



# GANDHI AND THE INDIAN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi an Indian lawyer, politician, social activist and a writer, became the leader of the Nationalist movement against the British rule. Later, he came to be known as, the father of India. He used the doctrine of Non-violence and Satyagraha in his protest that became the cause for achieving success in the political and social progress of the country. His role in making the women of the country participate in the political activities and the upsurge of the country was commendable. Along with, he is credited for improving the condition of Indian women and assigning them a better position in the society at the time when women were considered to be mere slaves, who hardly would have realized that she can ever be freed.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Mahatma Gandhi in his book *India My Dream* talked about women's suppression, for which he held men responsible for making such customs and laws. He said that, in the life based on non-violence, women hold equal power with men, in executing the rights and power to shape own's own destiny. To which he adds further that, the rules of the social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. And the men should realize that they should

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neither impose any rules from outside, nor should consider themselves as the lords and masters. Instead, he laid the solution laid in considering the women as friends and co-workers.

Secondly, Gandhi was also against that the wives to be considered as dolls and object of indulgence, rather he appealed men to treat their wives as honoured comrades in the name of common services. Adding to which he proposed of receiving liberal education, in order to bring in a sense of commonality in the society. Else, he believed that one sided picture of the helpless state of Indian women will continue, where men would continue holding an upper hand and ruling over them. He made the point clearer by stating about legislation that ever had been in the hands of men, and these men have not always had been fair enough in discriminating and performing their self-appointed task. As its solution, he said that for regenerating women our greatest effort be more directed towards removing the blemishes, which are represented in our shastras as the necessary and the inborn qualities of a women. Thus, one has to produce and represent women as pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Draupadi and Damayanti. This way, the stray reflections of women in our Smritis will make us feel ashamed of our prejudices and that can be soon forgotten of its false blemishes. Such reevaluation of Hinduism had already occurred in the past, and was still needed for the society in order to build stability and faith in women of the time.

Arguing to which he thirdly stated that, a woman in the companion of men, are gifted with equal mental capacities. She has equal rights, in order to participate in all activities therefore she must exert an equal right for freedom and liberty. She is entitled a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as that of men's own world. This should be the attitude which needs to be exercised in a very natural way and not only should come out as the learning outcome of reading and writing. In the prevailing vicious custom of the time, he said that even the most ignorant and worthless men enjoyed the superiority over women, which they fail to deserve in all aspects. This, according to Gandhi, acted as the reason for failure of various movements that stopped half way. And it was only due to the degraded condition of women that various movements failed to yield proper result.

Other than these there are many issues related to women on which Gandhi gave his ideas and views in his weekly paper *Young India* that was published in English between 1919 to 1931. In the journal, he wrote various quotations to spread his ideology and thoughts regarding the use of non-violence in organising movements. And on its basis, he urged the readers to consider, organise and plan for India's eventual freedom from Britain. From 1933 to 1948 Gandhi started publishing a weekly newspaper named *Harijan* in English, which meant 'People of God' and also this was Gandhi's term for the untouchable caste. During that time, Gandhi also published *Harijan Bandu* in Gujrati and *Harijan Sevak* in Hindi. All the three



papers, focused on India's and the world's social and the economic problems. Some of the women issues stated in these journals included:

### **Equality of the Sexes**

In the magazine *Young India*, Gandhi said that women's right cannot be compromised. He stated that, she should not labour any legal disability, in compared to any men. Rather, both the daughters and the son should be treated equally.

In the magazine *Harijan*, Gandhi said that the equality of sexes does not mean equality of occupation. Nature has created sexes as complementary to each other, and so their functions should be defined according to the forms.

### **Marriage**

Gandhi in *Young India*, said that a large problem of the society could be addressed, if we try to cultivate a healthy and pure relationship between the two sexes. This way, we could build a moral welfare for the future generations.

In the magazine *Harijan*, Gandhi once said, that marriage is not wrong in any sense, rather it is a natural thing in life. It is only that the marriage is to be looked upon as a sacrament, and thus, in the marriage one should live a life of self-restraint.

### **The Purdah**

Gandhi was of the opinion that chastity can never be protected by the surrounding walls of the Purdah. In *Young India*, he said that, it should come from within, and should have the potential to withstand every temptation.

In *Young India*, Gandhi even questioned that why is the need and anxiety only relates to the female purity, and never is the matter of male purity. He questioned that why are women never anxious of the male chastity. He, therefore suggested that Purdah should never be superimposed.

### **The Dowry System**

In the magazine *Harijan*, Gandhi said that, Marriage must not be a matter of arrangement made for money. He asked the boys and the girls to break the bond of caste system, then only the system of dowry could be eradicated. Else, if the choice is restricted to a particular caste, then the system will continue to persist, despite all efforts. And is only possible through education, that can help in revolutionizing the mindset of our country's youth.



In *Young India*, Gandhi said that if any man who makes dowry a condition for the marriage while disregarding her education, is simply a dishonour for the womanhood. He requested that the youth movements should include such questions and should condemn the practice of the dowry system.

### **Widow Re- marriage**

Gandhi supported the voluntary widowhood, which according to him adds grace and dignity to their life, and sanctifies the home by uplifting the religion. But, the imposed widowhood in the name of religion and custom, is an unbearable yoke that not only defiles the home but also degrades the religion.

Thus, in *Young India*, Gandhi requested Indians to get rid of the poison of enforced widowhood. And further he requested, that whenever we should see a child widow not married, then it becomes our responsibility to take charge of her getting married.

### **Divorce**

Marriage according to Gandhi confirms the right of union between two partners, but it never confers any right upon one partner to demand the obedience of the other for one's wish of the union. According, to him if one partner, cannot conform to the wishes of the other on the moral ground, and if divorce remains the only alternative, then one should not hesitate to accept it. Because it is never appreciable to restrain oneself, from the purely moral grounds.

Because, for him the marriage is the state of discipline like any other. Married life not only promotes mutual goodness, but also is meant to serve humanity. So, when one partner breaks the law of discipline, it is right for the other to break the bond, on the moral ground. In *Young India*, he said that Hinduism regards, each as absolute equal to the other.

### **Woman's Honour**

Gandhi in *Harijan*, said that it is physically not possible to bring violence to women against her will. Only when she gives way to fear, or does not realize her moral strength that she faces any violence. Supporting to which he stated the case of Sita, who was physically weak before Ravana, but he cannot defeat her purity. So, if a woman recognises her own physical strength that she possesses, that is her purity it gives her the strength to face any threat and violence from the male society.

When a woman is ever assaulted, then her primary duty becomes to self- protect. She must use all her strengths, and all liberty to try every method and means from her mind, in order to protect her honour.



### **Women's Education**

Another major issue that Gandhi talked about in this book was about women's education. He says that there exists no justification for men to deprive women or to deny them equal rights on the ground of illiteracy. Rather, education is essential for enabling women to uphold these natural rights, and to spread the true knowledge.

Gandhi ranks men and women equally, as a peerless pair being supplementary to one another. The purpose is to help each other in one's existence and therefore, anything that impairs the status of either of them, tends to equally ruin them both. Therefore, in framing any scheme of women's education, he requested people to constantly kept the mutual supplementary relationship in mind. One should accept the fact that as the man is supreme in the outwards activities, so the women's sphere lies not only in the domestic affairs, but also in the upbringing and educating children. And until and unless the discrimination disappears Gandhi says that the fullest life of men and women can never be developed.

In the magazine *Harijan*, Gandhi on the teaching of English language said that, it is necessary firstly, for making a living and secondly, for the active association in our political movements. So, he favoured the introduction of the English education in schools. He was of the opinion that all the knowledge should be made available to the common people, and that can only be done, if our learned men undertake the responsibility to translate them for others in our own regional language.

Adding to which Gandhi says that, there should also be night schools for illiterate adults, in order to acquire general knowledge. He was the opinion that the real education begins only after a child leaves the school. He calls it a superstitious believe, that no education is possible without a teacher. For him, a man's real teacher is himself. Experience, he adds is the biggest of all schools. Therefore, the creation of a vital educational atmosphere was more important, rather than laying foundations of innumerable schools.

### **Co-education**

Gandhi on the matter of co-education says that, first of all it should begin from the family. The boys and the girls should grow together, freely and naturally. Then naturally, the co-education will come by itself. In the magazine *Harijan*, Gandhi said that we must get rid ourselves from the sex mentality.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Gandhi worked for the progress and upliftment of women. He laid stress on the course of human evolution and said that, nature has given equal potential to both the sexes. Therefore,

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there arises no question of men being superior. Quoting from the Hindu's scriptures such as Vedas and Upanishads he said that in the eyes of God there lies no distinction between men and women as far as the spiritual goals are concerned. Both men and women, though equal are complimentary to each other. And neither was complete without the other.

Such views of Gandhi regarding women led him to be seen as Liberal, Marxist and Radical. Being a liberal he emphasised on equality and liberty of all human beings, and also on the freedom and welfare of the people. He believed that, in order to exclude women from the public life, such customary laws were made against women. Regarding Gandhi's views on women, Anthony Copley in his book *Gandhi Against the Tide*, cited the example of Kasturba Gandhi the wife of Gandhi, who found herself as a part of Gandhi's experiment with truth. He said that Gandhi first educated Kasturba and then enabled her to cooperate with him, in his great fight against the British.

Another writer J.B. Kriplani, in his book *Gandhi: His Life and Thought* projected Gandhi as a liberator of women from the scourge of social evils. As in his vies he made no distinction between men and women and was against all sorts of social and religious evils like child marriage and Sati. He invited the Indian women to participate in the Satyagraha movement, as not only equal to men rather their virtues made them superior to men in non-violent fights.

Thus, based on the views of Gandhi it can be concluded that from the final non-violence campaign of South Africa in 1913, until his death in 1948 Gandhi was fully supported and inspired by women to a degree incomparable in Indian history. It was Gandhi who brought women to the frontline, in the National fight. Never before in the Indian history, did women joyfully participated in the public activities, as they did under the charismatic cell of Gandhi. His efforts could be clearly seen in the post-Independence era where the Article 14 of the Indian Constitution ensured equality of the sexes before law. While Article 15 prohibited discrimination, and Article 16 granted the equality of opportunity for all citizens in matter of employment, or any office under the State.

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