than truth, and the only means for realization of truth is non-violence or love; truth meant the goal of life, self-realization. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan supports this view when he writes, "The inspiration of his life has been what is commonly called religion, religion not in the sense of subscription to dogmas or conformity to ritual, but religion in the sense of an abiding faith in the absolute values of truth, love and justice and a persistent endeavor to realize them on earth."

Gandhi was one of the most forceful personalities of modern India who believed that religion was a great creative force in human life. He stated that he approached everything in a religious spirit. He was deeply influenced by the profoundly philosophical and ethical teachings of the Gita. The most persistent theme in Gandhian writings was the emphasis on the twin values of truth and non-violence. Religion to him symbolized the attainment of moral perfection through the instrumentality of absolute truth. In this sense, even though the influence of Hinduism is evident, yet his religious beliefs transcend the Hindu religion. Gandhi explained his concept of religion in a clear-cut manner, "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends
Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies.4

The reason for such deep influence of religion was due to Gandhi's being born in a deeply religious family. In his formative years he regularly visited temples with his mother and observed a number of Hindu rites. Hinduism, in spite of its faults, was a very liberal religion and this aspect of Hinduism greatly appealed to Gandhi's mind. The book, which was to leave a lasting impact, on his mind, was the Bhagavadgita. He was of the opinion that the central message of the Gita was that through detached and devoted activity every human being would achieve the goal of self-realization.

Apart from the Gita, Gandhi was also influenced by the teachings of Raychand, "a real seeker after Truth."5 In his moments of spiritual crisis, Raychand was his refuge. The writings of Tolstoy, Thoreau, Ruskin and above all, the lesson of the Sermon on the Mount had their impact on Gandhi. All these influences worked out a synthesis in the mind of Gandhi, which is truly responsible for his broad understanding of religion.

Gandhi held that a truly religious person could not afford to keep out of any field of activity. He did not believe in leading the life of a recluse or an isolated individual. This meant for Gandhi that
there could not be a complete realization of Godhead until he devoted himself to the service of humanity. He said, "For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and of humanity. I want to identify myself with everything that lives." These words affirm the true spirit of Gandhi.

Gandhi's religion was an intensely practical one. For him sanctity and service of man were inseparable. He felt that he could not lead a religious life unless he identified himself with the whole of mankind. He claimed that he did not know any religion apart from human activity, and hence his participation in politics. He looked upon politics as a branch of ethics and religion. Freedom of the nation for Gandhi was not a mere political struggle, it was a social reality.

Gandhi's entire philosophy was based on the fundamental doctrines of truth, non-violence and democracy. According to him, the principles which he so devotedly advocated, are not merely theoretical but can be implemented with profit and advantage in the practical fields of human endeavour for the benefit of one and all. To Gandhi truth and non-violence were not abstract ideals or virtues for a cloister. These were to be realized in life.

Gandhi's ultimate aim in all his activities is spiritual realization. Satyagraha is the means by which he hoped ultimately
to achieve that aim. Satyagraha means holding on to truth. It is not, for Gandhi, a negative attitude. It is not non-resistance to evil. It is resistance to it through love. The pursuit of truth must be through non-violence. For Gandhi truth and non-violence are identical terms and these both together constitute the sum and substance of Satyagraha. Satyagraha is based on the conviction that love, non-violence and conscious suffering are the only means to overcome the evil forces because this is the divine way; the way of truth. Gandhi wielded the moral weapon of Satyagraha to end domestic, social, political, economic, religious and cultural problems and conflicts. His Autobiography documents his experiments with truth in the context of his family life and also national life. Experimenting with it in his own domestic sphere, Gandhi observed that non-violence or satyagraha in politics is a new weapon in the process of evolution. The uniqueness of Gandhi lay in that he was the first to apply non-violent Satyagraha on a social scale.

**Gandhi and Social Welfare**

Gandhi believed in the welfare of all human beings irrespective of their sex, religion and nationality. He was animated by a view of humanity that stresses its unity and interdependence and denies the segmentation of the world into narrowly drawn compartments. Sarvodaya, a concept that Gandhi popularized,
aimed at the good of all human beings. Sarvodaya is a social ideal and envisages a social order in which individuals would have full and equal opportunities to develop their capacity. The fundamental fact of sarvodaya is the belief in the spiritual and ethical unity of man. Truth, non-violence, satyagraha and sarvodaya are basic in so far as they cover the whole of Gandhian thought and philosophy.

It was but natural that the heart of a man who believed so firmly in truth and non violence should go all out in sympathy and understanding to all those who were oppressed or unjustly treated. Hence he took up the work of social welfare. To Gandhi, social welfare was an important part of the religion of humanity. It took the shape of what he called Constructive Programme which began with activities like propagation of khadi, Harijan seva, uplift of women, communal harmony and so on and ended with being as comprehensive and extensive as life itself. As Dhurjati Mukherjee says, “His concept of social welfare was apiece with his general approach to life and was not an isolated or a compartmental view of merely one of the many activities of life.”

Gandhi’s incessant activity for one kind of social welfare or the other was the mark of his awareness of himself as a social being and not a mere isolated individual who wanted to seek his own salvation. In his mind the individual and the whole of
humanity, or for that matter the whole of creation, were one integrated whole seeking light and emancipation. His object even in fighting for freedom was social welfare. Long before Gandhi joined the ranks of Gokhale and Tilak as a political fighter he had initiated social welfare work in the cause of the Harijans. In fact his public life was never dissociated from some kind of direct social welfare work, which called for selfless service in the cause of removing suffering of one kind or the other. Even in South Africa, he served the people in plague days and conducted schools, night classes and health classes for the poorest so that they could benefit by the results. His whole programme of constructive work and its philosophy is one integrated picture of his ideas and action in the field of social welfare.

Gandhi was not only a leader who guided the country to independence through a non violent struggle, but was a person with a deep insight into the social as well as economic aspects of life. He thought of man and life in its totality and wrote and expressed his views on practically all aspects of life. Vasant Sathe very aptly says, "He sought synthesis, understanding, cooperation and accommodation in a peaceful manner among conflicting interests, whether in political, social or economic fields." Gandhi knew very well that India lives in the villages, and her civilization has been an agricultural one. His concept of Gram Swaraj
ultimately paved the way for Panchayat Raj system. He propagated decentralized and balanced economy. Gandhi's emphasis on environmental hygiene is well known. He emphasized that the village as a whole and individual families must keep their premises absolutely clean. Gandhi not only propagated certain basic ideas relating to harmonious living as close to nature as possible, but practised these ideas himself.

In conformity with his philosophy, Gandhi held that the ultimate aim of life is self-realization, the liberation of soul. And freedom is most essential to realize this goal. The soul is the same whether it is man's or woman's. Therefore Gandhi believed in the fundamental equality of men and women in the sense that they both possess immortal souls and the same intellectual and spiritual potential. He said, "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities... and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he." Like Basaveshwara, Gandhi based his doctrine of sexual equality upon the Hindu Sanatani belief that the individual soul is immortal and an individual must be free to do what he or she considers best for self-realization. His devotion to equality was a necessary consequence of his deep and passionate belief in the spiritual essence of all human beings. Gandhi asserts, "Since he pervades every fibre of my being and of all of you, I derive from it the doctrine of equality of all creatures on
earth and it should satisfy the cravings of all philosophical communists."10 Thus he had a moral reverence for life and stood for the equality of man and woman and had an immense concern for the acquisition and extension of the rights and dignity of the human being.

The mark of spirituality is not exile from the natural world but work in it with love for all. When Gandhi was in South Africa he saw that Indians were subjected to grave disabilities and Gandhi started his passive resistance movement on a massive scale to protest against the oppressive restrictions. He stood out for the essential principle that all men are equal and artificial distinctions based on race and colour were both unreasonable and immoral. It was his ambition to rid India of its divisions and discords to discipline the masses to self-dependence. He aspired to raise women to a plane of political, economic and social equality with men. He struggled all through his life to end the religious hatreds, which divide the nation and cleanse Hinduism of its social abomination of untouchability.

To Gandhi that India belonged to the Indians was the truth, and British rule, which was a foreign rule, was untruth. Political freedom was the pre-requisite for attaining all other freedoms, and it was therefore the primary and paramount aim. Freedom for Gandhi was not a mere political fact. It was a social reality. He
struggled not only to free India from foreign rule but free her from social corruption and communal strife. Fight for swaraj meant for him not mere political awakening but an all round awakening - social, educational, moral economic and political.

**Gandhi and Women**

Gandhi finds that the contemporary status of women reflects historical, not natural, relationships. Seeing that traditional views of gender relations were formed by men and not women, he feels they do not speak to the issue of equality. He concludes, "The ancient laws were made by seers who were men. The women's experience, therefore, is not represented in them. Strictly speaking, as between man and woman, neither should be regarded as superior or inferior."\(^{11}\) Gandhi is also disturbed that women have accepted the position assigned to them. He writes, "and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's interested teaching that she is inferior to him."\(^{12}\) And this Gandhi means to challenge.

He finds many reasons for the subordinate condition of women, and one stems from the way parents educate their daughters to see any marriage as necessary and tolerable. The traditional practice of dowry, for example, is something Gandhi particularly wants to eliminate because it treats daughters as
commodities. On this account, dowry is nothing but the sale of girls. Accordingly, parents need to educate their daughters to refuse to marry any young man who demands dowry. The only honourable terms in marriage are mutual love and respect for each other.

Gandhi finds that the unequal treatment of women in India has taken many forms and one of the most brutal is the custom of child marriage and child widowhood. Child widowhood, in particular, denies girls the freedom to develop and consigns them, as women, to poverty and humiliation. In his account "Any tradition, however ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land." For him, child marriage and child widowhood fall into this category. They are, he feels, horrible and superstitious and need to be abolished.

Gandhi denounced purdah as a barbarous custom, which does great harm to the country. He rejected the argument that purdah protects the virtues of women. Gandhi flayed prostitution in no uncertain words. He held men responsible for this degrading and shocking evil. He would not accept the services of the prostitutes till they gave up their immoral trade. On the other hand Gandhi showed the rarest sympathy and humanity in the case of raped women. He condemned the parents and husbands of the
Hindu women who were abducted and molested during partition, for not wanting to receive them back.

Gandhi was an ardent supporter of compulsory education for girls as well as boys. In his Basic National Education Scheme elaborated in 1937, Gandhi proposed free and compulsory education for children of both sexes, from ages seven to fourteen. With regard to the type of education girls should receive, Gandhi felt that the educational curriculum should be adapted to the special needs of girls in order to prepare them to be mothers and homemakers. And most Indian women educators in the early twentieth century agreed with Gandhi that women's education must respond to the needs of their different social role.

Gandhi shared the concern of women reformers for the abolition of purdah, child marriage, enforced widowhood and discriminatory inheritance laws. The only major difference of opinion was on the question of birth control. He was against the use of artificial means of birth control. He was of firm faith that self-control is the only legitimate means of birth control. The women reformers, on the contrary argued that it is not a practical solution to the problem of millions of Indian men and women and, therefore, favoured contraception for married couples. Gandhi's belief that the achievement of control over the passions is
necessary for moral and spiritual advancement was at the very core of his philosophy.

Gandhi followed an uncompromising attitude towards woman's rights. He declared, “In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.” He would not agree with those who tried to argue with him on the basis of what the great lawgiver Manu is supposed to have said, that for woman there can be no freedom. Though a devout Hindu, Gandhi’s faith in the Hindu scriptures did not mean that he accepted every word and phrase as being infallible. He maintained an independent, critical and selective attitude towards these texts. No interpretation bound him, however learned it might be, if it was against reason and morality. To him even the slightest injustice was a form of violence, therefore an untruth.

Although Gandhi believed in the equality of the sexes, he at the same time felt that there are important physical and emotional differences between man and woman. He held that man and woman should generally follow different vocations, suitable to their different physical and emotional temperaments. It is in the natural order of things that women should tend home and children, while men work outside the home to earn a livelihood for the family. He said:
I do not envisage the wife, as a rule, following an avocation independent of her husband. The care of the children and the upkeep of the household are quite enough to fully engage all her energy. In a well-ordered society the additional burden of maintaining the family ought not to fall on her. The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the woman to household management, the two thus supplementing and complimenting each other’s labours.\textsuperscript{15}

However Gandhi recognized that circumstances might make it desirable for a married woman to work outside the home. Moreover, he felt that society should recognize the right of the woman to choose not to marry and to dedicate herself to social service in a different manner. Gandhi believed that differentiation of sexual roles was not necessarily conducive to inequality. No vocation was inferior in his view. His advocacy of traditional female roles for women was, therefore, in harmony with his overall philosophical view of women as equal but different.

There is no doubt that of all the factors that have contributed to the awakening of women in India the most potent has been the field of non-violent action, which Gandhi offered to women in his battle for India’s political freedom. Their participation on equal
terms with men in the freedom struggle gave women a definite place in the society. The main contribution of Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in society.

**Gandhi as a Writer**

There is a social feminist in Gandhi though feminism as such had not made its impact in India at that time. Gandhi's vision of the role of women in Indian society and his stand on specific social reform issues, were remarkably similar to that of leading feminists in India in the twenties and thirties of this century. Gandhi was a warm supporter of the demands of the organized women's movement in India, but he felt strongly that women should eventually define their own goals and take the lead in solving their problems. The way to change the status of women, he insisted, was for women to demand that they be treated as equals and with dignity. Gandhi saw no hope for India's emancipation while her womanhood remained unemancipated. Therefore he took up this arduous task by means of his writings and speeches as well as action. All of his writings exhibit his concern for the oppressed and a desire to serve them. Gandhi's writings and speeches suggest that he visualized women's struggle to surmount the barriers limiting the full development of their human potential.
Most of Gandhi's views on women appeared in his journals. While in South Africa Indian Opinion was launched in 1903. He founded Young India, English weekly in 1919, Gujarati weekly Navajivan in 1919 and Harijan in 1933. Harijan was issued in English and several regional languages. All the journals were 'a mirror of part of his life.' About Indian Opinion Gandhi says, "week after week, I poured out my soul in its columns and expounded the principles and practice of Satyagraha as I understood it." In his periodicals Gandhi exhorted the Indian women to contribute to the swadeshi movement by spinning and wearing khadi. He urged Indian women to be simple, pure and God fearing. He constantly put up Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi as ideals of Indian womanhood for women. To many personal enquiries by women as well as men, Gandhi replied though his journals. Women's issues were discussed and subsequently solutions were suggested. There was no place for advertisements in his journals. Writing in Young India he stated, "I have taken up journalism not for its own sake but mainly as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission of life." The high standard of journalism was Gandhi's contribution to public life.

Though Gandhi wrote mainly in journals his few books are also important. His An Autobiography, Satyagraha in South Africa, and Hind Swaraj carry his views on women. Gandhi was also an
untiring writer of letters. He answered scores of letters. He did not discriminate between great persons and laymen. A spirit of humanity and fellow feeling permeate through all his letters. They give us an insight into the mind of the Mahatma.

As a writer, Gandhi exercised utmost restraint in the choice of topics and his vocabulary. His writings are disarmingly simple. The texts of his writings frequently address matters of everyday importance to Indians in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century. Terchek remarks, “Writing for ordinary Indians, he frequently employs metaphors and engages in homilies to teach about the nature of power and empowerment as well as to remind Indians of their own strong traditions.” Through his writings, Gandhi seeks to mobilize the Indian public on behalf of his campaigns of non-violent civil disobedience against British colonialism, untouchability, suppression of women and communal discord. Relying on a simple vernacular, he questions much that has been taken for granted in both India and the West. He particularly challenges the ideas that violence is an effective way to achieve justice and that modernity and modernization spell progress. His commitments and actions complement his autobiography and his other written texts. In his writings and speeches Gandhi not only criticizes the modernity and modernization but at the same time provides idealized alternatives.
to them which he wants men and women to enlist in their struggle to protect their own autonomy.

Though Gandhi is highly indebted to Hinduism he learns much from other traditions also. He was born and raised a Hindu and has strong affinities to Jainism with its antipathy to taking any form of life. He also spends several years in Britain studying law, which he later practices in the British courts of South Africa. All the while, he reads and discusses Indian and Western texts in philosophy, religion and politics. Gandhi was also influenced by Buddhism and Christianity.

Gandhi is a synthesis of tradition and modernity. In defending tradition as a foundation for autonomy, he continually challenges what he takes to be its defects in order to reform it. Instead of holding that political independence from Britain is the sole criterion of freedom for India, he asks Indians to purge their country of indigenous patterns of domination. He particularly challenges the exploitation of untouchables and women.

Throughout his life, Gandhi seeks a non-violent, co-operative society based on mutual respect and assistance. He attacks modernity and modernization because he sees each of them disabling men and women, and he confronts violence because it treats people as means to be used to the benefit of the powerful.
His ideas about the dangers of Western civilization have assumed significance in the context of several issues concerning the survival of the humanity and evolution of a just and viable world order. Gandhi saw clearly the moral degradation and cultural decay long back. He strongly criticized the emerging trends of consumer culture in future in all spheres of life and emphasized austerity and the moral principle in development, which is essential for tomorrow's world.

Gandhian concept of sarvodaya will be very useful for solving the social problems of today and coming centuries. It is undoubtedly the only philosophy of life, which can be the answer to the challenges of the modern age. Its mass perspective and commitment for a decentralized social set up will help in transforming society for the welfare and well being of every individual and of the community as a whole. Gandhi, with his traditional bearing, envisioned a moral order in a world shattered by man's selfishness and intolerance, where poverty reigned supreme with injustice inflicting humanity. In this context, Gandhi's prescriptions of love, truth and non-violence are of great relevance.

All that Gandhi spoke or wrote was meant to be translated into action and he successfully put it into practice, in his personal as well as public life. Gandhi's writings and speeches reveal the
saint, politician, social reformer and above all a humanist. Every thought, feeling, act of his reflected a life mission; hence the statement 'my life is my message'. An attempt is made in this thesis to analyze Gandhi's contribution to the liberation of women in India. The thesis consists of introduction, four chapters and conclusion.

The first chapter, Indian Women Through the Ages, traces the history of the status of women and the emergence of proliferation of women's movements. In the course of Indian history, from ancient to modern times, there were distinct stages in the rise and fall in the status and role of women. The chapter also examines the impact of women's movement and its relevance.

The second chapter, Gandhi and the Emancipation of Women in the 19th Century, analyses the reform movement in the nineteenth century and the emergence of Gandhi as a liberating force. The chapter discusses, in brief, the individual as well as organized efforts to liberate women. The battle for social reforms in the nineteenth century, which culminates in Gandhi taking the leadership, has been dealt with elaborately.

The third chapter, Gandhi's Views on Women's Issues, reviews his basic stand on women's particular issues. It discusses Gandhi's views on the nature of women's oppression and the
influence his ideas had towards women's emancipation. His own contribution to liberate women from all social bondages is considered.

The fourth chapter, Participation of Women in the Freedom Struggle under the Leadership of Gandhi, gives a vivid picture of women's involvement in the national movement. Gandhi's efforts to consciously involve women in an attempt to link their struggle with the struggle for national independence are highlighted.

The Conclusion sums up the entire study. It also throws light on the impact of Gandhi's endeavour to free women from all social bondages and ensure an equal place for them in society. Thus it is a sincere attempt to assess Gandhi's role in and contribution to the emancipation of Indian women.
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