CHAPTER – VI

GANDHI ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Gandhi was not only a great political leader but also a passionate enthusiast of humanity and an implacable enemy of all injustice and inequality; he was a friend of the lowly and the downtrodden. Women, the poor and the deprived sections command his most tender attention. He had almost an instinctive understanding of women and their problems and had a deep abiding sympathy for them.

Gandhi was a peculiar blend of religious and rational elements when he invoked the aid of the "Inner Voice" to enable him to evolve a line of action in a baffling situation. He had profoundly said that the woman is the incarnation of Ahmisa; ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows his capacity in the largest measure? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget she ever was or can be the object of a man’s lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of the man as his mother, maker and silent leader. She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith.

Gandhi gave powerful support to the cause of women's emancipation and vehemently criticized various social evils afflicting Indian womanhood. But before discussing his singular vision regarding social evils, it would be appropriate and essential to examine first the predicament which Gandhi faced vis-a-vis the Hindu Scriptures containing derogatory remarks about women and giving them secondary position in the society. It is interesting to note that Gandhi despite his
profound respect for Indian tradition and his belief that India should preserve all that is sacred and upright in its ancient heritage was not overpowered by tradition. He wanted the *shastras* to be read and understood in the right spirit and if they contained contradictory statements on any particular issue, his advice was to follow the ones which were favoured by reason. He said: "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide."¹ He further remarked: "No progress or reform is possible if one is not prepared to get out of the rut of orthodox tradition."²

He tried to explain that writings generally fulfil various social, cultural and environmental demands and necessities of their times and therefore in adjudging an ancient author's statements or views, the historical context should always be taken into consideration. Commenting on Manu's controversial statements Gandhi said, "the saying attributed to Manu that for women there can be no freedom is not to be sacrosanct. It only shows that probably, at the time when it was promulgated, women were kept in a state of subjection. The epithets used in our literature to describe a wife, are 'ardhangini', the better half and 'sahadharmini', the helpmate. The husband addressing the wife as 'devi' or goddess does not show any disparagement. But unfortunately a time came when the woman was divested of many of her rights and privileges and was reduced to a status of inferiority."³ Moreover, Gandhi remarked that all that is published in the name of scriptures should not be taken as the word of God or the inspired word, since they often contain false interpolations and argued that in any case scriptural injunctions which are obviously in conflict with true morality need not be followed. In fact, Gandhi even went to the

¹ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), XXVII, p. 308. (Hereinafter referred to as CWMG).
² Ibid., Volume XXXVII, p. 167.
³ Harijan, 28-11-1936, p.333.
extent of suggesting the expurgation by some authoritative body of all those texts in the *Samritis* which were repugnant to the moral sense.\(^4\)

For ameliorating the condition of women, Gandhi sought and found support from the classical tradition. He frequently emphasised upon historical evidence which established that women's lives were less restricted in ancient times and often argued for a broader social role for women in modern times on this basis.\(^5\) Not surprisingly, the ideals which Gandhi consistently invoked for Indian women were Sita, Savitri, Damyanti and Draupadi and the perfect model for man-woman relations which he advocated was that of Ram and Sita. Moreover, when he wished to assert the superiority of women's inherent qualities such as spirit of strength and courage and the power of independent thinking and initiative which actuated the women of ancient India, he upheld the immortal Maitreyi and Gargi. Gandhi pertinently used these Indian traditional ideals, images and symbols to convey modern and revolutionary message, to impart strength and courage among women, to draw upon the deep resources available within women themselves and to rebuild action wherein women far from remaining passive spectators would gradually but inexorably become active participants and play a vital role in the struggle for *swaraj* and in the quest for *sarvodaya*. Gandhi asserted, "the only way to transform a community was to revivify, revise and reform its established institutions and to link up the old with the new."\(^6\) Judith Brown had rightly defined Gandhi's position *vis-a-vis* tradition: "working in the ambience of tradition, accepting its buoyancy and capacity for movement, using it to make progress, yet being its

\(^4\) CWMG, Volume LXIV, pp. 84-85.


master rather than its victim." Similarly, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph had remarked that Gandhi was 'one of the most conspicuous modernisers of Indian politics' who by employing tradition as an instrument of modernization 'gave familiar Indian ideas and practices new dignity and moral worth.'

Unlike the social reformers, Gandhi had realized some of the negative consequences of colonial rule on women’s economic status. In 1917 he stated that “women...(is)...mother to the Nation....”

“The economic and the moral salvation of India thus rests mainly on you. The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation....The destiny of India is far safer in your hands than in the hands of a Government that has so exploited India’s resources that she has lost faith in herself.”

The 1920s and 1930s represent a transition in Gandhi’s views on women from the concept of women’s rights to the far more dynamic one of role. Women’s energy would be unleashed for the nation-building process through an assertion of their productive and creative roles as equal partners, participants, leaders, conscience keepers, and beneficiaries. Between 1921 and 1925 Gandhi added India’s political salvation as a goal for women in nation-building. “....unless women of India work side by side with men, there is no

10 CWMG, Vol. 13, pp. 31-36.
11 Ibid., Vol. 20, pp. 495-497.
12 Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 199.
salvation for India, salvation in more senses than one. I mean political salvation in the greater sense, and I mean the economic salvation and spiritual salvation also.\(^\text{13}\)

Gandhi, thus, despite being deep rooted in and while drawing immense support from Indian tradition vehemently criticized various social practices and evils which were justified on the ground of their traditional sanctions which included the customs of child marriage, enforced widowhood, sati pratha, dowry, prostitution etc.

Gandhi on occasion declared: “We must test on the anvil of reason everything that is capable of being tested by it and reject that which does not satisfy it, even though it may appear in an ancient garb.”\(^\text{14}\)

**Child Marriage**

Marriage according to Gandhi is “A sacrament, an entrance, into a new life, the girls to be married should be fully developed, should have some hand in the choice of companionship for life and should know the consequences of their acts. It is a crime against God and man to call the union of the children a married state and then to decree widowhood for a girl whose so called husband is dead.”\(^\text{15}\) Gandhi denounced in unequivocal terms the custom of child marriage, which he considered as 'an immoral and inhuman act, for it undermined our morals and induced physical degeneration'. He maintained, "by countenancing such customs we recede from God as well as swaraj’\(^\text{16}\) Repudiating the claim that child marriage had a religious sanction, Gandhi severe and vehement criticism was further directed at the 'ill-matched union' of

\(^{13}\) Ibid., Vol. 26, pp. 395-398.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Young India, 21-05-1931, p. 115

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 26-08-1926, p. 300.
delicate young girls with much older men who looked upon marriage as a mere license to perpetrate all sorts of atrocities on young girls in their teens. He believed that both the boy and the girl should be fully developed physically and mentally at the time of marriage and they should have a voice in the choice of their life partner. It is irreligion, not religion, to give religious sanction to a brutal custom. The Smritis bristle with contradictions. The only reasonable deduction to be drawn from the contradictions is that the texts may be contrary to know and accepted morality, more especially to the moral percepts enjoined in the Samritis themselves, must be rejected as interpolations. Inspiring verses on self-restraint could not be written at the same time and by the same pen that wrote the verses encouraging the brute in man. Only a man innocent of self-restraint and steeped in vice could call it a sin not to marry a girl before she reached the age of monthly periods. It should be held sinful to marry a girl for several years after the period begins. He, therefore, pleaded for raising the age of marriage and when the Child Marriage Restraint Bill of Raisahib Harbilas Sarda sought to evolve a legislation to raise the age of consent to fourteen, he suggested that it should be raised not merely to fourteen but to sixteen or even eighteen years.

This custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By concentrating such customs we recede from God as well as Swaraj. A man who has no thought of the tender age of a girl has none of God. And undergrown men have no capacity for fighting battles of freedomor, having gained it, of retaining it. Fight for Swaraj means not mere political awakening but an all-round awakening — social, educational, moral, economic and political.

17 Ibid.
However, while advocating legal remedies, Gandhi laid greater stress on cultivating strong public opinion and spreading among women consciousness of their rights. He even supported agitation by local people to check such happenings. He also advocated opening of special institutions like Mahilashramas for rescuing young girls who fell victims to the evil designs of such lustful men or were sold by their parents for the sake of a paltry sum of money and exhorted educated and enlightened women to work among such girl wives and widows so as to gradually cultivate a social climate wherein weddings of little girls would become an impossibility.\(^\text{18}\)

Legislation is being promoted to raise the age of consent. It may be good for bringing a minority to book. But it is not legislation that will cure a popular evil; it is enlightened public opinion that can do it. Gandhi expressed his sentiments thus: “I am not opposed to legislation in such matters, but I do lay greater stress on culmination of public opinion.”\(^\text{19}\)

**Widow Remarriage**

Closely aligned to child marriage was the question of widow remarriage, especially the pathetic plight of child widows. For centuries, the miserable condition of widows and the customary servitude of 'enforced widowhood' constituted a blot on Indian society. Gandhi had three sets of values for widowhood:

(a) for child widows,

(b) about voluntary adult widowhood, and

\(^\text{18}\) CWMG, Volume XXXI, p. 480.
He was deeply concerned about the state and condition of child widows. He treated an unmarried girl and a child widow at par. But he was more sympathetic towards the latter, who were customarily denied the right to remarry and suffered several other social and legal disabilities than the former who could live a respectable life even if they decided to remain unmarried. He pointed out since girl widows had not experienced married life therefore these girls should not be considered widows in the true sense of the term. Gandhi felt that the presence of thousands of such widows in any society was a serious menace. It was like "sitting on a mine which may explode at any moment."  

Further, Gandhi contended that the custom prohibiting remarriage of child widows was particularly senseless and cruel and ought to be abolished forthwith. He commented: "We cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl widows.... There is no warrant in any shastra for such widowhood." He does not invoke the Shastras to support his view in favour of widow remarriage. He also highlighted the prevalent double standards when he angrily queried, "does not this Hindu widowhood stink in one's nostrils when one thinks of old and diseased men over fifty taking, or rather purchasing girl wives sometimes one on top of another?" He further argued that, "If a fifty year old widower may remarry with impurity, it should be open to the widow of that age to do likewise. Voluntary widowhood consciously adopted by woman who has felt the affection of a partner adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself. Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and

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20 Ibid., Volume XXXI, p. 264.
21 Young India, 05-08-1926, p. 276.
22 Ibid., 19-08-1926, p. 290.
defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. If we would be pure, if we would save Hinduism, we must rid ourselves of this poison of enforced widowhood. The reform must begin by those who have girl-widows taking courage in both their hands and seeing that the child-widows in their charge are duly and well married...not remarried. They were never really married.”

Gandhi advocated that these 'wretched beings' should also be given equal opportunity to find mates and advised parents who committed the 'sin of marrying' their infant daughters to 'expatiate for the sin' by remarrying these daughters should they be widowed in their teens. He even called upon educated young men to vow to marry none other than a girl widow. He reiterated "if there be even one child widow, the wrong demands redress.”

However, Gandhi never advocated widow remarriage 'en masse', as he believed that the Hindu concept of the faithful widow who remains chaste and devotes herself to good work in her husband's memory is a worthy ideal for women to follow, yet he did not believe in 'enforced widowhood' accepted mainly by fear of social ostracism rather than inner conviction. According to him, widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke, and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. Further, Gandhi pertinently queried, "can we possibly call ourselves men worthy of ruling ourselves or others or shaping the destiny of a nation containing thirty crore people as long as there is one single widow who wishes to fulfil her fundamental wants but is violently prevented from doing so?"

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23 Ibid., 08-10-1925, p. 346
24 Ibid., 06-10-1927, p.337.
25 CWMG, Volume XXXI, p. 493.
26 Young India, 02-09-1926, p. 307-309.
He emphatically advocated that to save Hinduism, we must rid ourselves of this poison of enforced widowhood since during Vedic times also there was no absolute ban on widow remarriage. He upheld absolute equality between men and women on this issue also by constantly affirming that a widow should have the same discretion as a widower about remarriage. That is why Gandhi advocated that if a widow wanted to marry she had every right to do so and society must not look down upon such marriages. Even a grown up widow, who cannot restrain herself ... should have the freedom to remarry without incurring any odium.27

Gandhi, though championed the cause of child widows and unambiguously condemned enforced widowhood, but in the case of adult widows, especially those having children, he preferred, the ideal of ascetic Hindu widowhood, if accepted consciously and voluntarily. He saw 'voluntary enlightened widowhood' as a great social asset and believed that 'a real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity.'28 This was because a Hindu widow had learnt to find happiness in suffering, self-control and self-denial which was carried by Hinduism to its greatest heights and in the widow's life it reached its perfection. Her duty was to serve others—family members and guests. She was never weary. She only prayed for strength to enable her to serve better. Gandhi opined that if this holy life lived by widows became a thing of the past, if this living image of service was destroyed through ignorance or pride, incalculable harm would be done to Hinduism.

27 Ibid., 05-08-1926, p. 276.
28 Ibid., 15-09-1927, p. 200.
Even the ascetic ideal of conscious and voluntary renunciation of the right to remarry which Gandhi deeply cherished was not to be confined only to women. Rather, Gandhi wanted men to strive and emulate the same ideal. He said, "I should any day subscribe to a reform in Hindu law making sinful the remarriage of a widow or widower who voluntarily married after maturity." He further implored that Hinduism will remain imperfect so long as men do not accept suffering akin to what was willingly adopted by many widows, and like them, withdraw their interests from the pleasures of this life. In culmination, Gandhi emphasized on the potential of widows as servants of the nation and believed that it was worth considering carefully, in what way the country could avail itself of the services of hundreds of widows, young and old.

Gandhi's ideas about different aspects of marriage were quite revolutionary and some people opined that it was due to western impact on him. Refuting the charge he said that saturated as I am with the spirit of Hinduism, do not make the mistake that it is the western spirit in me that is speaking. I claim to be full to overflowing with the spirit of India undefiled. I have assimilated many things from the west, but not this. There is no warrant for this kind of widowhood in Hinduism.

Sati Pratha

Gandhi considered sati pratha, having its origin in superstitions and blind egotism, barbarous in the present age. He believed that self-immolation on the pyre of the husband was a sign not of 'enlightenment but of gross ignorance'. He further opined that satihood was the acme of purity. This purity could be attained not by dying, but through constant

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29 CWMG, Volume XXXI, p. 443.
30 Young India, 19-08-1926, p. 290.
striving, constant immolation of the spirit from day to day. Our ancients, too, described a sati as one who 'signalize herself by her selfless service during her husband's lifetime as well as after and remains absolutely chaste in thought, word and deed.' He suggested women to prove their satihood not by mounting the funeral pyre but 'by renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country.' Such a sati would refuse to give way to wild grief at the death of her husband, but would ever strive to make her husband's ideals and virtues live again in her actions and thereby win for him the crown of immortality.

Gandhi extended the same test of loyalty to the husband also as he was aware of the double standard prevalent in society where no husband mounted the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. He affirmed: "If the wife has to prove her devotion to her husband, so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. You cannot have one set of weights and measures for the one and a different one for the other."

Though Gandhi criticized sati pratha wholeheartedly, but his criticism did not extend to the then existing social norms which required total self-abnegation from women and their total dependence on the charity of their in-laws and society. He also did not question the unequal property relations which leaves a widow without any access to the means of subsistence.

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31 Ibid., 14-10-1926, p. 356.
32 CWMG, Volume XXVII, p. 309.
33 Young India, 21-05-1931, p. 166.
Purdah System

Gandhi’s voice against the purdha system amongst women was consistent and by doing so his ideas was to make women realize that they were not meant simply for household affairs, but for also better and higher causes of society. He saw that purdha was not prevalent in Punjab, Gujarat and South India. The constricting system of purdah, the seclusion and veiling of women, prevalent in the society not only denied the freedom to the women, who had been 'caged and confined in their houses and courtyards', but also the free gifts of God like light and fresh air which had a ruinous effect on their personality, narrowed their vision, stunted their interests to petty things and hindered their advancement and their capacity for doing useful works for society. He felt much pained to find its existence even in educated families and their (women's) lack of courage to revolt against this evil.\textsuperscript{34}

He pointed out that by interfering with the free growth of womanhood of India we are interfering with the growth of free and independent spirited men. Gandhi further opined that we would be incapable of defending ourselves and healthily competing with other nations, if we continue to allow our better halves to remain paralyzed. It accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness.\textsuperscript{35} He, therefore, denounced purdah as its deleterious effects, felt Gandhi, were not only checkmating women's growth but also inflicting incalculable harm to the country.

Gandhi firmly believed, it was not 'purdah' but purity, which works as a shield and gives protection to a woman against malicious intentions rather then that purdah protects the virtue of women as the safety

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
valve against the corruption. In support of his viewpoint, he further remarked, "chastity is not a hot-house growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of purdah. It must grow from within and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation . . . men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk even as the latter are compelled to trust them and must help them to come out of their veils and breathe in the fresh air."36

Gandhi did not accept purdah as an Indian tradition. He pointed out logically that the women of ancient India, if they held public discourses and participated in them, certainly did not do so from behind purdah, nor is it known among the peasantry even now, although many in our society, then and now upheld purdah as an ancient custom. He asserted, "we must test on the anvil of reason everything that is capable of being tested by it and reject that which does not satisfy it even though it may appear in an ancient garb."37 He emphasized that humanity will remain diminished so long as women are confined in their houses. Hence, he made an appeal to the people to tear down the purdah with one mighty effort and bring those (women) out of their secluded shells.

The Mahatma argued that unless it was removed our women could not think of a good status in the society. He opined that the purdha was adopted during the period of Hindu decline. “In the age when proud Draupadi and spotless Sita lived, there could be no purdah. Gargi could not

have held her discourses from behind the purdah." He was critical of this custom which retarded the development of the personality of a woman.

**Prostitution and Devdasi System**

Gandhi was one of the first crusaders against the practice of religious prostitution of women. He was deeply shocked by its wide prevalence and felt excruciating pain at the sight of a Devdasi. He considered that the problem could be solved if man abstained from lust, and provision for an alternative occupation to women was made. He said, of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, shocking or brutal as his abuse of the better-half of humanity, the fairer sex." He protested against prostitution which he termed as moral leprosy but not against the prostitutes who were to be pitied and helped to regain their virtue rather than hated and condemned to lead a life of sin. He held those men who visited the pestilential haunts inhabited by the prostitutes equally responsible as women for perpetuating this evil. He remarked, "prostitute is commonly supposed to apply to women of lewd character. But the men who indulge in vice are just as much, if not more, prostitutes than the women who in many instances have to sell their bodies for the sake of earning a livelihood."

He further deplored the fact that the vast majority of men who visited these pernicious places were married men and therefore committed double sin. They sinned against their wives to whom they had sworn allegiance and also against the sisters whose purity they were bound to guard with as much zeal as that of their own blood sisters. Gandhi believed this kind of indulgence would be regarded as a greater crime than the steeling of a

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38 Young India, 20-06-1928, p. 32.
39 Ibid., 03-02-1927, p. 34.
40 Ibid., March 24-03-1927, p. 94.
banana by a hungry man or the picking of a pocket by an youngster who is in need of money. Hence he questioned, "what is worse or more hurtful to society to steal property or to steal the honour of a woman?" He said that majority of Devdasis took to religious prostitution because they were economically stranded. He wanted this evil or 'leprosy' to be completely abolished legally and otherwise. He suggested a two pronged attack propaganda amongst men who entice young women to sell themselves for the satisfaction of their lust and amongst women who sell their honour for a livelihood. Gandhi asked every young man, married or unmarried, to contemplate over the sin of prostitution and advised them to do what they could to purify their neighbourhood of this social disease. He asserted, "it is an evil which cannot last for a single day if we men of India realize our own dignity."

Moreover, he warned that man, the law giver, would have to pay a dreadful penalty for the degradation he had imposed upon the so-called weaker sex. Further, he affirmed, "when woman, freed from man's snares, rises to the full height and rebels against man's legislation and institutions designed by him, her rebellion, no doubt nonviolent, will be nonetheless effective."

Gandhi advised to some women trapped in prostitution, how to get rid of this evil. The remedy he suggested was spinning and weaving which all could adopt without over-crowding. For the large majority of them there was no need to think of marriage. He stated, "they must therefore become the true sannyasinis (women ascetics) of India. Having no cares of life but of service, they can spin and weave to their hearts

41 Ibid.
42 Harijan, 15-09-1946, p. 310.
43 Young India, 16-04-1925, p. 133.
content." If such women, he believed, gave up their vile occupation and turned over a new leaf, respectable men would marry some of them.

Gandhi, however, did not go deep enough into the socio-cultural and economic factors which lead women to prostitution, nor did he have any comprehensive programme for their rehabilitation. Still there were a few instances of prostitutes having given up their occupation and taken to charkha as a means of livelihood in response to Gandhi's call.

Similarly, Gandhi criticized the custom of dedicating young girls to temples which were supposed to be in the service of the deity but practically used for immoral purposes. He said, "in the name of religion we commit a double crime by degrading woman and involving worship of God alongwith it." He regarded it an euphemism for prostitution and an institution for further perpetuation of vice.

He wanted men and women to use reason and so mould the social and public opinion that would be able to reject those customs and social compulsions sanctified by time which were unreasonable, inhuman, degrading and crippling even though they might be ancient and time honoured. He also favoured legislative measures and appealed for active support to Muthulakshmi Reddi in her attempts to get a law passed to stop the system of Devdasi.

**Dowry System**

The system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste. So long as the choice is restricted to a few hundred

44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 15-09-1921, p. 293.
young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated. All this means education of a character that will revolutionize the mentality of the youth of the nation.\textsuperscript{47} Gandhi condemned dowry as a cruel and abhorrent practice. It defiled the pure character of the marriage institution and reduced marriage to a market transaction. This system, he believed, was nothing but 'a marriage by purchase', where women, who were 'ardhangini', 'the better half', were reduced to the position of a mere cattle to be bought and sold, which gave 'nightmarish experiences' for the parents who had marriageable daughters.\textsuperscript{48} In this 'heartless custom', an educated man was open to the highest bidder for his hand, and needy parents were open to negotiate the sale of their daughters hardly out of their teens, to the oldest man who were prepared to pay the highest price. He, therefore, was of the opinion that vulgar ostentation and gross commercialism should have no place in arranging a sacramental union which aimed to be a holy and lifelong bond.

Gandhi with perceptive intuition had realized that this hateful system of dowry had contributed to gender discrimination at the very birth of the girl child, which was taken up with much sorrow and sense of burden. He stated, "I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over that of a daughter, both are God's gifts. They have equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going."\textsuperscript{49} Since the dowry system was closely connected with the caste system, he recommended abolition of caste as one of the measures by which the system could be eradicated. So long as the

\textsuperscript{47} Harijan, 25-05-1936, p. 117.  
\textsuperscript{49} Young India, May 21-05-1931, p. 115.
choice is restricted to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system would persist, believed Gandhi, no matter what was said against it. He, thus, advised the parents that they should not hesitate to marry their daughters to good young men coming from other region and community. Curtailing wasteful expenditure on the marriage ceremony and making it a simple and dignified affair was another remedy he suggested. He also made fervent appeals to people, especially educated men and women, to take active steps to do away with this evil. "Any young man", he wrote, "who makes dowry a condition of marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood." Gandhi even advised young girls to remain unmarried rather than to be humiliated and dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry.

As regards the means to fight this evil, he laid stress on the role of education. He remarked, "whatever can be done to abate the evil must be done, it is clear to me that this evil can be tackled, if there is education which responds to the rapidly changing conditions of the country . . . of what value is their education, if it does not enable them to dare defy a custom which is wholly indefensible and repugnant to one's moral sense?" Gandhi also emphasized the need of taking recourse to radical measures like organizing youth movements as he was convinced that the remedy for this despicable evil lay in the hands of the youth and he wanted youth movements to actively take up the issue and offer satyagraha against those perpetrating the system. Gandhi further opined that strong public opinion should be created in condemnation of the degrading practice of dowry and young men who soil

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50 CWMG, Volume XXXIX, p. 415.
52 Young India, 21-06-1928, p. 201.
their fingers with such ill gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. Once public opinion is prepared legislation may put the final seal over it.\textsuperscript{53}

In this context, it is noteworthy that weddings at the Gandhian ashrams were celebrated with marked restraint, decorum and solemnity while customary pomp and show and traditional transactions were conspicuous by their absence. Even, the impact of Gandhi's message was manifested in different parts of the subcontinent also where many educated people began to encourage simple, ritual free weddings, which came to be known as 'Gandhi Lagan'. This type of wedding involved simply the exchange of garlands by the bride and groom while their friends and relatives blessed it by clapping their hands.\textsuperscript{54}

**Gender Equality or Equality of Sexes**

Gandhi did not wish women to be ill-treated by men. He advised them not to think that they are physically weak. He argued that every woman who had inviolable purity of character enjoyed the same boon as Sita did.\textsuperscript{55} He unequivocally affirmed his uncompromising stand in the matter of gender equality. He believed that women are also individuals as men who should be given the liberty to make their own moral claims. But somehow or the other men has dominated women from ages past and the view imposed on them with regard to their inferiority, was part of the 'self-Interested teaching of men', which had left women in a state of helplessness and dependence. He opposed such 'excessive subordination' of the fair sex and wanted 'mutual consultation bold cooperation' between men and women. He looked upon woman as the companion of man gifted

\textsuperscript{53} Harijan, 23-05-1936, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{54} Young India, 21-06-1928, p.209.
\textsuperscript{55} CWMG, November 1930. Vol. XLIV.
with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in every minutest detail in the activities of man, she has an equal right of freedom. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity am man is in his.\textsuperscript{56}

Gandhi considered women not only equal to men, but in many ways superior to them. He accorded a high value to the qualities of suffering, sacrifice, humility, penance and tolerance. He considered bravery not in dying and killing but in the highest sense of suffering and real sacrifice in dying for a noble cause and in that way woman was any day superior to man because of the presence of these qualities in her. He even believed that in a non-violent war women could make a greater contribution than men because non-violence calls for suffering and who could suffer more purely and nobly than women. 'When she does a thing in the right spirit, she moves mountains', remarked Gandhi.

He did not regard the two genders as identical or similar rather he considered them to be spiritually and mentally equal but physically, emotionally and psychologically there was slight difference. He further described that equality of sexes did not mean equality of occupations, nor did it imply equality in the realm of work and power. Nature demanded the vocations of men and women to be different from each other. In fact, he was in favour of maintaining a 'harmonious division of labour between man and woman' which had been operative since the time of Adam and persisted to the present day—Adam wove, Eve span.\textsuperscript{57} For instance, it was not necessary for man to acquire the qualities needed for performing the responsibilities of motherhood. The duty of motherhood or a caretaker and the household work is the basic task of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 22-09-1927. Vol XXXIV
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 03-02-1927. Vol XXXIV
\end{itemize}
women and these are in no way less significant than the works done by men. In his opinion the art of bringing up the infants of the race is 'her special and sole prerogative.'

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There may be no legal bar against a woman hunting or wielding a lance. But she instinctively recoils from a function that belongs to man. Nature has created sexes as complements of each other. Their functions are defined as are their forms. He believed that the woman who knew and fulfilled her duty realized her dignified status. This fact perhaps was mainly responsible for Gandhiji's objection to women's working outside home as he gave greater importance to her special function of transmission of moral values to children. He thought that if they got involved in the tug of war for jobs with men, the care and upbringing of child will suffer greatly. He wanted women to have strong, purifying and controlling influence on family and society. Since man is supreme in the outward life, therefore, it is appropriate that he should have a greater knowledge of the world. In fact, he saw male and female in terms of the 'active-passive relationship'. "He is the bread winner; she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term."

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It is degrading in Gandhi's opinion that both for man and woman, that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and take up the rifle for the protection of that hearth, as it is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end.61 In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down. The sin will be on man's head for tempting or compelling his companion to desert her

59 Harijan, 2-12-1939, p. 359.
60 CWMG, Volume LXX, p. 381.
61 Harijan, 24-02-1940, p. 13.
special calling. He insisted that there was as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there was in defending it against attack from outside.

There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men. But insistence on the care of the home does not imply that women should consume whole of her time in the slavery of the kitchen or bringing up of children.\(^\text{62}\) He called it domestic slavery. He, instead, preferred part-time work for them so that home is not neglected. He wanted them to take some work which could supplement the income of the family.

Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of men; and men has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task. Gandhi, thus, legitimizes the different social, cultural, economic and political roles of men and women in terms of natural differences. He tends to consider certain culturally conditioned patterns of behaviour as belonging to the eternal and immutable essence of women and at the same time insists on the inviolability of the personal dignity and autonomy of women and that they should be treated as honoured comrades in common service.

Man should learn to give place to women and a country or community in which are not honoured cannot be considered as civilized.\(^\text{63}\) If man has ill-treated woman and is still doing so, the remedy for this ultimately lies in women’s own hand. If she stops thinking that she is weak, she can be free this very day. The really strong are not those who are strong in body. Ravana, who was a demon, that is, had physical strength, was helpless before the seemingly weak Sita. As souls man and

\(^{62}\) Ibid.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.
woman are equal. If a man does not recognize his spiritual nature but a woman does, the latter is the stronger of the two, as Sita was stronger than Ravana, and the other remains weaker, as was Ravana. Moreover, that this was possible only in the time of Rama. Even today there are countless Sitas in the world who require no man’s help and are yet safe against all danger.\

Gandhi clearly visualized the fact that man had dominated woman from ages past, and the result of this domination was that woman had developed an inferiority complex. He advised her to shun this inferiority complex and claim equality with man in every sphere of life.

**Women and the Struggle for Swaraj**

Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen… I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange ‘king log for king stork.’

Real Swaraj will come, not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be attained by educating the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority. Gandhi assigned to women a distinct and crucial mission in the nationalist quest which was perhaps the most creative and significant aspect of his vision. He remarked that in order to play her full and destined role in world affairs on the solution of conflicts by non-violent means, women must extend their capacities to the fullest.

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64 CWMG, November 1930.
65 Harijan, 24-02-1940, p.13.
66 Ibid.
67 Young India, 12-06-1924, p. 195.
68 Ibid., 29-01-1925, p. 41.
their interests beyond the narrow confines of their homes and family and embrace the whole of humanity. He did not see his advocacy of women's participation in freedom struggle as contradictory to his basic concept of woman as nurturer and core-taker of the home. On the contrary, participation of women in satyagraha was seen as an extension of her special mission as the caretaker of humanity. He, in fact, envisaged a pertinent link between the struggle for political freedom and the social reforms, as he believed that entry into politics would greatly help in removing many shackles with which they were fettered find getting them a place of equality with men.

Furthermore, having been acquainted with women's potential in South Africa, Gandhi was convinced that women's active association was a sine qua non for attaining swaraj. It would be in vain to hope for swaraj", remarked Gandhi, "so long as women do not make their full contribution to the effort... If the women do not know or do not accept their duty of preserving the nation's freedom, or of winning it back when it is lost, it will be impossible to defend it.69

The weapon, which Gandhi adopted to further the basic objectives of swaraj and sarvodaya was non-violent satyagraha, and this, he affirmed was particularly suited to the needs and genius of women. In fact, Gandhi was convinced that women would be worthier interpreters of non-violence than men, not because they are weak, as men in their arrogance believe them to be, but because they have greater courage of the right type and immeasurably greater spirit of self-sacrifice.70

69 CWMG, Volume XV, p. 290.
70 Ibid., Volume XLIII, p. 199.
Gandhi admitted that he had designed his strategy and chosen his particular form of struggle very consciously and deliberately, so as to encourage women's participation in them, which was for him, a life preserving and humanizing force and would help in preventing the movement from getting dissipated by senseless and self-destructive violence. He wrote: "My contribution to the great problem (of women's role in society) lies in my presenting the acceptance of truth and *ahimsa* in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, woman will be the unquestioned leader and having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex."\(^7\)

Women, thus, in the Gandhian vision were stronger by virtue of their infinite capacity of love, endurance, suffering and self-sacrifice and were really more amenable to non-violent *satyagraha* than men who normally glorified physical strength and armed accomplishment. In fact, he looked upon women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He not only envisaged a vital role for them in India's public life but also assigned them a more crucial task, i.e. their own emancipation. Reaffirming his faith on women Gandhi said, "...until women establish their womanhood the progress of India in' all directions is impossible. When woman whom we call abla become *sabala*, all those who are helpless will become powerful."\(^7\)

These fervent appeals of Gandhi and his advocacy of non-violence as a revolutionary weapon created favourable conditions for 'invisible' to become 'visible' in non-violent satyagrahas, which earlier social reformers could not envisage.

\(^7\) Ibid., Volume LXXI, p. 208.
\(^7\) Ibid., Volume LXIV, p. 165.
Education of Women

The education of women is as faulty as that of men. No thought has been given to the relations of men and women or to the place of women in Indian society. Gandhi emphasized upon the need for compulsory education for girls considering it as an essential means for 'enabling women to assert their natural rights, to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion and also to achieve emancipation from male domination.'73 According to him, a human being without education is not much different from an animal. Education is necessary for women as it is for men. As for illiteracy among women, he believed, its cause was not mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men. It was men, who had converted her into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasures and result was 'semi-paralysis' of our society. Yet much good and useful work could be done 'without knowledge of reading and writing'. He saw no justification for men depriving women of or denying to them equal rights on the ground of their illiteracy.

The Ancient aphorism, 'Education is that which liberates' is as true today as it was before. Education here does not mean mere spiritual knowledge, nor does liberation signify only spiritual liberation after death. Knowledge includes all training that is useful for the service of mankind and liberation means freedom from all manner of servitude even in the present life. Servitude is of two kinds; slavery to domination from outside and to one’s own artificial needs. The knowledge acquired in the pursuit of this ideal constitutes true study.74

Though Gandhi was against any department of knowledge being divided into watertight compartments for either sex, yet he was convinced

73 CWMG, Volume LXXI, pp. 207-08
74 Harijan, 10-03-1946, p. 38.
that if education is not based on a 'discriminating appreciation' of gender difference, it could not lead to the fullest development of human being. No surprise, therefore, that while agreeing to the need of universal education, Gandhi recommended separate education for boys and girls. As mentioned earlier Gandhi felt that since home life is entirely the sphere of women they should be specially equipped for domestic duties including the upbringing and education of children as men should be equipped for activities outside home.

He stressed the need for an education that would help women to think on their own. He said, "today few women take part in politics and most of these do not do independent thinking. They are content to carry out their parents or their husband's behests." Instead of doing so, he wanted women workers to enroll women as voters, to impart among them practical education, to teach them to think independently, to release them from the chains of caste and to bring about a change in them which would compel man to realize woman's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her a place of honour. He considered that this was necessary for purifying the present unclean atmosphere.

Regarding the remedies for many of the evils Gandhi favoured creation of strong public opinion. He also advocated the introduction of legislative enactments by the Government against these evils. He, however, believed that legal measures were not enough and resented the idea of being entirely dependent on them. "If any change in the condition of women were to come", affirmed Gandhi, "it would come through their own enlightenment, their capacity for resistance against injustice and self-
confidence.” He advised women to refuse to be mere playthings for men, to deck themselves with ornaments and scents simply because it pleased the menfolk, and to rise in rebellion against any inequality imposed on her. He called upon the enlightened ones among them to contribute to the welfare of their own sex and deal with the root cause of the inequalities they suffer from.

His writings and speeches suggest that he visualised women's struggle to surmount the barriers limiting the full development of their human potential from two perspectives. On the one hand, he was of the opinion that female weakness is only superficial, if women would but draw upon their inner reserves of strength; no obstacle could block their progress. At the same time Gandhi recognized that a programme of social reform to provide woman with elementary human rights such as physical mobility and access to learning was necessary to stimulate in them the desire for progress.

Moreover one finds in Gandhi's views a unique blend of tradition and modernity about the role of women in Indian society. His opposition to women's forsaking the hearth to become bread winner and his glorification of the role of motherhood with qualities of suffering and sacrifice reflect that he was guided by traditional Indian ethos. He was modern in so far as he considered woman as an individual human being in her own right and sought a new social and moral role for them outside sex relationship and propagated for gender equality and participation in public life.

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77 Harijna, 21-04-1946, p. 96.
78 Young India, 27-10-1927, p.364.
Thus the contribution of Gandhi to the upliftment of the Indian women has been immense and immeasurable as he concerned himself not only with social reforms designed to get rid of the atrocious customs that were weighing heavily on women, but he also gave philosophical consideration to every aspect of the problem of women's emancipation and worked for it. He devoted himself so much to the cause of women that some began to speak of him as half woman (ardhnari). Once he himself declared that 'I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart.'\(^8\) Gandhi's emphasis on women's moral superiority over men removed the age old stigma of women's inferiority and inspired them with a new self-confidence.

Sucheta Kripalani, a follower of Gandhi undoubtedly regarded, "many leaders and reformers has espoused the cause of women in this country, but none held women in such high esteem as did the Father of the nation. With infinite compassion and love he held the women by the hand and led them forward in their rightful place in society."\(^81\) Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a great woman leader and veteran soldier of the freedom struggle also remarked, "never perhaps, since Buddha preached his message, has any single individual swayed and transformed the destinies of so many millions as did Gandhiji. Were it not for his leadership, with his wide vision and practical sense, women to India would have had to plod the slow way to the heights they have now been able to attain. He not only respected women, but also valued them."\(^82\)

Woman is given to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. To girls and grown-up women there come times, in spite of their wish to the contrary, when they have to venture out alone, whether they are going from one place to another in the same city or from one town to another. And when they are thus found alone, evil-minded people pester them. They use improper or even indecent language whilst they are passing by. And if fear does not check them, they do not hesitate to take further liberty. The use of violence is of course there. If the girl or the woman has sufficient courage, she will use what resources she has and teach miscreants a lesson.

Gandhi stated that the privilege of the awakened women should be to spot and eradicate ageing evils. They were advised not to ape the manner of the West and apply ways and means suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment.83

Education is the only of empowerment of women on which he remarked, “develops and sharpens one’s intellect and it increases one’s capacity of doing good.”84

83 Young India, 17-10-1929, p. 340.
84 Ibid.