

## **Gandhi's Views on Women's Empowerment**

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### **Abstract**

In the present paper, an attempt is made to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues. We discuss on Gandhiji's thoughts on women's upliftment, against child marriage, social and religious barriers to widow remarriage, the purdha system, the dowry system, heavy expenditure in connection to marriage, etc. Life sketches and reminiscences of women freedom fighters give us glimpses of their crusade against injustice and inequality. We conclude that the status of women now in India compared to the pre-independent era is better.

### **Introduction**

The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. from equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points in the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers. The history of women have adorned high offices in India including that of the president, prime minister, speaker of the Lok Sabha, leader of opposition etc. In India Mahatma Gandhi motivated women in political movement for the first time during satyagrah. He worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life work has been the awakening of women. In the present paper an attempt is made to understand Gandhi's views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues.

We discuss on Gandhiji's thoughts on women upliftment, against child marriage, social and religious barriers to widow remarriage, purdha system, dowry system, heavy expenditure in connection to marriage, etc. We also discuss on Gandhiji's view on women empowerment.

#### **Gandhiji's view on Women Liberty:**

Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but also for the liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the note worthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self- esteem. For Gandhi, "When woman, whom we all call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful"[1] [2]. The welfare of the weaker sections of society was dear to his heart. He had no qualms about the priority of social over political ends. In his opinion, to postpone social reform till after the attainment of Swaraj.

#### **Gandhiji's Influence on Women:**

Women, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, indian and foreign, were attracted to his ideas and deeds. While some like Sarojini Naidu, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur rose to prominence, there were thousands of unsung and unnoticed women of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence. Life sketches and reminiscences of women freedom-fighters give us glimpses of their crusade against injustice and inequality[1].

### **Gandhi's view on Women upliftment:**

- In Vedic times men and women were equal in all walks of life, including the religious and the intellectual. Therefore, in proclaiming the perfect equality of men & women.
- Gandhi was against-
  - 1) The pernicious system of child marriage. He considered such marriage as *initio null* and void and as such, no marriage at all.
  - 2) All social and religious barriers to widow remarriage. In the case of adult widows, especially those with children; he would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love, rather than to remarry. If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she has every right to remarry and society must not look down such marriage[1][2][3].
  - 3) The *purdah* system. It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to the society.
  - 4) The dowry system. For the middle and poor classes, it was a nightmare. It was also on this account that while there was joy on the male child, there was expressed of silent mourning on the birth of a female child.
  - 5) Heavy expenditure in connection with marriages. He wanted to simplify marriage ceremonials. He was against feasting on such occasions. Many marriages were celebrated in the Ashram. All that was done was the recitation of the simple Ashram prayer and some advice from Gandhi to young couple on how they should live a contented and happy life of service. At the end of this simple ceremony, he would present to the couple a copy of *Bhagavad-Gita*.
  - 6) Gandhi revolutionized not only Indian politics, but also the whole perception of life for women.

### **Gandhi's View on Participation of Women in Politics:**

M.K. Gandhi is known to be one of the few people who encouraged women's active participation in the freedom struggle-marking him as a rare promoter of women's liberation. In Gandhi words, "My contribution to the great problem (of women's role in society) lies in my presenting for 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. Women's entry into national politics through non-violent methods brought miraculous results. On the one hand, women became aware of their inner strength, and on the other, the process brought human and moral elements into politics[4].

Though Gandhi never challenged the traditional set up, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within it, and thereby changing its very essence. Women learnt from Gandhi that one can be strong, even if seemingly weak, to protest against injustice. They realised that they do not have to accept the norms of male-dominated politics. They evolved their own perspectives and formulated their own methods. In a way they presented a critique of the colonial unethical state.

Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power. When a woman wrote to him in 1946 about the political scene and the paucity of women in it, he wrote: "So long as considerations of caste and community continue to weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be well-advised to remain aloof and thereby build up their prestige. Women workers should enrol women as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel men to realise women's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honour. If they will do this, they will purify the present unclear atmosphere." His advice to women was to teach people in villages simple lessons of hygiene and sanitation. Seeking power would be, for them, "reversion of barbarity". And still Gandhi believed that, "Women must have votes and an equal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation." [1]

### **Present Position of Women in India:**

A 1997 report claimed that at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry deaths, and at least a dozen die each day in 'kitchen fires' thought to be intentional.

According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children-2009 report, 47% of India's women aged 20—24 were married before the legal age of 18, with 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in India.

The National Crime Records Bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. Earlier, many cases were not registered with the police due to the social stigma attached to rape and molestation cases.

Through the Panchayat Raj institutions, over a million women have actively entered political life in India. As per the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Although the percentage of women in various levels of political activity has risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision making positions.[4]

### **Conclusion;**

Lastly we conclude that the status of woman now in India compared to pre-independent era is better. Opportunity for women in various fields is improving. Earlier in poverty driven rural areas woman is considered as a kitchen bee. This type of attitude is changed. It's a good sign of women upliftment & empowerment. Still today Gandhian thought of women upliftment is a valid ideology.

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