
GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi popularly revered as Mahatma Gandhi was not only one of the greatest leaders of Indian Nationalism but a major social and political reformer, who played an important role in purging the Indian Society of its inherent evils. In this regard, he assumed a pioneering role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the women of the country through ages. Gandhi's political ideologies strongly anchored in humanitarian values, were a reflection to his spiritual self. His personal philosophies of life moulded to a great extent his political strategies, with which he steered Indian on the path to freedom. For Gandhi, politics was not an exclusive category, but it was very much a part of one's holistic spiritual approach towards life in general. Therefore politics could not be divorced from social factors.

To Gandhi, social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. Gandhi throughout his life waged a crusade for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the enhancement of the status of women in India. Women under his aegis took a milestone step towards re-establishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morale and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under Gandhi's leadership they entered into the national mainstream, taking parts in the National Movements. In Gandhi's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's in justice to women". Gandhi's reformist spirit seasoned the role that he played in uplifting the status of women in India.

There was a marked departure of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, a woman was not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems; women are at par with men, one complementing the other. According to Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humanity, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. These qualities were essential prerequisites for imbibing the virtue of Satyagraha. The capability of enduring endless suffering can be witnessed only in the women, according to the Mahatma. The doctrine of ahimsa as preached by Gandhi incorporates the virtue of suffering as is evident in the women. Therefore, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in establishing non-violence. Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womanhood, like Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti, to show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom. To sum up in Gandhi's words, "The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows-as free as the husband to choose her own path."

Gandhi realised the power of women in different spheres of life. He stood with the Indian women and described that woman as the cultural backbone of the society and certain basic qualities like tolerance, benevolence, purity, adjustability, integrity and spiritual strength possessed by them entitled them to equality.

While emphasizing the complementary roles of men and women, Gandhi made it absolutely clear that women were in no way inferior to men. The very idea of calling woman the weaker sex was not

acceptable to Gandhi.

He asserted that women were blessed with immense spiritual strength and they were not weak (stree able nahin hai), though men were stronger at the physical level.

He went to the extent of arguing that those scriptures which look down upon women should be condemned. "The ancient is, therefore, not sacrosanct to Gandhi ji, if it has turned to dross. His heart bleeds for those who suffer under the burden of traditions".

Arguing that those scriptural injunctions which were in conflict with the true morality should not be followed, Gandhi asserted that "All that is published in the name of scriptures will not be taken as the word of God". Gandhi even suggested the removal of all those injections in the smrities which did not appeal to the moral sense.

He was of the opinion that men's lust for power and prestige had led to the subjugation of women and also to the degeneration of the society. Thus while giving his consent to the traditional role differential between man and woman; he also wanted to break the traditional stereotypes. This he did by recommending equal rights for both, by emphasizing those women were in no way inferior to men and by encouraging women to fight for their rightful place in society. Gandhi also expected women to play leadership roles. He tried to capitalize on women's feminine traits and traditional qualities by extending their traditional roles into the political sphere.

Gandhi discussed the plight of the Indian women under various heads related to social aspects of the society. He had given his views related to social women problems on almost all evils, existing in the Indian society. He not only touched social issues like marriage, child marriage, dowry system, Purdah, widow remarriage, prostitution, devadasi pratha etc., but also suggested the **different remedies to overcome the above mentioned problems related to women**. In this context, Gandhi ji advised the women not to rely on men but on themselves and cultivate complete fearlessness and inner strength. Education to women, according to him, was the most important instrument for bringing about the desired change. "Education", he argued "is essential for enabling women to assert these natural rights, to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion." It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common nation of women in the Indian Society.

According to Mahatma, social reforms were essential for the reconstructing of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception to Indian women. Although, he had great reverence for the traditions of the country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. To quote Gandhi, "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide". Realising that social and political reforms are inter-connected and that social evils impeded the country's march towards Swaraj, Gandhi stressed the importance of raising the status of two very important suppressed sections of the society, viz, the Harizans and women so much so that C.F. Andrews was prompted to observe that among all the different interests which occupied Mahatma Gandhi's attention in India, very few can be compared with his earnest support to the women's' movement. It is to the lasting credit of Gandhi that he realized the status of women and made people understand what an important contribution they made in upholding and continuing our cultural traditions. The custom of child marriage became a target of his criticisms. In his opinion, child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as much as a moral evil. Gandhi lent whole hearted support to the efforts of earlier reformers. He believed that both boy and the girl should be fully developed physically and mentally at the time of marriage and that they should have a choice in the choice of their life partner. Repudiating the claim that child marriage had a religious sanction, he not only considered it uncivilised but a crime against God to call the union of children a married state because it undermines morals and includes physical degeneration. Young widows and young mothers dying in child

birth are some of the evil consequences following from child marriage.

Gandhi looked with contempt on those men who married young girls at a late age, with a view to have male progeny. This in his view was merely an excuse put forward by lustful men who looked upon marriage as a mere license to perpetrate all sorts of atrocities on young girls in their teens. Advising a man of 70 from Gujarat who was preparing to marry for the fifth time on the plea that he had no son, he wrote "It is better that you cease to entertain the desire for having a son. Desire to have a son is not always good. In a country where generally, the birth and death rates are properly balanced, it is more desirable to curb the desire for having a son rather than entertain it. In today's slave India where everyone is fear-stricken and had lost the capacity to protect oneself, ones Kith and Kin and one's property, I believe it to be a sin to produce children.

Some of the means suggested by Gandhi ji for eradicating these evils were cultivating public opinion and spreading of the consciousness of their rights among women as legislation also. He fully supported the Child Marriage Restraint Bill of harbilas sarda in spite of strong opposition to it from the orthodox sections of the society. He also advocated opening of special institutions like mahilas harms for young girls who fell victims to the evils designs of such lustful men or were sold by their parents for the sake of a paltry sum of money. He favoured not only the rescuing of such girls but was prepared to arrange new matches for them because marriage under duress was no marriage but rape according to him. Even if the criminal law allowed such marriages, Gandhi saw no objection in breaking these laws as he attached greater importance to the higher law- the law of ones conscience than to state – made laws. His advice to all social reformers and especially to women social reformers was to go ahead in their mission of mercy with faith in themselves and their cause disregarding the laws.

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