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Abstract: Gandhi ji has always tried his best efforts to make women's condition better in society. He was always against the system which downgraded the status of women in society. His focus was always on the upliftment of women. He worked a lot for the change of people's mind for women's lifestyle. When Gandhi arose in society as a leader, there were evils like purdah system, child marriages and dowry in the same society. He took on a more authoritative attitude towards women unlike his contemporaries. He always knew that Indian society was male dominant society since ages. But he always considered women as companion of man with equal capabilities but with more responsibilities. This article is all about the status of women of Indian Society and Gandhi ji's role in upliftment and improvement of women's status.

Keywords: Women, Rights, Dignity, Youth, Society, Obligations, Child Marriage, Purdah System, Divorce, Peace, Mahatma, discrimination, Equality, Male, Respect, Justice, Movement, Tradition, Culture, Widow, Remarriage, women empowerment, customs.

The present age of humanism is the high time to provide an equal privilege, rights and dignity to all the suppressed and oppressed sections of the society. In accordance with the social changes and developments, the necessity of women empowerment, gender issue, women liberation and upliftment has been a daily burning issue in the present century. Gandhi was no different than many of the noble souls who focused on these issues. Gandhi had a distinct vision regarding different issues related to women. He focused on women oriented matters like widow remarriage, divorce, child marriage, purdah system, dowry system, women education, participation of women in politics etc.

When Gandhi came into social and political power, Indian society was completely grabbed by social evils like purdah system, child marriages and dowry. Unlike his contemporaries, he took on a more authoritative stance to women. He knew Indian society had always been male dominant society. But he always considered women as companion of man with equal capabilities. According to Him, women education was essential at the time to ensure moral developments. It was the key for pulling women up on the same platform as men. He declared women as moulder and the shaper of the society.

There has been no other country, than India where, a single unarmed man, fought for his nation's freedom struggle. As the chief architect of the nation's independence movement, the Mahatma led the country to emancipation from British

rule. Bapu ji wanted to build a nation based on cardinal virtues of justice, peace, love, dignity of each and every individual and equality. He stood as a great social and political reformer and felt that India has to be strengthened from its very roots. Gandhi's views concerning to the youth and women were unique. They are still unrivalled and worth considering in current perspective also.

Social Regeneration

The most suited honorific 'Father of the Nation' has been appropriate, more than ever in the case of Mahatma Gandhi. He worked with all his might to fight for India's Independence and emerged as a leader and later named as 'Mahatama'. He played the most important roles in shaping all the principal moments of the movement. From the struggle in Champaran to the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-1922, The Civil Disobedience Movement, the Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement, the Mahatma was to have the decisive and authorial voice. It was only under the Mahatma's guidance that the movements remained largely non-violent. Also, it is largely on his account that they were bound to a certain ethical conception of life. Gandhi's vision not only kept most of the freedom movements free of violence but, also inspired other political leaders like Nehru, Vinoba Bhave etc. Nehru, purportedly his 'successor' and who was so inspired by the him, led among other sources of political wisdom, to the formulation of fundamental rights for all Indian citizens and safeguards for minorities in the new constitution.

Talking of the significance and the role of the youth, Gandhi ji stated, 'Youth are the life of Nation'. They have duties towards society and the Nation. Therefore they must be ready to discharge the responsibility. This will prepare them to become mature and worth. They are always needed. Further, He urged, "Young men, claiming to be father of tomorrow, should be the salt of the nation. If the salt loses its flavour, where it shall be salted?"¹

Likewise, declaring a woman, 'moulder and the shaper of the society' and the nation in the same measure as the man, Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "Man and woman are of equal rank. They are a peerless pair, they are supplementary to one-another; each helps the other. Their existence cannot be conceived without each other and that is why it follows as a necessary corollary from these facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of them both."²

Gandhi recognizes the patriarchal society in India. He acknowledged that men played a dominating role and that this was almost universally common in Hindu society. In spite of all these things in the society, Mahatma felt very strongly that women must be given equal rights as men. He also quoted on saying, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very fine details in the activities of man and she has an equal right of

¹ Young India, December 22, 1927.

² Harijan, February 27, 1927

freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as is of his.”³

When Gandhi came into political and social power, Indian society was filled with social evils such as child marriages and dowry. Gandhi took on a more authoritative stance to women, unlike his contemporaries. According to Him, women education was very important at the time to ensure their upliftment and moral development. It was the key to pulling women up on the same platform as men. Women inspired all qualities needed for virtues of ‘Satyagraha’; like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. According to Gandhi, women could also persist endless suffering. The Mahatma was very much inspired by ancient Indian women characters. He admired role models such as Draupadi, Savitri, Sita and Damayanti to demonstrate women’s real strength.

Because of his strong principles, a wave of women emancipation across India was initiated by the ‘Father of the Nation’. The voting rights of the women came after 90 years along with the economic and political rights which were urged by Gandhi to start women movements and to compete with men in every field.

Gandhi’s Influence on Women:

The lives of women freedom fighter, urban and rural, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, Indian and foreign during the period of Gandhi ji, were attracted to their ideas and deeds. Great personalities like Amrit Kaur, Sarojini Naidu, Rajkumari, Lakshmi Menon, Sushila Nayyar etc. rose to prominence. There were thousands of unsung, unheard and unnoticed heroines of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence against injustice and inequality.

Gandhi respected traditions and cultures of the ancient Indian society, but not at the cost of loss of individual dignity and self-respect. He believed and advised that, it was good to swim in the waters of tradition and culture, but not to sink in them completely. He believed that following traditions and cultures blindly, especially those traditions which affected lives of any human, especially women, were like suicide or killing themselves. He always criticized the evils which had gripped the Indian society like Purdah system, child marriage, widow remarriage etc. and tried to mobilize and change public opinion against such mentalities. Gandhi felt inside that there were deep-rooted customs and typical cultures which disturbed the development of women and hindered the nation’s emancipation. Women's freedom from such shackles was necessary.

Gandhi ji was fully aware of the exploitation of women in and outside their homes. But he also thought that a person cannot be exploited without his or her permission. So he motivated women not to get exploited in any form and motivated them to rise against exploitation. For this purpose he always supported women education.

³ Harijan, 24.02.1940. p. 13

Gandhi Ji's view on Women upliftment:

Men and women were equal in all aspects of life whether religious or intellectual in Vedic times. Gandhi also favoured equality of men and women. He criticized the social evils which denied the equality of men and women. Gandhi ji was against-

-The system of **Child Marriage**. Gandhi never considered such marriage as marriage. For him, it was null and void. It had no meaning at all. According to Gandhi ji, the custom and tradition of child-marriage is a moral as well as a physical evil, this custom weakens our morals and leads to physical regression.

-All social and religious barriers to **Widow Remarriage**. According to Gandhi, if a widow does not wish to live alone and want to remarry, she has every right to remarry and society must not look down to such marriage. But in case of adult widows, especially those with children; he felt that they should remain true to their marriage vows rather than to remarry, for the sake of their children.

-The **Purdah System**. Gandhi was strictly against the Purdah system. Gandhi felt that the purdah system not only restricted the free movement of women but also interfered and worked for their social, economic and mental development and their capacity for doing useful social work. The purdah system, according to him, was vicious, brutal and barbarous.

-The **Dowry System**. The dowry system was a nightmare for middle as well as poor classes of society. It was only because of dowry system that the birth of male child was celebrated and birth of female child was expressed as silent mourning. The girl child was considered as a curse to father especially to the middle and poor class people.

-Heavy expenditure in connection with marriages. Gandhi was against heavy expenditure done on wedding ceremonies. He wanted to simplify marriage ceremonials. In Ashram, marriages were done following a simpler procedure. All that was done was the recitation of the simple Ashram prayer followed by some advice from the Mahatma to young couple. He would advise them how they should live a contented and happy life of service. Gandhi used to gift the Holy Bhagvad-Gita to the couple at the end of simple ceremony.

Gandhi ji not only revolutionized Indian politics and Indian society, but also the whole perception of life and its development for people especially women. Gandhi questioned on what basis women were pushed in isolation. He did not appreciate the fact that the society questioned a woman's purity and sincerity whereas there was no concern or question raised regarding a man's purity and sincerity. Gandhi ji asked the world with disappointment that why there is such morbid anxiety about female purity but women never raised her voice or questioned about male's purity? We never hear of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why it's always men who dominates themselves over women and regulate female purity according to their own opinion? It

is a matter of evolution from one's soul and mind and that's only by self-effort which cannot be superimposed by anyone.

For Him, prostitution was 'moral leprosy' and despised the fact that 'the beast in man has made the horrible crime a lucrative profession'. He appealed to prostitutes to give up this 'unworthy profession' and become 'sanyasinis' of India.

Gandhi ji did not view marriage as a license for physical union. Instead, for him, it was a sacrament imposing discipline on both the partners. He also emphasized spiritual union in marriage. He was not in favour of more than one life partners. He insisted on monogamous marriages. He also put forward a plea for inter communal marriages between different castes. Gandhi thought of woman as companion of man and she was nothing less than a man. In his own words, "Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his"⁴.

Gandhi was very open-minded. He believed that women have every right to choose her partner. And also, she has every right to not let consider herself as the object of man's lust. In his words, "She must refuse to adorn herself for men including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man".

Gandhi believed that women have every right to devote herself to a noble purpose. When Gandhi was asked whether a wife could go against will of her husband and take up national service. He said that no one has right to stop her if she wants to serve the nation. No one has right to make decisions for her but only herself. As described earlier, he admired ancient Indian women characters very much, so, in support of this argument he gave the example of Mirabai. In his opinion, wife has a perfect right to take decisions for herself when she knows what she wants to do. According to Him, the only honourable terms in marriage are mutual love and mutual consent which lets the other person to explore, learn and grow. For him, marriage does not mean the dominant behaviour of one over another and put restrictions on another person.

Gandhi believed that the sexuality should be kept at the minimum inside marriage and totally eliminated outside it. According to him, the method of birth-control which should be adopted by people was by exercising 'self-control' in life and restricting physical union only for getting children. He said that he himself began to enjoy his married life only after abandoning sex. He believed that overpowering lust is the most difficult thing for both man and woman.

Gandhi realised that it is a feeling of great despair of widowhood for a woman. Men have preordained eternal widowhood on women and endowed with themselves the right to get married with another woman on cremation-grounds itself. For Gandhi, voluntary widowhood, consciously adopted by a woman who has felt the affection of

⁴ <http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap60.htm> accessed on 18.08.2017

the partner, adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts the religion itself. Widowhood imposed on women by religion or traditional custom is not tolerable and is an unacceptable practice and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades the religion. He believed that a woman should get married to a man openly rather than commit sin secretly if she becomes widow.

Gandhi sees these widows as a strong reservoir of energy, which could be put to use to bring light to the dark corners of the nation. In his opinion, 'It is worth considering carefully in what way the country can avail itself of the services of hundreds of widows, young and old'. As Gandhi respected widows who dedicated themselves to the service of humanity, he had great regard for women who chose the path of staying single to serve society and the nation. In his opinion, not every Indian girl is born to marry. There are many girls willing to dedicate themselves to service of nation instead of servicing one man. Gandhi had visualized a great role for women in eradicating the evil of communalism. His attitude towards women was to refuse to cook, and to starve their own selves in protest, so long as their men do not wash their hand of these dirty communal squabbles. Gandhi's appeal reached women everywhere in India. He expected great things from them in the areas of work concerning purity of life, removal of untouchability, propagation of Khadi, communal harmony and Swadeshi. His logic was simple: 'If Kaikeyi could obtain all that she wanted from Dashrath by dint of Duragraha, what they could not achieve with the help of Satyagraha?'

Gandhi believed that women can play significant role in removal of untouchability. This fact was realised by Gandhi when his own wife Kasturba opposed the acceptance of untouchables as members of the family. He felt that to remove untouchability from Hindu religion or others, women would have to do the lion's share of work. He appealed women to not consider Harijans untouchables for performing sanitary service. Because he felt that every mother has performed such service for her children.

While telling women that the economic and the moral salvation of India rested mainly with them, Gandhi did not pay mere lip-service to them. Gandhi tried his best to evoke the creative and constructive spirit which was being suppressed in them. Gandhi transformed simple factors like their choice of clothes and jewellery into a force for Swadeshi. Khadi was being identified as live for the nation and with opposition against foreign rule and love for the nation. Women gave up their jewellery as a symbol of shedding her shackles.

Political Emancipation

Gandhi was not just known for Indian politics, but also contributed to the new and changing perception of life of women. He quoted, 'My contribution to the great problem (regarding women's role in society) lies in my presentation for acceptance of truth and ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, women will be the unquestioned leader and having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex'. The smooth,

non-violent entry of women into national politics was a break through. The women brought human and moral elements into politics and also rediscovered their hidden potential that was unexplored for so long.

The inherited motherly and caring nature of women was always appreciated by Gandhi and he had a tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for non-violence which he had experienced from his days in South Africa till the end of his life. The good record of women's role in politics and non-violence bears testimony to the fact that they never failed his expectations. The role of women rose from being a homemaker but to also selling Khadi and literature, preparing contraband salt, held public meetings to pick shops selling liquor and foreign items, and even underwent imprisonments and all sorts of atrocities. They even sacrificed their little ancestral jewellery and belongings for the unusual and unprecedented struggle.

Gandhi's involvement of women in the freedom struggle helped a lot in changing their outlook. The common demand of Swaraj swept all old customs and taboos prevalent in the society. The women ideology was reformed and felt no shame if they were made prisoners. The prejudices were finished. When married women were told that the bangles were made of Czechoslovakian glass, they were not hesitant to even break their glass bangles which were taken as a sign of ill omen for married women. Women's participation in the freedom struggle liberated the country from age-old traditions and also feminized nationalism to a great extent.

Gandhi very smartly without challenging the traditions, inspired women to move out of their comfort zone and motivated them to write their own destinies. Gandhi ji's fragile looking, lean body also somewhat inculcated the idea in the women that the mental strength was above all physical stamina whichever be the phase whether a national freedom struggle or their daily lives where they had to learn to say no the old norms set in the male-dominated politics. They started to have their own vision and saw the world with a few open minds and in a way they presented a critique of the colonial unethical state.

Gandhi ji saw the condition of women in India could connect women with service and not with power and freedom. A woman wrote him about their condition in 1946 and told about the political scenario and the paucity of women in it. In reply of that, Gandhi ji wrote that, till the time, we are dependent upon the caste, community and social obligations, and rule our choices, women will always remain aloof and cut off from the process of upliftment. Every woman should enrol herself as independent voter, should have practical education, should make herself strong and independent and should think independently. They should release them from the obligations of society, which keeps them away from the development mentally and socially. Should release them from the chain of obligations and restrictions. They should make them that strong and independent that men realise the strength and capacity of a woman and give her the place of honour. 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'. Still Gandhi ji believed that women must have votes and an equal status in society.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi ji gave new strength to the traditional role. He had undaunted faith in the chastity and purity of woman. In his opinion, an ideal woman would rather give up her life than her purity. At times, Construction of the woman in such terms seems to be too idealistic in contemporary times. And yet, there is something essentially radical in his ideas. He never thought of women as helpless objects of reform or any sort of object which just meant to satisfy lust of men. Also, he thought of bringing change not only in some parts of life but in all aspects of life. He had a vision of change which was more comprehensive. He never restricted this thinking to marriage or education only. Instead, he supported the fact that women should grow morally, socially, politically, economically. His vision presented an electric view of life. According to him, things which stopped growth of women in any form should be eradicated from the social culture. Gandhi did not differentiate between the private and public worlds of women. Gandhi not only enhanced the dignity of woman's housework, but also, he advised his men followers to take to spinning and to do ordinary works in everyday life.

Gandhi ji saw that the status of women was low because of prejudices and adverse traditions which were centuries old. The reason why women were not interested in bigger problems of life and society was that they knew nothing about them. They were never allowed to breathe fresh air of freedom. The only factor that enabled women to come out of their situation was nothing from outside but their very own determination and confidence which in turn was recognised by 'The Father of the Nation'. It is not true that men cannot help women in their fight against injustice. But first, they would have to show courage on their own and step out of their boundaries around them. They themselves can ultimately determine their destinies. Though Gandhi sympathized with women, but he did not want to pity them all the times. Neither did he want them to be irresponsible, pleasure-loving beings.

In Gandhian philosophy, Indian women found a new identity. His thoughts, words and deeds have inspired thousands of women all over the globe. It was not just until that time. His ideas and views are still unmatched in present day. His words not only uplifted women at that time, but also have uplifting and motivating women to break their barriers and step out of their boundary zone and move forward and work for a bigger, noble cause. The Mahatma by far was one of the most honest and divine historical figures of the modern age. Although the philosophy of non-violence was not so new but under his guidance, it assumed revolutionary proportions and captured the hearts and imaginations of people all over the world. His words are always with them in their struggle against injustice and inequality.

Lastly we conclude that the position of woman is still poor in India in comparison to some countries. In some rural parts of India, they are still considered as a kitchen bee. This thinking needs to be changed. But as compared to the early days, today, women are coming out freely and participating in every field. They are more aware. They are taking responsibilities in many fields like politics, sports, education, social service and many more. It is a good sign of women upliftment &

empowerment. Lately, the government of India has been taking significant steps by introducing various schemes and policies like 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao', 'Ujjawalla', 'Swadhar Greh' and many more to improve the status of the females. The aftermath of which can be seen in increased self-esteem, self-confidence and self-dependency.

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