Chapter II

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In the history of Indian women's struggle for liberation and right of equality, the most eventful period was the nineteenth century that saw the dawn of new India with liberalism as her basic principle. Although a few efforts were made to raise the status of women earlier, serious concern regarding status of women was evinced only in the nineteenth century. Bipin Chandra Pal in his *Memories of My Life and Times* wrote, "Our youthful intellectuals were not only anxious to acquire political freedom but also equally, if not more, anxious to break through every shackle that interfered with their freedom of thought and action. Social reform was even more popular than political reform... in those early days consciousness of sacerdotal and social bondage was far keener than the consciousness of political bondage."¹ Truly this socio-political consciousness of the nineteenth century prepared the masses to think seriously and effectively about the emancipation of Indian women from her social degradation.

The eighteenth century was the darkest period so far as the women were concerned. Illiteracy was the common lot of all Indian women. Sati, child marriage, polygamy and prostitution flourished
as never before. Widow-remarriage was strictly prohibited. Indian women were living in a most deplorable condition. This oppressed situation of Hindu women was regarded by the British as an example of the backwardness of all Indians. Interested British scholars, missionaries and bureaucrats had applied European standards and values in judging the position of Indian women. They described Hindu women as being tradition bound, religious and subservient who functioned in an environment, which was limited and oppressive and inhuman.

In the nineteenth century, elite Hindus, under the influence of the West, had recognized the need to modify traditional mores concerning women. The life of a Hindu woman would conform to the standards of humanitarianism and rationality, women would be educated and oppressive customs would be proscribed. Although the elite accepted and recommended this change, they desired to retain the essential spirit of Hindu culture. Because the reformers were conscious that whatever the source of their own ideas, in personal and intimate matters, particularly those relating to women, social customs could only be modified or altered according to the precepts of Hindu religion and tradition. In explaining the peculiarities of the movement, which distinguish it from Western movements, S. Natarajan observes, "...though the stimulus for the movement came from outside - through western
ideas - it was deeply rooted in the Indian faith in continuity and evolution, rather than in revolt and sudden change."

Historians of the reform movement as well as most reformers themselves have argued that the inspiration for the reform movement came from the liberal humanitarian and rationalist ideas spread through English education, which started the process of questioning traditionally accepted practices. Hence nineteenth century saw a proliferation of societies interested in social reform and the education of women. The reforms initiated by these organizations were modern, progressive and reflected their social and political aspirations for India. The programme of reform societies was designed to protect and provide for the needs of Indian women. Societies such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj established schools for girls. The motivation for starting these schools arose from a desire to defend women of their families against the influence of the Christian missionaries.

The women's movement in the early nineteenth century was primarily concerned with the problems of the upper-class women. The life style of elite Hindu women, their conventions and practices of marriage and widowhood had received wide publicity. While reformers aimed at an overall transformation in the Hindu society, particular attention was paid to eradicating social evils and inhuman practices which were the cause of the deplorable
condition of women. The reformers of this period concentrated their attention on three important aspects of a woman's life: age of marriage, the life of widows and their right to remarry and education.

**Sati**

Sati was one of the glaring evils of the time. Many of the enlightened Muslim rulers tried their best to prohibit the practice of sati without any tangible result. The Sikhs and Marathas prohibited the practice within their territories. The British government however, showed indifference in this matter due to their official policy of non-interference in the existing laws of both the Hindus and Muslims. But in the nineteenth century the government could not remain aloof and the person who triggered off the official reforms was Rammohan Roy. Roy has been rightly called the father of modern India. He worked incessantly to abolish this social evil by law.

The number of widows who perished annually in flames was quite considerable and Lord William Bentinck decided to abolish the institution by legislation. Bentinck's convictions were shared not only by Englishmen but also by a good number of enlightened Indians of whom the most important were Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. In opposition to a large number of orthodox
Hindus who made a formidable representation to the Governor-General against his interference with their right to burn their women, Roy and his associates sent a petition supporting the proposed legislation, stating that sati had no religious sanction but was an accretion of the middle ages, and physical force was often used in burning unwilling widows. On the 4th December 1829, the famous resolution was passed by which sati was made a crime of culpable homicide punishable with fine, imprisonment, or both.

**Child Marriage**

The practice of child marriage was institutionalized by the Hindu society for several centuries. The most significant reason was the Shastric injunction that girls were to be married at a young age so that intercourse might take place with the first sign of puberty. Therefore the debate on the right age of marriage was to focus on the interpretation of the Shastras and the religious duty of the parents.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the noted social reformer of the 19th century, devoted his untiring energy against the evils of early marriage. He strongly backed the view that child marriage was the root of the miseries of Indian widows. He said that if it could be checked and a limit on marriage age of Indian girls could be fixed through official enactments, then the condition of Indian women
would improve. Another indefatigable social reformer, Keshabchandra Sen actively supported the women's right for better position and earnestly fought for marriage reforms. On the question of child marriage, Keshabchandra voted against the custom and pointed to the Hindu scriptures, which laid down, "so long as a girl does not know how to respect the husband, so long as she is not acquainted with true moral discipline, so long the father should not think of getting her married."4

Consequently Government legislation to improve the situation of minor girls resulted in the first Age of Consent Bill, passed in 1860, which made sexual intercourse with a girl less than ten years, a rape. The bill provided only negligible protection. The ideal of complete surrender was so thorough that it would be only the most exceptional girl who would complain.

Social reformers such as M.G. Ranade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru, in their attempts to further raise the age of marriage, cited several cases of consummation at the age of ten or eleven which led to serious physical and psychological disturbance.5 Behramji Malabari brought the problems of legislation controlling the age of marriage of Hindu girls to the forefront. Malabari's newspaper Indian Spectator and the journal East and West were the major literary vehicles for the All India Social Reform Movement. In 1884 the publication of his notes on
Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood successfully drew the attention of a wide section of the people and social reformers to the glaring social evils prevalent in Hindu society.

The Government in pursuance of their policy of neutrality and non-interference with the social and religious practices of the people was reluctant to legislate. Official British opinion, with some exception, opposed the legislation. The majority of the Indians favoured legislation or some form of deterrent action to restrict child marriages. The Indian social reformers interpreted the government's refusal to legislate as an indirect means of keeping the people backward. The All India Social Reform Conference led by M.G. Ranade supported the legislation. As a result of the ceaseless efforts of the reformers, in 1891, the Government passed an amendment to the existing Penal Code raising the age of consent from ten to twelve. The passing of the Bill constituted a definite legal support towards women's emancipation from age-old bondage.

Reform societies like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj and eminent families like the Tagores tried to establish a trend by personal example. Though the intelligentsia became aware of the evil effects of child marriage and sympathized with the movement, few tried to defy established social practices or to institute social
changes within their family. Hence the practice of child marriage and early consummation continued unabated.

**Widow Remarriage**

A widow is regarded by the Hindus as an unfortunate and inauspicious woman. From the sixth century onwards the Brahmins and their Shastras had rigidly prohibited widows from remarrying. Manu prohibits widow remarriage, with the exception of those women whose marriage had not been consummated.

When sati was abolished by law, the oppression of the widows became more intensified. The natural consequence of the abolition of sati was the recognition of the right of the widow to remarriage. But in this the British were reluctant to take the initiative. They were inclined to treat the question of widow remarriage as a purely social matter to be decided by Hindus themselves. But the enlightened Hindu public opinion worked incessantly to make legislation possible in this direction, by the sixth decade of the nineteenth century. The movement to improve the position of widows was supported by many social reformers. Prominent among these were Pandit Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and Maharishi Karve. Vidyasagar who hailed, like Roy, from Bengal championed the cause of the widows.
The main obstacle against widow remarriage, according to the orthodox viewpoint, was that it was not sanctioned by the Hindu lawgivers. Vidyasagar published in 1855 a pamphlet entitled 'Remarriage of Hindu Widows' in which he quoted several passages from Hindu scriptures sanctioning widow remarriage and vehemently pleaded for legislation in its favour. The orthodox pandits condemned the pamphlet and its author. They maintained that the alleged permission for widow-marriage was meant for the bygone golden age in which men were good and women virtuous, and not for the degenerate Kaliyuga with its evil men and impious women. Vidyasagar pointed out that even Parashara whose code was considered the most authoritative for Kaliyuga permitted widow-remarriage. M.G. Ranade, like Vidyasagar, attempted to convince the orthodox by quoting and interpreting the Shastras.

In 1856 the government, despite the protests of the orthodox, passed the Widow Remarriage Act. The legislation allowed widows to remarry. On their remarriage however, widows lost property rights in the estate of their deceased husbands. For obvious reasons, while legislation for the prevention of sati was successful, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act remained ineffective for a long time. Sati could be stopped by the police but policemen could not arrange the remarriage of widows. Though some organizations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj actively supported widow
remarriage and even a 'Widow Remarriage Society' was formed to work as a marriage bureau for widows, it did not find social acceptance. So deep rooted was the prejudice against widow remarriage at the time that even the most vociferous advocates of the reform often evaded the issue, when it came to be a question of their own sons, brothers or themselves marrying widows. An important exception was the son of Vidyasagar who married a widow.

Until 1880s local efforts for social reform were organized without much effect on the country as a whole. In 1884 a united social front was developed through the vigorous activities of Behramji Malabari, another untiring social reformer. Though he was not a Sanskrit scholar like Roy or Vidyasagar and nor being a Hindu, Malabari in his book *Niti Vinod* portrayed the sorrows of Hindu widows, with great fervour. His appeal was to the sentiments of all Indians, not merely to the minds of the educated class. He also addressed a note to the Government explaining the ineffectiveness of the Widow Remarriage Act because of the opposition of the orthodox and the general disabilities of widows which prevented them from taking advantage of the law, and stressing the need for doing something positive in the matter. Malabari devoted his life for the uplift of Indian women.
In western and northern India, the movement became quite popular due to the vigorous support of Vishnu Shastri Pandit, the translator of Vidyasagar's book in Marathi, with the active backing of reformers like Ranade, K. T. Telang and Gopal Hari Deshmukh. But the movement of western India differed from that of Vidyasagar's. While Vidyasagar sought government sanction for widow remarriage, Vishnu Shastri desired the sanction of the highest religious authority with jurisdiction in western India, the Shankaracharya of Karver and Sankeshwar. In Ahmedabad Gujarati reformers formed a Remarriage Association. In Madras Presidency Viresalingam Pantulu launched his crusade against enforced widowhood. The Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati also fought against it.

Sporadic and occasional marriages took place with the influences and patronage of the reformers. In Bengal Vidyasagar sponsored a few marriages. The Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj encouraged widows to remarry. But the movement did not gain momentum or popularity. The legislation, despite the opinion of the enlightened minority, was far ahead of the sentiments of the population. Widow remarriage was regarded with abhorrence. The ideals of devotion and sacrifice, along with the religious and social conventions, were so well entrenched among the widows that few could be persuaded to remarry.
Recognizing these limitations, social reformers like Maharishi Karve concentrated their efforts in promoting education among widows.

**Female Education**

The Indian women were illiterate and ignorant and therefore could not voice any protest against the existing social evils and the ill-treatment meted out to them. The reformers felt that if women were educated, most of the social evils associated with women could be minimized. Therefore apart from social uplift of Indian women, the other factor that attracted the reformers was the question of female education.

The British government introduced a curriculum of studies for Indian schools based on the British model, with English as the medium of instruction. The first modern schools for girls in India were started by Christian missionaries. Because of the age-old Indian prejudice against mixed classes even for children, convents and protestant missions started 'zenana' schools, staffed by lady teachers to which girls alone were admitted.

Apart from the activities of the European missionaries, the man who zealously supported the cause of female education was Raja Radhakant Deb. Though he was the leader of the orthodox Hindus who strongly opposed Vidyasagar's crusade against
enforced widowhood, yet he personally believed that to make a nation progressive, women must have to be educated. Under his patronage a number of girls' schools were founded in Calcutta. On female education Radhakant Deb published a book written by Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalankar.

Apart from missionary institutions, the Bethune School of Calcutta may be said to be the first regular secular school for girls in India. Vidyasagar and Drinkwater Bethune who noticed the reluctance of the Hindus and Muslims to send their daughters to mission schools because of the Bible classes and fear of conversion started it in 1847. The school proved a great success. The Bethune experiment was soon copied all over India. Due to Vidyasagar's encouragement nearly thirty-five schools were opened in Bengal itself between November 1857 and May 1858.

Keshabchandra Sen started the *Bamabodhini Patrika* and *Paricharika* to encourage female education and founded the Antopur Strishiksha Sabha for family women. He also founded a rescue home for innocent girls and orphans. In 1896, Maharishi Karve along with fifteen of his colleagues founded the Ananth Balikashram for the education of widows. The institution made slow and modest progress in the beginning. But gradually it became popular and unmarried girls were willing to be admitted to the school.
In Bombay, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and Francina Sorabjee were the three lady pioneers who dedicated themselves to the education and uplift of their sisters. Francina worked for the welfare of all the communities through education. Francina's chief influence was an unifyingness, which compelled love and obliterated all differences. She brought together children of all communities. In an age when welfare organization had not even been conceived, she did practical social service work in Poona and the adjoining villages.\textsuperscript{8} Ramabai Ranade worked in close collaboration with Francina. Mrs. Ranade actively worked for female education. She also selected for her special field the economic advancement of widows and destitute women. 'The Industrial Home of Service' which she founded at Poona is a self-supporting and expanding organization conducted by capable women to fulfill the growing needs of the day.

Pandita Ramabai was a rare genius, whose concern for her sisters was emphasized by her own sufferings. Her parents and a sister died of starvation in the famine of 1877, when she was twenty-four and she lost her husband in 1882. The lot of Indian women in general and of widows in particular thoroughly roused her and she undertook a career of social service for the uplift of her sisters. In 1889 she founded the 'Sarada Sadan' in Bombay for the education of women, particularly widows. In 1890 'Sarada Sadan'
was transferred to Poona because of the rising cost of living in Bombay. By the year 1900, the inmates of the various ‘Homes’ she was running reached the remarkable figure of 2000. Most of them were employed in educational and humanitarian work.

The efforts of these tireless pioneers and the social reformers began to bear fruit and the old prejudice against female literacy was overcome in India. Gradually the upper classes were feeling that literacy was an accomplishment to girls. Girls' schools were opened in every city and town. The popularity of female education was on the upward trend and year by year the number of girls attending schools increased. There were also encouraging signs that Indian girls were prepared to go for higher education and even for careers. A direct result of the spread of female education was the rise of literary women in India and the liberation of dancing from brothels. With the spread of education and the general decline in purdah, music and dancing began to be cultivated among the upper and middle classes. Consequently India produced some famous lady musicians and dancers.

The preaching of Ramakrishna Paramhamsa was quite a break from the nineteenth century efforts for social upliftment of women. While the reformists worked to obtain legal sanction for their cause, Paramahamsa with his simplicity directly appealed to humanity to sanction a revered position for women. His worship of
the Goddess Kali attracted the ordinary masses as well as the educated elite. In all women he recognized the mother, even in the most degraded women. And his devotion for the mother cult led men to think and behave politely to women.

The ideas of Paramahamsa were carried further by his famous disciple Swami Vivekananda's liberalism, humanism and refreshing boldness. According to Vivekananda Indian women should be emancipated from their artificial bondage to make India truly modern. But he was not enthusiastic about widow remarriage, child marriage and other such issues. His view of freedom was that if women were given education, they would themselves be competent to settle all further questions of their fate.

In northern India another movement against social evils developed with the founding of the Arya Samaj by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. Dayanand Saraswati held that women were equal to men in their ability to achieve emancipation. They should be educated and not allowed to marry before they reached eighteen. A staunch Vedantist Swamy Dayanand held that widows should be allowed to take other husbands and thus fulfill their role as mothers. The Arya Samaj tracts and newspapers frequently attacked various caste and sect rituals. Dayanand Saraswati insisted that women should be released from the seclusion of purdah and allowed to participate in religious and public life.
Prostitution

The patronage prostitution had enjoyed from rulers and the aristocracy in ancient and medieval India ceased during the British Period. The British disapproval of professional prostitution in the West, the strict attitude of the later British, objection against loose morals, and unpopularity of the 'nautch' among English educated Indians, all had a salutary effect on Indian public opinion about prostitution. Courtesans were no more considered necessary for the adornment of courts or for public entertainment.

The institution of devadasi was abolished during the British period. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi’s Bill for prohibiting the keeping of paid devadasis in temples was passed into law by the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. Ten years later a bill was passed against the dedication of children to temples. In other provinces the problem was not so serious as in Madras and by the time the British left, there were no temples in India where devadasis were retained.

The outcome of such efforts of reformers was a distinct improvement in the status of women within the family, especially among the urban educated classes. However the aim of reformers was to ensure women some dignity and status within the family. They did not think of expanding women’s role outside the home.
Although some women began attending the first few sessions of the Indian National Congress, yet the beginning of women's movement, which organized itself for a share in public life, did not appear till the second decade of the twentieth century. A delegation of women led by Sarojini Naidu went to England to demand franchise for women. The Government of India Act of 1919 conferred limited franchise, based on education and ownership of property, on the wives of men voters. The emphasis on wives as an essential qualification for political rights indicated the limited achievement of women's cause till that date.

The political movement, which developed along with social reform movement in spite of the fact that it shared many common leaders like Ranade, Naoroji, Shankar Nair and C. Y. Chintamani, was unwilling to associate itself with the reformers' cause. This was manifested in Tilak's opposition to the Age of consent Bill and his refusal to permit the National Social Conference to hold its meeting inside the Congress pandals. Progressive reformers found their causes obstructed by political extremists, while the latter accused the reformers of fondness for the alien government.

Also the reformers were able to reach only a small section of the population. The National Social Conference, founded by Ranade, like the Indian National Congress, remained largely an urban and middle class affair. B. R. Nanda observes, "The middle
class leadership, which dominated Indian politics and society at that time, had not yet learnt the idiom in which to communicate with the masses." The movement in fact needed new dimensions, a wider and more radical ideology and new leadership. This leadership was provided by Mahatma Gandhi who transformed the reform movement into a revolutionary one by highlighting the role of women in this transformation. Nanda also says, "The emergence of Gandhi was to transform the political as well as the social scene. To the English educated elite, his views on non-violence, industrialization, education, sex and marriage seemed somewhat odd and old fashioned. But these very views, a quarter of a century after his death have a strangely modern ring." Gunnar Myrdal considers Gandhi as an enlightened liberal. On the status of women Gandhi's views were not just liberal but radical.

Gandhi's image of woman was different from that of any earlier reformer. Before the advent of Gandhi on the scene, the attitude to women, though sympathetic, was patronizing. Leaders and social reform groups thought in a language that made women look helpless. They wanted to protect, uplift and bring relief to women. But to Gandhi woman was neither man's plaything, nor his competitor. What she needed most was education, the recognition of her birthright to be free and equal, to steer her own destiny side by side with man.
On landing in India in 1915, Gandhi realized that crores of people - men and women - living in more than half a million villages were quite ignorant of the ideology of swaraj. He emphatically declared, "our first attempt should be directed towards awakening in the minds of as many women as possible a consciousness of their present condition." Gandhi asserted that 'swaraj', would be meaningless without reform of the social structure. He insisted that women and the untouchables must be uplifted. He declared himself as uncompromising in the matter of women's rights, and denounced the customs of child marriage, enforced widowhood, dowry, purdah and prostitution. Religious prescriptions could not, in his opinion, alter these immoral and inhuman practices.

Gandhi recognized that Indian men had been subjugating women for centuries, using them as drudges in the kitchen and playthings in the bedroom. He knew that men were responsible for the degradation of women, their exclusion from the world beyond the home, and from education. Even when men turned to social change, they tended to resort to violence. As Madhu Kishwar states: "Gandhi realized that the identification of 'manliness' with violence was likely to lead humanity to destruction. Men needed to emulate women's quiet strength and their resistance to injustice without resorting to violence." Just as India needed new women,
it needed new men, and Gandhi wanted men to follow women's lead. Characteristic of Gandhi, he did what he asked the men to do. He lived increasingly as a womanly man, a human being who sought to incorporate the best of traditional roles from both sexes in his own person.

Gandhi considered women as individual human beings with full and equal rights for self-development. A staunch believer in gender equality, Gandhi wrote, "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man."\textsuperscript{13} He denounced the existing evil customs, which impeded her spiritual growth.

Gandhi exhorted women to emulate Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi, who were "pure, firm and self controlled."\textsuperscript{14} He was trying to instill a sense of self-assertion in women by transforming old symbols. He also made use of these traditional symbols to convey contemporary socio-political message. Madhu Kishwar writes:

Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi were the three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India. But the Sita or Draupadi of Gandhi was not the commonly accepted lifeless stereotype of
Instilling moral courage to face danger was another lesson Gandhi gave his women followers.

Gandhi's greatest contribution to the movement for raising women's status lay in his revolutionary approach to women's roles in society and their personal dignity as individuals. Without minimizing their roles as mothers and wives, he proclaimed at the same time that they had an equal role to play as men in the achievement of freedom and social justice. If the struggle was on non-violent lines, then women in Gandhi's opinion, would be more competent to lead it, since nature has endowed them with greater power to love, endure or suffer, as demonstrated in their motherhood. To quote Gandhi "Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader." This vision of women's role and personal dignity had nothing in common with the limited aims of the earlier reformers. Gandhi declared himself "unable to subscribe to the doctrine of the infallibility of ancient law-givers," who had denied freedom to women and suppressed their development.
By opening the gates to women's political participation, Gandhi facilitated the acceptance of the women's cause by the nationalists. The sudden and massive entry of women into Satyagraha in 1930 opened up for them opportunities which could not be denied again. Participation in public life raised their prestige and status. Kishwar remarks that women from extremely traditional and conservative families who had never been out of purdah walked unveiled in public processions. They gave up their religious and caste prejudices in the process.\textsuperscript{18}

Gandhi called upon women to take the responsibility not just for changing their own situation but that of the society at large. He urged, "The economic and moral solution of India thus rests mainly with you."\textsuperscript{19} It is true that at times Gandhi adopted a traditional approach to solve many of the women's problems. But he wanted to take women to a larger struggle, a struggle for the liberation and reconstruction of the nation. He recommended that all women should devote at least one hour daily to spinning. He spread the message of charkha and khadi through women. He believed that by doing productive work she can be self-sufficient.

Because khadi was seen as a symbol of self-reliance and regeneration, it seemed to provide solutions to various problems. Gandhi stated, "I swear by this form of swadeshi, because through it I can provide work to the semi-starved and semi-employed
women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn and clothe the people of India with khadi woven out of it."²⁰ Due to the colonial impact millions of Indian women lost their means of subsistence. Naturally they responded to Gandhi's appeal. For the middle class women the charka would supplement the income of the family and poor women could earn their livelihood by spinning, and the educated and rich were expected to take to spinning as a duty.

Gandhi's idea of non-violence as a revolutionary weapon contributed to creating a favourable condition for mass participation of people, especially women. Madhu Kishwar writes:

The programmes of action undertaken as part of non-violent Satyagraha were such that women would not feel limited or unequal to men, as they inevitably do when sheer muscle power or capacity for inflicting violence are to determine the outcome of a struggle. Thus women's traditional qualities such as their lesser capacity for organized violence were not downgraded but were held up as models of superior courage. When used consciously and collectively this form of non-violence could put the mightiest weapons to shame.²¹
Gandhi admits that he learnt the technique of non-violent passive resistance from women, especially from his wife and mother. He states that even when he pushed his way with Kasturba her passive resistance compelled him to change his attitude. He transformed himself from a dominating husband to that of a true husband and acted on the principle of mutual consideration.

Gandhi helped the entry of women into public life without making them assume a competitive posture vis-à-vis man. Thus women's entry into society and political life was characterized by the absence of hostility from men, that women's movements in some parts of the world had to face. Gandhi realized that even if Congressmen showed no dislike they tended to put aside this issue. So he kept reminding them, "It is the privilege of Congressmen to give the women of India a lifting hand... It is up to Congressmen to see that they enable the women to realize their full status and play their part as equals of men."22

Gandhi and his movement had a tremendous uplifting impact on women. Those closely associated with him were instilled with self-confidence, initiative and a sense of moral courage and fearlessness. When these women came in contact with the poor classes of women in prison, they were convinced about the importance of improving their economic and social life. This
consciousness had its impact on the women's movement initiated by them. Gandhi's ideology was very respectful to women and supportive to their uplift. His activities inspired women to participate in public activities and encouraged the growth of the women's movement. Gandhi's Satyagraha Movement, with the twin objectives of truth and ahimsa, gave propulsion to the women's movement which was already in its infancy, thus enabling it to gain a greater speed.

Strictly speaking there had been no feminist movement in India similar to that started in England and America. Right from Rammohan Roy to Gandhi, there were a number of great men and women social reformers who brought about the reforms. So men in India did not fear the women's movement, as did their counterparts in the West. Right down to the beginning of the twentieth century, men were generally fighting the battle of women. Towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, there were a large number of educated, able, energetic women who were competent to organize themselves and fight their own battles. Women's movement participants were drawn from urban educated families. Members of all major religious communities were represented in women's movement. Women's organizations came into existence in several parts of the country for promoting education, supporting
the cause of widows and destitute women, providing homes for the homeless and for numerous other activities.

Women's organizations, like All India Women's Conference and Women's Indian Association, were free from communalism or sectarianism. Almost all the communities - Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and Jews have worked together in them with complete identity of interests, and here Gandhi's influence is apparent. P. Thomas says, "In this respect women proved themselves an example to their dull-witted husbands, brothers and sons who have brought upon the land untold misery and suffering by their parochial and factional allegiances."

Gandhi as a neo-feminist was against the attempts at masculinization of the feminist movement. Gandhi and women's movement leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, did not identify themselves as feminists because they believed that feminism was a Western belief system that divided women and men. Instead they analyzed men's power over women in India and they came up with a number of strategies to liberate women from their power.

Most important of all, Gandhi wanted women to learn the primary right of resistance. He declared, "so long as women in India do not take equal participation with men in the affairs of the
world and in religious and political matters we shall not see India's star rising.”24 Women were involved in many aspects of Gandhi’s Constructive Programme, his attempt to transform Indian society from below. One of the most important aspects of the Constructive Programme is the ‘Shanti Sena’, the Peace Army. Gandhi hoped that ultimately armed conflict would be replaced by women and men who intervene in a wide range of social conflicts. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya was the first to join a women's brigade and she became a key organizer in villages throughout India. Gandhi admitted men and women into his Peace Army, but he believed that it would ultimately contain a vast predominance of women over men.

Gandhi believed that women's unpaid labour in the home needed to be shared equally by men. He wrote a primer for children in which he said that sons must be taught to do home work. He maintained, “To me the domestic slavery of women is a symbol of our barbarism... Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.”25

Gandhi tried to spiritualize the political process. He and the women’s movement leaders believed that women were generally more spiritually oriented than men. They would therefore understand and work within a movement dedicated to spiritual politics. According to Sarojini Naidu women’s work was the
spiritual reform of the world. Many women of the Indian nationalist era found their spiritual home in satyagraha, translated as soul force. Margaret Cousins wrote of the Satyagraha Movement, "men and women acted as souls not as sexes. Soul force was their weapon and safeguard." Gandhi found equality in each person's spiritual nature.

Gandhi and a number of women favoured celibacy as an integral part of their spirituality. Brahmacharya meant mastering one's senses in the service of self-realization. Madhu Kishwar stated that the vow of celibacy had "a very liberating potential for women because wives were forced to perform sexual acts by their husbands, whatever the women themselves desired."

Some of the ideas advocated by Gandhi, relating to the role of women, were similar to those of the leading feminist movements. The large number of feminist groups like Stri Mukti Sangathana and Shramika Sangathana that emerged in the 1970s and 80s with specific aims and objectives began to search for traditional models for their ideological support. Gandhi's principles are of great relevance in this context. They are quite close to the 'feminist paradigm' implying that women should be equal to men; rights and opportunities, open to men, should be available to women; they should receive equal pay for equal work; they should not be treated as mere sex symbols.
Gandhi’s views, however, did not completely favour women’s ‘liberation paradigm’. An analysis of Gandhi’s fundamental ideas reveals that in Gandhi’s social order based on justice and equality, there was no place for competition and confrontation, between men and women. Gandhi did not want to ignore their duties as housekeepers, mothers and moulders of future generation. But at the same time he did not put any limit on their role in practice. The very fact that he invited women to take part in public and political life of the country indicates that he believed in complete gender equality. His call to parents not to keep their daughters ignorant and illiterate and bring them up only for the purpose of marriage and to girls to get education and to remain unmarried and to be economically independent shows his belief in equality of the sexes.

The answer to women’s dilemma, Gandhi said, would be found not in imitating the manners of the West but in conserving the best that was in Indian culture and rejecting what was base and degrading. Gandhi urged women to “… refuse to believe in the modern teaching that everything is determined and regulated by the sex impulse.”28 He warned women against copying men’s ways. He said, “…if educated women give up copying the ways of men and think independently about the important questions affecting their sex, we shall find it quite easy to solve many a knotty problem.”29
Gandhi is against modern trend of woman competing with man in every sphere and holds women more suited to domestic work. He accorded equal importance and prestige to all honest roles involving discharge of duties. That is what he had learnt from Ruskin. Gandhi knew that a vast majority of women would be marrying and raising families. He did not assign her bread winning role because he felt that then it would be over burdening her with two roles, as many working women experience today. Gandhi assigns greater role to the husband outside home because nature itself has imposed certain limitations on a married woman with children. The unmarried of course were more free. Gandhi never thought in terms of superior or subordinate role. All work was a religious duty for him. Gandhi's whole technique of societal change involved suffering and sacrifice. He found women embodiments of these qualities and he rated them higher than men for that. Hence he did not want women to forgo that quality but to raise it to a higher level and he advocated the same for men.

Gandhi's assertion on women's capacity for self-sacrifice and suffering is criticized by modern feminists. Feminists like Madhu Kishwar, Tanika Sarkar and Sujata Patel point out that Gandhi had age-old patriarchal bias in his attitude towards women. They conclude that the movement failed to make any change to the institution of patriarchy. Madhu Kishwar is of the opinion that
"The capacity for silent suffering, which Gandhi idealized was in fact one of the key symptoms of her subordination." Sujata Patel criticizes Gandhi’s claim that women were biologically suited to life in the home than working outside it for wages. She holds, "his understanding in these respects was that of an upper caste and middle class male whose ideal woman was cloistered in the home." The Western radical feminists do not accept Gandhi’s ideas on sex. For them Gandhi’s advocacy and appreciation of voluntary self-suffering is a hated thing. They refuse to look upon Brahmacharya as a valid principle for the whole life.

It is partly true that Gandhi appears patriarchal in his attitude towards women. It is mainly because he was brought up in a traditional atmosphere, and the impression of his mother, a profoundly religious and traditional woman, never left him. As Richard Johnson notes, "The image of the new women that he wanted to create was deeply influenced and coloured by the kind of cultural and emotional environment in which he grew up." But Gandhi was not blind to the traditional defects. He wanted to preserve what is good and discard what is bad in the ancient heritage. He tried to balance tradition with modernity. Malathi Ramanathan rightly feels:

The tenor of his thought was towards an ideal of equality and for an assertive role for women in the society, with an emphasis on their moral superiority
- and thereby defining as well as broadening the parameters within which they could function. If the emerging picture is not one of a revolutionary restructuring of women's position, this is because Gandhi represented the essence of his times, along with its limitations.33

Gandhi firmly believed that realization of one's inner strength was essential to free oneself from subservience to man or any power on earth. Thus it was necessary for women to gain this power to free themselves from the shackles that bound them. He felt that women should be self-reliant to effect their own emancipation. Gandhi's stand that women should work out their own salvation is one of his greatest contributions to women's liberation and unlike the earlier reformers he was more revolutionary in this regard. Nehru has rightly said "Like an alchemist he transformed the very nature of Indian people and marched them towards the integrated emancipation of women and nation."34

Gandhi is one of the few leaders whose practice was far more radical than the words he used for describing it. However Gandhi's impact and influence lies in the fact that he helped women find a new dignity in public life, a new confidence and a consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression.
REFERENCES


5. Uma Shankar Jha, op. cit., p. 22.


10. Ibid., p. 8.


15. Quoted in Madhu Kishwar, op. cit., p. 1691.


25. Ibid., p. 312.


29. Ibid., p. 72.


