

GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT FROM GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Gandhiji thought us that empowerment of women without sharing our material, financial, intellectual resources with the poor women is not possible. Sharing requires sacrifice. In short, this is the Gandhian formula (sharing and sacrifice). Nobody has done as much as Gandhi has done to bring out masses of illiterate women from the four walls of their houses. A few talented women were spotted by him who worked shoulder to shoulder with him, like Midas touch, anybody whom he touched became vibrant and active soldier of movement and not a lifeless idol of gold. Many of us have to change our life style. Women have to be conscious and aware to feel and realize at every step of their life that they are builders of their nation and the peaceful world.

The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world!

Let the pursuit of power be not only aim of the women empowerment. It should be "total emancipation". No one can double the efforts made by Gandhi to empower women. He had attracted so many millions of not only literate but illiterate women without the power of state, without the modern information technology and offering in return only sweat, toil, and pain, is an exceptional feat! His insistence on Women's education is the first step in right direction. We still have miles to go to achieve our cherished goal to empower women.

Keywords: *Gandhi, Empowerment, Women, Perspective Writings, Inferior*

INTRODUCTION

- Woman is more fitted than man to make exploration and take bolder action in nonviolence.
- There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men.
- Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacity.
- If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.
- If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with women.

- Woman, I hold, is the personification of self-sacrifice, but unfortunately today she does not realize what tremendous advantage she has over man.

These are some of the most famous quotes from Gandhiji's writings and speeches. Gandhiji believed that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women. Any tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, the Great Soul, would be an empty one, if we were to take no cue for our own guidance from his words and from his life; for him ideas and ideals had no value if they were not translated into action. He saw man and women as equals, complementing each other. And he saw himself not as a visionary, but as a practical idealist. If then, men and women work together selflessly

and sincerely as equals with a faith like Gandhi's, they may indeed realize Ram Rajya, the perfect state. Traditionally, woman has been called abala (without strength). In Sanskrit and many other Indian languages bal means strength. Abala means one without strength. If by strength we do not mean brutish strength, but strength of character, steadfastness, and endurance, she should be called sabala, strong. His message almost six decades ago at the All India Women's Conference on December 23, 1936 was: "When woman, whom we call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful." [1,2,3]

GANDHIJI'S IDEA OF WOMAN AS MOTHER AND "MOTHER INDIA"

In the formative years, the Mahatma Gandhiji (Alia Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi) was influenced by his mother Putlibai who imparted in him strong sense of personal ethics and compassion that is conveyed in Gandhiji's favorite prayer song by the 15th century religious reformer, Narasinha Mehta (Life time: 1414-1481) "Vaishnav Jan to tene re kahiye je peed parai jane re" (A godlike man is one, Who feels another's pain, Who shares another's sorrow). Gandhi said: "The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without daily prayer. She would take the hardest of vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them." He got his mother's permission to go to England for studies by taking an oath: "I vowed not to touch wine, women and meat." These three vows shielded him throughout his stay in England.

Gandhi married at the age of thirteen to Kasturba. But he lost no time in assuming the authority of husband to lord over her life (emphasis added). At the time of conjugal conflict, Kasturba used the weapon of passive resistance of "fasting"; from which Gandhiji got inspiration to start Satyagraha in the freedom movement to resist the British Regime. Kasturba became his active partner and supporter in all his activities. She was a devoted

wife who was content to live in the shadow of her illustrious husband. She had multifaceted personality. She was fiercely independent woman. Kasturba became Ba-mother of all who took care of Babu's extended family.

Gandhi learnt much from Kasturba and perhaps even more from his mother. His spiritual bent of mind seems to have come from her. Gandhiji's devotion to women began with his devotion to his mother and Kasturba, most particularly to women as mother. Motherhood became increasingly his model for liberation of India and his own life, a mother, having brought forth a child, selflessly devotes herself to his care till he grows up and becomes independent. Even after children are grown-up her constant desire is to make herself one with them. Unless we have feeling and devotion for our motherland many countries will be lying in wait to crush us down, He saw no hope for India's emancipation while her womanhood remained un-emancipated. He held men to be largely responsible for the tragedy. In the course of his social reform work the realization came to him that if he wanted to reform and purify society of the various evils that had crept into it; he had to cultivate a mother's heart.

He learnt the fundamental aspects of his soul politics from his mother and his wife but women's influence on him was not limited to his family. The bhadra mahila (responsible or new women), created in nineteenth century by Indian social reformers, became the model for Indian women on the nationalist era. Women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century created organizations such as All India Women's Council and Bhagini Samaj founded predominantly among the upper-middle class in urban centers. Although many associate the ideals and organizations of the "new woman" with Gandhi, as Elise Boulding indicates "well before Gandhi was calling women to practice Satyagraha, the grandmothers, mothers, wives and daughters of the educated classes in India were forming organizations providing educations and action-training for other women, in order to re-build

an Indian society freed from colonial structures." [4,5,6]

INFLUENCE OF WOMEN PUBLIC FIGURES ON GANDHI

He was profoundly influenced by Annie Besant, a British militant feminist and a Theosophist, Sarojini Naidu a trusted Gandhi's co-worker, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a fiery Satyagrahi, RajKumari Amrit Kaur and Pushpa Ben Mehta. Geraldine Forbes examines the model that Sarojini Naidu developed in her speech as President of the Indian National Congress, a model with India as the "house", the Indian people as "members of the joint family and the Indian woman as the "Mother". Naidu, Gandhi, and many other advocates of women's and national liberation agreed wholeheartedly that women and India would advance together to the extent this new familial model for India was adopted by the women and men of India.

Gandhi believed women could do much to transform India on all levels. He believed that equal rights for women and men were necessary but not sufficient to create a more just social order. What good does it do to us to have equal rights if we are divided within ourselves and unable to attend true unity with others?

In a letter written to RajKumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi writes, "If you women only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full sense 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 holders have become one in the crime on 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."

Gandhi further said: "I began work among women when I was not even thirty years old. There is not a woman in South Africa who does not know me. But my work was among the poorest. The

intellectuals I could not draw ... you cannot blame me for not having organized the intellectuals among the women. I have not the gift... but just as I never fear coldness on the part of the poor when I approach them, I never fear it when I approach poor women. There is invisible bond between them and me."

The mass of poor women was those whose dignified upliftment he craved. Poor women understood what he was saying because he spoke in the religious pantheon and referred to the facts of caste and gender. Sometimes highly progressive, other times conservative, he created an empathy with his audience through this cultural fine tuning.

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur echoing this aspect of Gandhiji's personality stated:

"We found him not a "Bapu" - wise father, but what is more precious, a mother, whose all-embracing and understanding love all fear and restraint vanish."

GANDHI AGAINST GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

Gandhi was totally opposed to gender discrimination. Gandhi did not like Indian society's preference for a boy and a general neglect of a girl child. In fact, in most cases she is not allowed to be born. If born her survival is not ensured. If somehow, she survives, she is subjected to neglect. She does not get respect and the status she deserves equal to that of a boy. He described discrimination against women as an anachronism as already stated: he said: "I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over the birth of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going."

Gandhiji called women as the noble sex. He said that if she is weak in striking, she is strong in suffering. Gandhi described; "Woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and ahimsa." He further states: "A daughter's share must be equal to that of

a son. The husband's earnings are a joint property of husband and wife as he makes money by her assistance."

Gandhiji firmly believed that if a husband is unjust to his wife, she has the right to live separately. He averred, "Both have equal rights over children. Each would forfeit these rights after they have grown up, and even before that if he or she is unfit for them. In short, I admit no distinction between men and women except such as has been made by nature and can be seen with human eyes."

Gandhiji preached and practiced sharing of housework by both men and women of the family. He encouraged women to do intellectual work and men to help in cooking, cleaning and caring, conventionally 'women's chores'.

DISCUSSION

Gandhi prepared a primer for the children for a primary school. This primer or Balpothi is the form of a mother teaching the child. In a chapter on housework,

The mother asks her son, "Dear Son, you should also help in the housework as your sister does."

Son answers: But she is a girl. I am a boy. A boy plays and studies.

Sister says: How come I also like to play and study?

Brother: I do not deny that but, dear sister, you have to do housework as well.

The mother: Why should a boy not do house work?

Son: Because the boy has to earn money when he grows up, therefore, he must study well.

The Mother: You are wrong my son. Woman also makes earnings for the family. And, there is a lot to learn in house work-house cleaning, cooking, laundry. By doing house work you will develop various skill of the body and will feel self-reliant. In good housework, you need to use your eyes, hands and brain. therefore, these activities are educative and they build your character. Men and women,

both need to be educated equally in housework because the home belongs to both.

Gandhi expounds this theme further. More often than not a women's time is taken up not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master for her own vanities. To me this domestic slavery of woman is the symbol of our barbarism mainly. It is high time that out womankind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of women's time. His policy of empowerment was that man must participate in the housework and reduce the drudgery of women's home work.

GANDHI AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Gandhi was not only a great political leader but a passionate lover of humanity. An implacable enemy of all injustice and inequalities, he was a friend of the lowly and the downtrodden. Harijans, women and the poor commanded his most tender attention. He had almost an instinctive understanding of women and their problems and had a deep abiding sympathy for them. [7,8,9]

The oppressive custom of dowry too came under fire from Gandhi. He preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonored by marrying men who demanded dowry... He found dowry marriages "heartless". Gandhi wished for mutual consent, mutual love, and mutual respect between husband and wife. He said: 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 limited to a few hundred 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.

Injustice, like exploitation, has to be resisted wherever it is found, not only in the political field. For the fight against foreign domination,

women by the thousands rallied to Gandhi's call for civil disobedience. Women set aside their traditional roles, they came out of seclusion, they cast off their purdah. They entered the public domain along with men, and offered satyagraha; they remained undaunted by police beatings and extreme hardships in prison. Even illiterate tribal women from the forests joined the freedom movement. That is the Truth-force Gandhi urged in private matters as well. In fact, that is where he wanted it to begin. The first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of life. Perhaps it is too much to expect of human nature. I do not, however, think so. In Harijan, October 3, 1936 we find the reason for his faith: I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she will make the same effort, and have the same hope and faith.

Though pre-occupied with heavy responsibilities his views in this regard were clear and he tried to educate the public to accept women as equal partners. He said:

"I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labor under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on an equal footing of perfect equality."

Again, he said:

"To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is a man's injustice to woman. If by strength it is meant moral power then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not more self-sacrificing, has she not great powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women." Women could play a significant part in the freedom fight under his inspiring leadership, his fostering care and loving guidance. According to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none has been so potent as the field of nonviolence which Gandhiji offered to women in his "war" against British domination of India. It brought them out in their hundreds from sheltered homes, to stand the furnace of a fiery trial without

flinching. It proved to the hilt that woman was as much able as man to resist evil or aggression.

The greatest tragedy of present-day situation is that even after almost 53 years of our development work we have not been able to clothe our women. [10,11,12]

This problem was brought to our notice in 1917 by Mahatma Gandhi. He said: "I happened to visit a village in the Champaran district of Bihar. I found some of the women dressed very dirtily. So I told my wife to ask them why they did not wash their clothes. She spoke to them. One of women took her into her hut and said: look now there is no box or cupboard here containing other clothes. The Sari I am wearing is the only one I have. How am I to wash it? Tell Mahatma ji to get me another sari, and I shall then promise to bathe and put clean clothes every day. This cottage has no exception, but a type to be found in many Indian villages."

He took to spinning so that every poor woman could be clothed and he promoted production of khadi as an economic activity.

GANDHIJI ON WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION

Fundamentally, man and woman are one; their problems must be in one essence. The soul in both is the same. each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is bread-winner; she is the caretaker 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...

The division of spheres of work being recognized, the general qualities and culture required are practically the same for both the sexes....

He had profoundly said that the woman is the incarnation of Ahimsa: 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? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joys in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labor. But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Who, again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? 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 man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to trade the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for nectar. She can become the leader in Satyagraha which does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith.

By giving an example of the bravery which, a woman showed during child birth by not taking chloroform, which would have risked the child's life and undergoing a very painful operation. He further says: "Let not women, who can count many such heroines among them, ever despise their sex or deplore that they were not born men."

Gandhiji declared that we cannot return our debts to Mother India or Mother Earth or women as mothers who have given us everything. We should remain loyal to them and cease to exploit. We should "rediscover" status of women and give them full respect and support needed by them in domestic and other works.

Feminist researchers differ widely in the assessment of Mahatma Gandhi's theory and practice of women's emancipation during the Indian Nationalist Movement.

Ketu Katrak maintains, for example, that "like other Indian social reformers, Gandhi reinforced British liberal and imperial policies since

he did not challenge women's subordinate position in the patriarchal family structure. [13,14,15]

On the other hand, Madhu Kishwar asserts that "Gandhi saw women not as objects of reforms ... but as self-conscious subjects who could, if they choose, become arbiters of their own destiny. In this way Gandhi represents a crucial break from the attitude of many of the leaders of the reform movements of the late nineteenth century... The main contributions of the Gandhi to the cause of women lay in his absolute and unequivocal insistence on their personal dignity and autonomy in the family and society."

However, Phyllis Mack contends in his *Feminine behavior and Radical action: Franciscans, Quakers, and the Followers of Gandhi* that St. Francis, Fox, Gandhi and their followers placed women's experience at the heart of the movement. She suggests "that we (contemporary feminist and peace activist) would do well to contemplate the virtues of these partisans of nonviolent public behavior, and that we can find affinities with their compassionate activism very close to home to embrace our own political and spiritual struggle."

IMPLICATIONS

It took several years for Gandhi to overcome the forms of sexism, classicism, and racism that he internalized as a young man. The process was painful for him and for Kasturba. But from the perspective of social feminism, he made enormous progress. The new women (women engaged in feminist movement) loved Gandhi because he spoke their language, he did what they wanted men to do, and encouraged other men to follow suit. Given the stark contrast in Indian society between man and women's cultures broadly speaking men is more bellicose rigid, controlling culture and woman's more relational, egalitarian, fluid, opened peace-loving culture, it is not surprising Gandhi chose the latter. The extended family, even with its patriarchal modes of dominance, gave many women a wide scope of expression than either the British or the Indian public spheres. Gandhi's effort to model Indian

public life on the joint family brought thousands of women into social and political institutions of the nation. Equity-feminism, on the other hand, seemed foreign to women during the Indian Nationalist women with the exception of a small number of middle-to-upper class women who lived primarily in cities.

Gandhi had advocated three distinct levels of women's participation in the national movement.

First, women who had familial responsibilities such as care of children and the aged were to fulfil only their primary duties which were not to be given up for the sake of the national movement.

Second, a group included women from whom he expected a sacrifice of the pleasure of housekeeping and child caring. If already married these women were expected to remain celibate for the sake of the nation. He advised Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and her husband, for instance, to practice celibacy after having blessed the marriage. [16,17,18]

Third, full time workers were expected to stay single and dedicate themselves entirely to the struggle for independence.

It is clear that Gandhi theory and practice- which unfolded over five decades on two countries were enormously complex, as the voluminous research about him has shown. Equity-feminism has been so central among western feminist that social feminism is ignored, marginalized, or seen as an earlier and less radical precursor to real (Equity) feminism. Based on an equity feminist analysis of Indian women in the nationalist era, Forbes states of Sarojini Naidu, "by linking feminism with nationalism, she and her colleagues hindered the development of a radical feminist critique of women's work."

RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN LEGACY THE CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Contemporary feminists' analysis on empowerment of women includes not only of sexism but also of racism, classism and imperialism as determining factors in shaping women's status in the private and public realm. This development seems consonant with Satyagraha which for Gandhi was an inclusive quest to find creative solutions for all forms of oppression. In India and elsewhere, there are healthy movements of Gandhi's followers, and there are more moribund Gandhians who speak in Gandhi's name but also subvert the power of his theory and practice by failing to be open to new movements. Feminists and other women are engaged in many forms of action that Gandhi may not have anticipated. We have much to learn from Gandhi's theory and practice, but not to the exclusion of modern ideas and movements. He was never against any idea/s coming from any quarter/s. He said: "I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave."

Former South African President Nelson Mandela and follower of Gandhi has an interesting tip to give to women to bring their men around. He said: In the ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, the women of Athens refuse to do anything for their men- including make love- to get them to stop fighting the Spartans."

Mary Beth Sheridan writes that for the first time in 23 years, Irene Ortega of Mexico City slept late this week end. She was participating in one of the most unusual work stoppages Mexico has ever seen: A one day national strike against housework, intended to highlight women's contributions in a society famous for machismo. This is aimed at converting the "invisible" into the "visible" ... women have poured into the work and force and universities. What has not changed is their place in the home. Even those without side job, such as Ortega, find they must do the household chores that have traditionally fallen to women... Thus, she works seven day a week, in addition to keeping the house...

They want men to pitch in more at home. And they would like the media and the text books to portray housework as a mutual responsibility.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Swaraj in all its facets and from different perspectives has permeated the discourse on India's contemporary history. As the most towering figure in India's freedom struggle Gandhi's role will remain unchallenged. All over the world the imprint of his moral philosophy as a workable political ideology has been particularly indelible. Yet Mahatma Gandhi's positions on social, political and economic matters are transparently evolutionary, a continuing examination of reality, the human condition and truth. Gandhi's attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of comparison and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. The contradiction between his liberal feminist pronouncements, his egalitarian, loving and respectful concern for women, his belief in their role in politics and in society are sometimes difficult to reconcile. Yet Gandhi, more than anyone else, struggled with these paradoxes in the existing social milieu. Comparing his vision of women with the current status of women and the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment will provide a measure of what has been achieved.

In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21, October, 1936 Gandhi writes, "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 slaves 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 a slave-holder myself but Ba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?"

Gandhi was able to devote himself to such a mission and formulated views on all aspects of a woman's life, political, social, domestic and even the very personal or intimate. He was able to do this by liberating himself from the sexual desires that identify the difference between man and woman and thereby positioned himself well above the feminist, becoming instead a reformer of humanity. "True affection does not demand identity of outlook...my passion for brahmacharya has that meaning. I must be wholly pure, if I have true love for womankind" (July 1938). While this gave him the right to demand far-reaching changes in the attitudes of society towards women and the attitudes of women about themselves, he rooted his views on distinctly Indian soil. It was also for the "non 'Intellectual among Indian woman. [19,20,21]"I began work among women when I was not even thirty years old. There is not a woman in South Africa who does not know me. But my work was among the poorest. The intellectuals I could not draw...you can't blame me for not having organized the intellectuals among women. I have not the gift...but just as I never fear coldness on the part of the poor when I approach them, I never fear it when I approach poor women. There is an invisible bond between them' and me." (8 July, 1938). Poor women understood what he was saying because he spoke in the idiom of Hindu religion and culture. He wanted them to drop the figurative veil while continuing to wear the real one. He referred to ideal women in the religious pantheon and referred to the facts of caste and gender. Sometimes highly progressive, other times conservative, he created an empathy with his audience through this cultural fine tuning. [22,23,24]

This is particularly clear in his response to a question asked of him in an issue of the Harijan in 1934, in which described the ideal within which he placed as the real "What would determine a woman's varna? Perhaps you will answer that before marriage a woman would take her Varna from her father; after marriage from her husband. Should one understand that you support Manu's notorious dictum that there can be no independence for woman at any stage of her life ...?" In his reply

Gandhi analyzed the prevailing social situation and went on to state an ideal objective and finally reiterated the reality embedded within the question. He says:owing to the confusion of varnas today, the varna principle has ceased to operate. The present state of Hindu society may be described as that of anarchy; the four varnas exist today in name only. If we must talk in terms of varna there is only varna today for all, whether men or women; we are all shudras. In the resuscitated varna Dharma, as I conceive it, a girl after her marriage, would naturally adopt her husband's varna and relinquish that of her parents. Nor need . . . any such change... imply a slur since...the age of resuscitation would imply absolute social equality of all four varnas." (Harijan, October 1934). Not only does Gandhi automatically accept the secondary status of the woman vis a vis the social identity of her husband or father but he goes on to say, "I do not envisage the wife, as a rule, following an avocation independently of her husband."

Again, in a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in answer to a question about the religion of children in mixed marriages, Gandhi reveals his patriarchal bias. "I am quite of opinion the children of mixed marriages should be taught in the mal parent's religion. This seems to me to be self-obvious for common happiness and interest. That the instruction should be liberal goes without saying. I am considering merely the question of choice of religion. The children cannot profess two religions. They must respect the female parent's religion. If the female parent has not that much discretion and regard for her husband's religion, the marriage becomes superficial." One sees Gandhi grappling with what is just and moral at one end with the necessity to assert the paternity rights of the father at the other. In reality, even if there was no respect, and the marriage was not a true meeting of minds, the father's religion still prevails, seems to be the unsaid part of the answer.

While adopting a high moral and often conservative position he could the next moment seemingly abandon it for a more fruitful and dynamic postulation that brings him to the forefront

of extreme liberalism. Typically, Gandhi was able to step out of his traditional attitudes through the medium of education. When asked to write a primer for school children by Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Gandhi did it in the form of a mother teaching her child in which she explains to her son that housework was good for both mind and body and helped in character building. "Men and women need to be educated equally in housework because the home belongs to both", he wrote. This was part of his efforts to build a wholly new society, without which he believed it was not possible to make an appreciable difference to improve the lot of mankind with the cultural discourse of society as it was, and he never shied from providing direct and practical methodologies to achieve his goals. From feminist ideas in a text book to spinning the charkha for swaraj he always came up with a constructive proposal to bring women out of their traditional mental fetters and into a better more dignified life.

RESULTS

In describing the woman's role as householder and housekeeper, he goes even further in stressing the need for man and woman to "do the duty for which nature has destined us" by finding it "degrading, both for man and woman, (if) the woman should be prevailed upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end. 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 special calling. There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition, as there is defending it against attack from without." The contemporary argument for wages to be calculated for women's work at home and the need for economic independence for them to be truly able to act in their own interest overtakes by far Gandhi's traditional perceptions. Today's liberated woman would find his position almost totally unacceptable. They would argue that while women's special calling may be child nurturing,

peace loving and preservationist they are capable of performing all tasks hitherto left to men.

But Gandhi revealed a deep understanding of the pulse of society, and reflected its rhythm. He offered spinning and the salt agitation as nonviolent ways for women to join the political movement for swaraj. He saw it as right as well as possible for women at that time in history. By 1940, he had provided modifications to his earlier more generalized approach to women's contribution to public life. In an issue of the *Harijan* of that year there are questions about the rising participation of women in activities outside the home:

More often than not a woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. To me this domestic slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our women kind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.[25]

Despite a change in attitude, he seems to have the middle-class woman rather than the poor one in mind, and adheres to the position that a woman should be able to order her household duties in such a manner as to complete them and yet have enough time for public work were she to abjure vanities. The onus is still on the woman. However, Gandhi was always willing to modify his own stated positions. He simply resolved his contradictions by responding instinctively and practically to a situation as he saw it. For instance, in the second set of questions and answers he tackles the male offenders thus:

Liberation of woman as Gandhi saw it, was linked to a deep-seated malaise. Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy wrote a long letter to Mahatma Gandhi as far back as 1929, in which she raised some fundamental issues concerning social reform. She also questioned him as to why the Congress, which was fighting for the freedom of every nation and the individual should not first liberate their women from the evil customs and

conventions that restricted their healthy all-round growth. She considered it a specific instance of social tyranny. Indian women, with a few exceptions, have lost the spirit of strength and courage, the power of independent thinking and initiative which actuated the women of ancient India, such as Maitreyi, Gargi, Savitri and even today activate a large number of our own women belonging to the liberal creeds like the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophy, which is only Hinduism freed of all its meaningless customs, rites and rituals? Although Gandhi agreed with her in a rather perfunctory way, he was not prepared to tackle the issues of social and religious customs so directly at that point of time and centered his response thus, "Men are undoubtedly to blame for their neglect, nay their ill use of women, and they have to do adequate penance, but those women who have shed superstition and have become conscious of the wrong have to do the constructive work of reform. The question of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of the economic condition of the masses and the like, resolve themselves by penetration into the villages, reconstruction or rather reformation of the village life." To achieve one's goal of liberation from the various shackles of society he believed that had to work for total change starting in the villages.

The late Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a well-known freedom fighter, political and social activist, an effective constructive worker, and motivator of India's cultural renaissance asserted that while the progressive status of women in the freedom movement was amply propelled by male social reformers and Gandhi, it was actually the advocacy of women which influenced many male leaders including Gandhi.

In 1983 the women's movement in India in its currently known phase, was just beginning to mobilize itself. Kamaladevi was witness to and part of valiant efforts by women to "not only push forward their own progress but act as levers to help other oppressed sections, while facing fierce hostility.... there were no grants to feed such activities; no awards, titles, national recognition, no

press publicity instead a lot of abuse." She defines women's actions of that time to be for equal rights which could not be described as feminist. "Women's problems were never sought to be treated on a sex basis but as social maladies of a common society, men and alike. What is indeed significant is the danger signals she saw at this time. "Habit, complacency and consequent lack of vigilance which fast undermined women and eventually deprived them of whatever gain they have been able to secure over the years. There are numerous subtle ways of ignoring women and abridging their rights. She lamented that woman had docilely accepted the situation of "helper" and that their work in political parties was only to mobilize support for the party and not to assert their personalities or strength as political entities. Kamaladevi's concerns for the gains achieved during the freedom movement were well founded if we view the almost regressive situation in rural and urban society with increasing violence against women, and the decreasing number of women in the population ratio. Modern technology, consumerism and lack of effective instruments have allowed, women no real progress even while allowing greater mobility and visibility to women from the middle and elite classes. Visibility alone is not empowerment in the real sense. [20,21,22]

Mahatma Gandhi believed that satyagraha was the most powerful weapon in a nonviolent struggle. Satyagraha involves defiance. It involves the willful, peaceful, breaking of laws that are unjust. It means picketing, protesting, squatting, obstructing, challenging and publicly resisting wrongs. Since women were the most nonviolent and ardent lovers of peace, it could be sharpened and extended as a weapon in women's struggles for justice and equality. To him the ultimate ahimsa and satyagraha was when women, in vast numbers, rose up to put an end to the destructive aspects of male dominance in society. Had the momentum of freedom struggle not been slowed down, such mobilization could have attracted many more women into public life. Political activity geared towards the transformation of society into the holistic, integrated entity as Gandhi had visualized

has not yet crystallized. Satyagraha is now just a word, a mere symbol, that serves no purpose for the academic or the elite, or even the middle-class feminist whose dialectic emerges from a theoretical background far removed from Gandhi's poor women who act because they have no use for words to explain themselves. Among those women who today have made satyagraha a mode of struggle for a better world are the meira peibi of Manipur who stand in clusters on the roadside outside their village with flaming torches to protest against men who indulge in drugs and alcohol which are jointly ruining the youth of north-eastern India. These women also raise their voices against the excesses the security forces and form a protective shield around their villages against them. They do not quote Gandhi nor term their struggle as satyagraha but their steadfast, powerful and peaceful picketing has all the elements of struggle in the manner, Gandhi himself would have wished.

The anti-liquor movement of Andhra Pradesh built up gradually in the minds of poor and illiterate women who for long years suffered the ill effects of alcohol consumption by their men folk. For families steeped in poverty, for women who were subject to domestic violence related to alcohol, for wives who had nothing material to lose by rebelling because they had nothing to lose, they fulfilled Gandhi's wish of deciding no longer to be slaves of the situation. "No one can be exploited without his or her willing participation," said Gandhi. Gandhi said that women "strengthen my belief in swadeshi and satyagraha.... if I could inspire in men devotion as pure as I find in the women, within a year, India would be raised to a height impossible to imagine. As for swaraj it was the easiest thing in the world." Gandhi expected them to do battle from their homes, while still fulfilling their traditional roles. "If we send them to the factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline." The superior qualities of women and the intrinsic difference between man and woman was something Gandhi kept highlighting. Since he believed that women could bring about

swaraj better: women were the very embodiment nonviolence, for him they were greater soldiers and beneficiaries of his swaraj campaigns. The three famed spearheads of these campaigns were the manufacture of salt, boycott of foreign cloth and shunning of liquor which he said "were specially meant for the villages and the women would benefit especially." In 1930 Mithiben Petit reported to Gandhi that habitual drunkards were enthusiastically breaking earthen jars containing toddy and that thousands of persons in Surat who were given to drinking had started having resolutions passed by their castes prohibiting drinking.

Somewhere along the way, however, the issues close to Gandhi's heart have been largely left by the wayside by women who became part of the power structure as well as by the emancipated women's groups. Organizations involved in trade union work, social reform and development issues have in part or in whole addressed the issue of prohibition, but neither have women as a group in parliament nor through institutional structures raised this demand loudly and effectively. Prohibition is not accepted when it is presented as a moral issue alone and therefore the argument has to include developmental priorities, revenue collection, and budgetary allocations to social welfare, health and other sectors which rural women are unable to do.[23]

The salt satyagraha and boycott of foreign cloth emphasizes the indigenous, but the feminist movement has not associated itself with the swadeshi movement except for the Gandhian elements within the various groupings. The wearing of khadi and handloom among the younger activists is more as the badge of a progressive liberal rather than as a commitment to the foods of indigenous manufacture. These are no longer taken up as issues of struggle although many women are part of the wider movement against the neo colonial pressures of the new world trade regime which destroy both sovereignty and national resources.

Many institutions and organizations representing women's rights have a high visibility in the cosmopolitan arena and have effectively

expressed their concerns. Not only that, their members have decisively moved far ahead of Gandhi's vision of fearless women. Alert, active and bold, they engage in constant discussion and introspection for genuine equality.

While all women's agendas prescribe peace and nonviolence, the feminization of the military and police and, the expanding membership of women in militant groups that do not abjure the use of arms are all a sad cry away from what Gandhi viewed to be a woman's special role.

While middle class women were visibly active side by side with Mahatma Gandhi, wearing khadi, going to jail, organizing resistance on the British in some creative and selfless way, the socially conscious middle-class woman of today has largely shunned direct political activity, preferring to seek more secure ground in funded social work through voluntary organizations. A growing number of emancipated, educated, young women are being diverted by market-oriented consumerism in the name of modernity and liberation. They become packaged products for the marriage, beauty or fashion markets, a professionalized catering to "the vanities" that Gandhi spoke of. This depoliticizes them to such an extent that the cream of young women students are unavailable to articulate the needs of their under privileged sisters. This results in a wider cultural and social divide emerging between the rural and urban woman. It also demonstrates that emancipation does not mean empowerment in the Gandhian sense if women move away from involvement with the more deep-seated problems facing India.

CONCLUSIONS

Compared to the momentous work of stalwarts like Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Dr Muthulakshi Reddy, Lakshmi N. Menon and Annie Besant and organizations like the All-India Women's conference, the Arya Samaj and many others during Mahatma Gandhi's time, the collective or individual work of women in the political arena in the post-independence era has been unremarkable. This

clearly does not take into account the phenomenon of an Indira Gandhi or the many successful efforts of various women's organizations in bringing about legislation to improve the status of women. Self Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad is a fine example of Gandhi's ideas put into practice but it lacks of political power to influence change in the society around it. The fact that women have never held more than 10 percent of the seats in parliament or jobs in the decision-making levels of the administration shows that there is a long way to go before gender parity is achieved.

While in some spheres women have accepted Gandhi's words about shedding their role as slaves and facing patriarchal challenges, women have largely slipped away from the paths of political action that Gandhi had opened out for them during the freedom movement. For instance, outside the home and far from the hearth individual women from the middle classes have achieved remarkable prominence in fields such as aviation, science and space technology, administration, education, literature and the arts. Unfortunately, the women of the rural classes are subjected to the same oppression as before, not only by the men within their caste but by upper caste communities who carry, out reprisals on communities from the under castes. The recent political empowerment of the backward castes has found a corresponding rise in the suppression of their own women, reflecting the existing ethos of rural society. Neither has an effective political leadership risen from amongst them to give courage to other nor are emancipated urban women able to provide the kind of sustained leadership rural women need largely because of class and caste differences.

On paper, India is far ahead in policies and legislation favoring women. It adopted universal franchise before many other nations. Yet men in the political structure refuse to acknowledge the relationships between social justice and gender justice while women outside the political system are unable to effectively implement and integrate these two most powerful national and international agendas. The increasing criminalization of politics

and the use of vast sums of unaccounted money and ugly muscle power by caste and criminal gangs present an entire hostile environment for women who wish to pursue a political vocation. With both caste and gender groups perpetuating traditional and modern divisions and indigenous human resources being replaced by western technologies the mission of Gandhi and the dreams of women are yet to be fulfilled. [24,25]

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