Gandhi on Women

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CHAPTER VI
GANDHI ON WOMEN

Undoubtedly, Gandhi was a *karma yogi* who conscientiously sought to translate what he knew into the concrete discipline of moral conduct. Gandhi wanted to build a society based on cardinal virtues of justice, peace and equality. He stood as a great political and social reformer and felt that India has to be strengthened from its very roots. He paid special attention to the position of untouchables. The wretched position of women in Indian society also drew his attention. Gandhi always included woman in his discussion of ‘human being’. He held that woman is a companion of man gifted with equal mental and moral potential. Gandhi brought Indian women out of their homes and made them participate in social and political activities. Gandhi, however, remained mostly within the traditional patriarchal framework. Women, Gandhi felt, has the primary task of a homemaker. She may take up other work only as a subsidiary.

6.1. WOMEN’S INFLUENCE ON GANDHI

In a letter written to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi wrote: “If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use 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 the slave holders have become one in the crime of 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.”

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Gandhi's awareness of women’s exploitation

Gandhi was fully aware of the exploitation of women in and outside their homes but he also thought that a person cannot be exploited without his or her will or participation. Gandhi, himself admitted that he learnt the technique of non-violent passive resistance from women, especially from his wife and mother. It was Kasturba’s passive resistance against Gandhi’s unreasonable actions and attitudes, both as a man and husband that compelled him to change himself from a domineering husband to an understanding one; thereby realizing the spirit of equality and acting upon the principle of mutual consideration. In his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, he has discussed at length about his inner transformation from an authoritarian husband to an understanding companion. This, Gandhi admitted, did not come easily. He exercised authority on Ba not only physically but mentally as well. At one point Gandhi forced Ba to clean the toilet of his visitor and Kasturba refused and there was a violent conflict between the two. Shyama Sinha states that Mahatma Gandhi had almost threatened to throw Ba out of the house. When she admonished Bapu in “firm and measured tone”, it brought Babu to his senses and he realized his fault. Thus Gandhi’s own admission on his immense faith in women’s *Shakti* (power) comes from his experience of his mother and his wife. He observed and studied women in his own home and came to perceive women as equal partners in the home and society, not merely as wives and mothers.

6.2. GANDHI AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Gandhi desired to build a new society in free India i.e. a society based on social justice, peace and harmony. He firmly believed that freedom was a birthright of every nation, as well as of every human being. He never failed to include women in his concept of ‘human being’. However, we find that Gandhi’s socio-political philosophy, as far as he addresses to the question of gender equality, is progressive but constructed on ‘patriarchal values’.
According to Gandhi, a woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. But, she is entitled to a supreme place in her own ‘domain’ or sphere of activity as man is in ‘his’. Women’s domain is her home and man’s the outside world. Gandhi said that both boys and girls should be educated, but it is only the primary education for the two sexes that can have much in common. As far as the higher education is concerned, important differences would exist. “As nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equals in life, but their functions differ. It is woman’s right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, woman saves and spends.... She is her children’s educator and hence, mother to the Nation.”

Gandhi did not support co-educational institutions. He felt that there must be provision for separate arrangements for the education of women after their attaining a certain age. They should be taught the management of the home, the things that they should or should not do during pregnancy and the nursing and care of children etc. Hence, Gandhi always felt that while both are fundamentally equal, as far as form is concerned, there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must be different. She is in fact, care taker in every sense of the term. “... the art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct.” Gandhi, therefore, insisted that it is degrading both for man, as well as, woman that woman should be called upon to “forsake the hearth” and “shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth.” “... in trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down.”
Woman, according to Gandhi, is an incarnation of ahimsa which means love and infinite capacity for suffering. Gandhi had observed his wife and mother quietly resisting their exploitation at home. He admitted that he learnt the method of *satyagraha* from them and he thereby put it into practice as a major strategy to rebel against exploitation by the British.

To begin with, Gandhi did not advocate an “active role” for women in the public sphere. However, when the issue of women’s voting rights was first raised in 1921, Gandhi supported it and even felt that the success of the *satyagraha* movement and the *Dandi* March was inextricably linked with the active participation of women. Burning of foreign cloth and picketing of liquor shops were activities which were predominantly undertaken by women. By 1939, Gandhi was thoroughly convinced that if the national movement had to be elevated to the level of a mass movement, then women have to be included as active participants. Gandhi said, “I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then face it with greater confidence, than if men predominated. I would dread the latter’s violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak.”

Gandhi had an immense faith in the inner strength of women. He held that women by nature are endowed with the qualities of love, non-violence, forgiveness and a remarkable capacity for sacrifice. Gandhi once remarked:

> God only knows who invented the word *abala* for the women of India. To call them *abala* is to condemn the inherent strength of women, in my view it is an insult to them. If we pursue the history of the Rajput, Mughal or *Mahabharata* period of our country we shall come across marvelous instances of bravery shown by women. They not only exhibited their bravery through arms, but by building up their moral courage they developed immense strength. If women resolve to bring glory to the nation, within a few months they can totally change the face of the country because the spiritual background of an Aryan woman is totally different from that of the women of other countries.  

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It is the woman only who painfully yet joyously gives birth to a child; she toils day and night and still experiences utmost joy and satisfaction watching her baby growing day by day. Gandhi exhorted that this incomparable love and suffering should be transformed to the entire humanity. Gandhi says:

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. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith.

Gandhi, definitely thought women to be worthier interpreters of non-violence than men. A man, according to Gandhi, understands the dharma of non-violence through his intellect whereas a woman, the very embodiment of renunciation and compassion, has imbibed it even before her birth.

Gandhi strongly believed that the happiness of mankind will be realized only when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the companion of the other. In fact, one cannot live without the other’s active help. As souls man and woman are equal. However, for Gandhi, equality of the sexes does not mean equality of occupations. Women’s occupations are more conducive to peace than war. Since nature has created sexes as complements of each other, their functions are also defined as are their forms.

Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. Taking a critical and rational approach, Gandhi said, while “it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide.” Gandhi called himself an ‘orthodox Hindu’ but one who desired to rid Hinduism of its defects and restore it to its
pristine glory. According to him, the *Smritis* which do not give a woman her due place should not be taken as the word of God. In fact, scriptures that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religion and morality should be revised. Gandhi strongly felt that the evils of child-marriage, dowry, *purdah*, the restrictions on widows and other such practices have to be eradicated. “The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our *shastras* as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women,”11 By participating in political struggles, Gandhi thought that the women would be gradually able to liberate themselves from *purdah* and such social taboos. He rejected the idea that the *purdah* is a means of saving women from men’s evil eye; the only means is men’s own purity of character.

Thus, in Gandhi, we find a revolutionary who could challenge the ills of traditional Hindu Society and liberate the women from the prejudicial customs and traditions. Gandhi said that chastity is not a “hot-house growth.”12 It cannot be superimposed. In fact, it cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the *purdah*; it must grow from within and must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation.

The entry of women in the *satyagraha* struggle gave the movement a new momentum. The women in India came out of *purdah* and actively participated in the non-violent struggle. They manufactured contraband salt, picketed foreign cloth shops and liquor shops and even tried to wean both the seller and the customer from these. Gandhi chose women for this job because he believed that women had an inherent capacity for non-violence. He felt that the non-cooperation movement of 1921 had partially failed because men had
been entrusted with picketing and violence had crept in. Women’s involvement in non-cooperation movement, helped women in finding a new dignity in public life; a new place in the national mainstream.

Gandhi had an immense faith in the inner strength of women and he wanted women to acknowledge their inner moral courage so as to a) emancipate themselves from the domination of men and b) participate in the national emancipation. To quote Gandhi, “...let them become members of legislatures in India, but the foremost duty of women is to save themselves from the intentional or unintentional tyranny of men and make India glorious and strong.” At another place Gandhi says, “A woman conscious of her dignity as woman sheds luster on her womanhood through soul-force.”

Gandhi believed that the evil practice of dowry should be completely eradicated from the Hindu social order. He called marriages involving dowry ‘marriage by purchase’. He strongly believed that in marriages where wives and daughters-in-law are ‘purchased’ cannot blossom into any harmonious relationship. Gandhi, in 1929, astounded his cotemporary society by saying that “if I had a girl under my charge, I would rather keep her a maiden all her life than give her away to one who expected a single pie for taking her for his wife.” Gandhi strongly opposed child marriage and when the Children’s Protection Act was brought up, Gandhi supported it whole-heartedly. He said that the issue was not just raising the marriageable age for girls from 14 to 16, but rather not forcing marriage on any individual without their prior consent. Thus Gandhi put emphasis on the consent of the people entering matrimony. This is particularity significant since we find that even today consent of the girl, quite often of boys is not considered important before family decision.
However, the most remarkable feature that underlies the ‘practical’ philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is that he tried to bring about reforms in the society not on a superficial level but at a deeper level. The change has to be brought from within, this is what he thought and worked upon until his last breath, thereby setting an example for the generations to follow.

Gandhi emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone – both men, as well as, women. Gandhi believed that economic freedom would play a vital role in the empowerment of women. He consistently inspired and motivated women for spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Once addressing women at Nadiad, in 1919, Gandhi suggested that rather than spending so much time in temples, women should spin for few hours everyday. Telling the beads in temples, undoubtedly is dharma but real bhakti, Gandhi felt consisted in serving the motherland.

Gandhi believed that the success of the Swadheshi movement was possible only if women spun yarn and weave cloth in large numbers. Spinning yarn would not only enable the women to be economically independent, but would also add to the resources of middle class, sometimes even the sole source of subsistence for lower class families. Gandhi remarked that the wages payable to women for an hour’s spinning should be the same as are paid to men and we know that equal wages for equal work is an important aspect of feminist thought. He remarked, “The times have changed when man was regarded as woman’s master. That we do not admit this is a different matter. God has made man and woman one complete whole. One must not lord over the other. An endeavor is being made to establish this truth through Khadi.”

Woman, thought Gandhi, is the personification of strength, endurance and self-sacrifice but she does not realize what tremendous strength she
possesses. Once a woman realizes this, she can exhibit to the world the infinite strength that is latent in her, “... the beauty of a woman does not consist in the beauty of her clothes and jewellery, but in the purity of her heart.” It was this immense faith in women’s moral strength that made Gandhi think that ‘self-control’ rather than contraceptives would be the best method for population control. Gandhi never admired the use of contraceptives or other artificial means of birth control. He said:

Birth control by contraceptives no doubt, regulates to a certain extent, the number of newcomers and enables persons of moderate means to keep the wolf from the door. But the moral harm it does to the individual and society is incalculable. For one thing, the outlook upon life of those to satisfy the sexual appetite for the sake of it is wholly changed. Marriage ceases to be a sacrament for them.

Since Gandhi believed that women had more self-restraint, the responsibility of restraint was handed over to women. “Women should have to resist their husbands. If contraceptives are resorted to, frightful results will follow. Men and women will be living for sex alone. They will become soft-brained, unhinged, in fact mental and moral wrecks.” Gandhi thus placed an ‘extra responsibility’ on women to bring the entire situation of over population under control. Women, Gandhi strongly believed, have to learn the art of resistance so that they “learn to say ‘no’ to their husbands when they approach them carnally.” Woman has to be taught that she has rights as well as duties. She is
not a mere tool of her husband’s lust. Moreover, since having more children not only results in over-population, but it also drains away the health of the mother, women should acknowledge their moral potential lying dormant in them and exercise self-restraint. “To ask India’s woman to take to contraceptives is, to say the least, putting the cart before the horse. The first thing is to free her from mental slavery, to teach her the sacredness of her body and to teach her the dignity of national service and the service of humanity.”

The central purpose of marriage, according to Gandhi, is procreation and the ideal, therefore, is to look upon marriage as a sacrament and to lead a life of self-restraint. Marriage, therefore, according to Gandhi, is a sacred union which finally leads to the spiritual development of both the partners.

To quote Gandhi:

When love between husband and wife becomes wholly pure, it reaches its perfection. There is no place in it then for sensual pleasures nor for any touch of selfishness ...... the poets have conceived and expressed the longing of the individual self for the supreme self in terms of conjugal love. Desire for marriage springs from attachment, from intense attachment. When that attachment has developed into an unselfish bond and one has no desire for physical contact – does not even think of it – when one atman completely merges itself in another, we then see that one gets a glimpse of the love of the supreme Atman.

Gandhi, thus, condemned the physical aspect of love, and instead emphasized the spiritual feeling which lies beneath the love of husband and wife. Man, and, woman are equal as souls. But they forget their higher nature and being enslaved by passion, they consider themselves as mere bodies i.e. man as strong in physical strength and woman as a weaker sex needing man’s protection. A woman who recognizes her spiritual nature is stronger than a man, “... as Sita was stronger than Ravana, and the other remains weaker, as was Ravana.”
Undoubtedly, Gandhi’s ideas on marriage, sex and celibacy are highly controversial. Gandhi took a decision to practice sexual abstinence in 1910 apparently without consulting his wife. Gandhi regarded female sexuality not as intense and powerful as the male. He expected woman to be more virtuous and disciplined than man and thereby he considered her, as Bhikhu Parekh rightly comments, “too sacred for sexual love”.25 He could only see her as a mother, sister, daughter, or a dutiful and sexually disinterested wife. Gandhi, therefore, granted her moral superiority at the expense of her sexuality and sensuality.

Secondly, in the beginning, Gandhi’s views on ‘simple life full of hardships’ were enforced on Ba and she followed Gandhi perhaps because like a conventional wife, she considered it a duty to follow her husband’s footsteps or to ensure domestic peace. Though in the later years of her life, Ba understood his philosophy as well.

Thirdly, Gandhi’s transcendence into Mahatma owes much to Ba’s silent contribution in molding the beliefs and contributions of Gandhiji. Ba is remembered primarily as a life companion of Bapu, a shadow following the footsteps of her husband. Her contribution to Gandhiji’s success and mass appeal is not adequately recognized, though she awakened the simple rural women of India through her own toil and sufferings and her own example. It was Ba’s active as well as supportive participation in all Gandhian activities that ensured that Gandhi’s master plan of non-violent satyagraha could be realized.

6.3. CONCLUSION

Gandhi’s critique of social evils, his consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women’s moral strength made an impact on
women’s struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women participated in large numbers in ‘mass’ movements led by him and this made a big breakthrough in Indian women’s lives. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded and in its 1889 Bombay session, ten women participated. Gandhiji’s call to women and large scale participation of women in the freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of other nationalist leaders as well. Jawaharlal Nehru who was influenced by the liberal views on women’s question in the west was in agreement with Gandhi that without economic freedom other aspects of women’s equality would not be realized. However he disagreed with Gandhi on many points. He did not agree that women’s education alone can bring about the desired changes and wanted women being trained in all human activities. He admitted that if women’s struggles remained isolated from the general political, economic, and social struggles, the women’s movement would not gain strength and will remain confined to the upper classes. Equality between men and women was accepted as one of the objectives in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931. Many women who fought for the country’s freedom also became active on the issues of women’s rights. This period saw the emergence of many women’s organizations. The Women’s India Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by Margaret Cousin, an Irish and an Indian nationalist, the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW) in 1926 and All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) in 1927. In the 1920s and 1930s women participated actively in the Civil Disobedience movement. Thousands of women were jailed during their participation in Salt march when Gandhiji urged people to break the salt law by making salt themselves. Thus, women’s participation in the national movement helped in breaking several of the old barriers of tradition and custom.
However, Gandhi’s delineation of the role of women in society is blurred with gender-dominated patriarchal value system. Though progressive for his times, Gandhi could conceive of women’s role as that of a mother and homemaker. He did not support the idea of her working in public life, “…politics and professions were to be, by and large exclusively male domains, and you, sisters, what would you do going to parliament? Do you aspire after the Collectorship, Commissionership or even Vice royalty? You would not care for the Viceroy has got to order executions and hangings, a thing you would heartily desist.” Gandhi felt that the division of society into varnas, solely defines categorization on the basis of division of labor. And thinking within the same framework, any male/female distinction may also be understood in terms of their respective functions. Gandhi believed that both men and women are equal in status and should have the same opportunities to enhance their potential; but they are not identical. Gandhi supported the traditional ideas about women’s nature and functions. Man is supreme in outward activities; women ought to have more knowledge in domestic affairs. This distinction in their sphere of activities requires that boys and girls have to be educated differently. The girls should be trained more in domestic household management skills. But while emphasizing on this, Gandhi never meant that women’s entire life is to be dedicated in managing the household or bringing up the children. He, instead, suggested part time work for them so that their home is not neglected. Gandhi wanted women to take some work which would make them economically independent and would at the same time supplement the income of the family. However women’s education, according to Gandhi, laid much emphasis on home making and child caring activities and this would not, in any way, equip them for other skills required in the public domain. Therefore women, according to Gandhi, could hope to be economic
independent only through activities like spinning or those which are extensions of house work like poultry etc.

Gandhi had prepared a primer for the children for primary school which is in the form of a mother teaching the child. In one of the chapters of the primer or Balpothi, Gandhi laid emphasis on the dignity of household work i.e. both men and women need to be educated equally in homework because the home belongs to both. Gandhi strongly felt that men must participate in the house work and reduce the drudgery of women’s homework. Therefore Gandhi, even a century before, could perceive the hardships that woman would face performing the dual responsibility (i.e. of a home maker and of a professional woman contributing towards the economic subsistence of the family). Until and unless men come forward and show their participation, willingly and happily, in performing domestic tasks as well as rearing and bringing up of children, Gandhi’s ideal of woman as a home maker may act as a protective shield for her. Gandhi had suggested that woman has a right to decide for herself. She may remain single and fulfill her wishes of being a progressive working woman.

The soul is the same in both, though in form they both are different. Gandhi believed that every human being is born with certain natural tendencies and definite limitations; and it is woman and not man who is endowed with the attributes of love, tolerance and compassion. Gandhi discussed sexuality almost from the masculine point of view and expected woman to be more virtuous and disciplined than man. Gandhi never liberated women in reproductive domain. Deeply convinced with the idea that female sexuality was not as intense and powerful as the male, Gandhi strongly criticized the use of contraceptives. He rather felt that woman, the very incarnation of shakti must recognize the hidden
moral potential in her so that she along with her husband are able to live the life of restraint. Gandhi’s conception of a woman is a “long suffering selfless and self-effacing being.” But this capacity for silent suffering which Gandhi idealized may be regarded as one of the key symptoms of her subordination and a significant cause of her exclusion from decision making processes within the family and outside it, “a glorified cult of eternal womanhood.”
NOTES AND REFERENCES


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.


12. *Young India*, 3-2-27 p. 37.


15. *Young India*, 14-2-1929.


22. Ibid.


28. Ibid.