



## A Study of Gandhian Thoughts on Women Empowerment

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**Abstract :** *The term empowerment refers to measure designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. Empowerment as action refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, resources and chances. There was an urgent need to make special efforts to enable women to become self-reliant, by positive and active interventions in the direction of confidence building in the cognitive, psychological, economic and political areas. Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate to the very minutest detail 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 a man is in his. In this paper we study in depth the role that Gandhi played in improving the position of women in society prevalent at that time.*

**Key words:** *self-determination, men , women, empowerment*

### Introduction

Both men and women are of equal rank, but they are not identical. They are peerless pair, being supplementary to one another, each helping the other so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived. The concept of self is the most important Factor affecting the behavior of women. Self-realization of the potential of women was severely restricted in the pre-independence period due to various socio-cultural conditions and conditioning. The term empowerment refers to measure designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible

and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. Empowerment as action refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, resources and chances. The term empowerment originates from American community psychology and is associated with the social scientist Julian Rappaport (1981). Women Empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights.

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self-reliant, by positive and active interventions in the direction of confidence building in the cognitive, psychological, economic and political areas. Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate to the very minutest detail 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 a man is in his.

In accordance with the social changes and developments the necessity of women empowerment and gender issue has been becoming a burning issue day by day. Removing social disparities between men and women and bringing about equal status of women along with men at every spheres of life like economic, political, social, educational and professional and even to religious spheres also has become a burning necessity in the present century which is an age of humanism. For the full growth and the protection of humanity and the human society as a whole equal upliftment of the women is a necessary condition. Different social and religious reformers at every age and society put their attention to this issue and provided their valuable contribution in different issues regarding women upliftment and empowerment. Different religious and social norms tried to bind with shackles the feet of women from the ancient ages. It is true that some living religions to provide an exalted position and high status to women in every spheres of life in the society, still some aspects of some existing religions are causes of concern and degradation of the position of women in the society.

To understand in depth the role that Gandhi played in improving the position of women in society, it is essential to look at women's status, prevalent at that time. When Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario, social evils like child marriage and dowry system were rampant. Indian women had an average life span of only twenty seven years. Death of women in labor was a common phenomenon. The percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. The patriarchal nature of the society confined women to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. The purdah system was in full vogue in Northern India. Unless accompanied by their male guardians, the women were not permitted to venture out on their own. Only a handful few could avail of education and attend schools. It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society.

#### **i. Gandhi's Perception of Women**

There was a marked difference of Gandhi's perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. According to Gandhi, "Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity." In his speeches and writings, Gandhi said that in many matters, especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women is superior to the male.



Mahatma Gandhi & his ideas about women empowerment needs to be reviewed in the current scenario. Indian women have been experiencing heavy outrageous tortures. With the economic revolution conceded through globalization women have found good jobs but their problems with economic self reliance remains disgustingly irrelevant. The great Indian reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy had pleaded for inheritance right for women. Ishwara Chandra vidyasagar championed the upliftment of women along with Jyothirao Phule P C. Sarkar & hoard of others. Mahatma Gandhi also advocated women participation in all political struggles he waged against the British. His concept of woman as a constant energy of righteousness can be explained.

#### ii. Role Of Women As Envisaged By Gandhi

Regarding the role of women, Gandhiji once said, "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen." He opined and felt that, "Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered." It does not mean that women shouldn't cook, but only that household responsibilities be shared among men, women and children. Gandhi laid more emphasis on the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country. Under his guidance and leadership women came out from their houses and joined India's struggle for independence. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned Gandhi felt that female folk could be engaged in the cottage and small scale industries of the village such as spinning, broom, basket and rope making and oil processing so that the rural women can supplement to the family income. Hence empowerment

of women has to be the ultimate goal to improve the quality of the society and development of the economy.

#### iii Great Role for Indian women

Gandhi had visualized a great role for women in eradicating the evil of communalism. His appeal to women was to refuse to cook, and to starve themselves 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*.

When Gandhi told women that the economic and the moral salvation of India rested mainly with them, he was not paying mere lip-service to them. He was evoking a creative and constructive spirit that was suppressed in them. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom. As a practical thinker, Gandhiji tried to understand the problems and sufferings of women. He had attempted to find some practical solutions of their problems. Gandhiji, while he stayed at home, tried to help his wife, Kasturba, in her daily household duties. In western countries also, these days" men are encouraged to be with their wives during the delivery and the men are supposed to pitch in with diaper changing, feeding etc. Gandhiji practiced this very modern concept 90 years ago in his own family. According to Mahatma Gandhiji rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual cooperation & consultation women must realize her full status & play her role on par with men.



#### **iv. Gandhi's Voice Against The Social Evils**

In the view of Gandhi, although he had great respect for the traditions of the country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were anti-ethical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. To quote Gandhi, "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition; but to sink in them is suicide". Therefore, he was completely against many social customs, traditions, norms and values and social evils like child- marriage, widowhood, the dowry system, the pardah system and prostitution, the witch- hunting etc. which are threats to the development of the society. According to him, social reforms were essential for the restructuring of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception of Indian women. He realized that certain customs and traditions were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. Gandhiji was totally opposed to gender discrimination. He has said, " 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."

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 Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur rose to prominence. There were thousands of unsung and unnoticed heroines of India who learnt the meaning of liberation from him and contributed with all their energy to the struggle for independence. Gandhiji was influenced by his mother Putlibai and wife Kasturba very much.

#### **v . Empowerment Of Women: The Gandhian Model**

According to Gandhi, the three important factors that promote women empowerment are: education, employment and change in social structure. All the three components are equally important and mutually related. Simply development of education of the women would not automatically empower them. The case in point is Kerala. The state has hundred percent (100%) literacy but the women folk are not even today free from exploitation. This is because of the fact that the traditional Keralite society is yet to be reformed to provide equal rights to the women in de facto terms.

#### **vi Gandhian Concept Of Women Education And Equality**

Gandhi always favored women education. The educationally ill-disposed should be educated by their husbands. The customary and legal status of women is bad and demands radical change. According to Mahatma Gandhiji Women are gifted with equal mental capacities and therefore she has equal rights. However, due to the force of custom, ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women. Gandhi had invented a portable spinning wheel which he professed to ne be used by women for their living. This was a strategy to inculcate discipline and dedication to weeding out the unwilling and ambitious and to include women in the movement at a time when many thought that such activities were not respectable activities for women.



### **vii Gandhian Concept of Women Emancipation**

According to Mahatma Gandhiji women should be emancipated from all types of slavery. He favored the emancipation of women he opposed purdha & extreme oppression of Hindu widows & sati system. By allowing women to participate in no tax campaign salt Satyagraha he made women to involve themselves in politics. Ultimately women will have to determine her needs with authority. He acknowledged that the determined non violent resistance technique came from his wife. Twentieth century was hailed as the People's Century and 2001 was earmarked as the year for Women Empowerment. The aim of empowerment is to enable women to realize her worth and also acknowledge that the key to our national development is empowerment of women. Women need to be empowered so that they can work and think independently, prove their worth and genius, cope with oppression and injustice and become capable of taking part in public affairs. Viewed in the Indian context women empowerment is both a social necessity and a constitutional obligation.

Human Rights include rights of both the sexes without any discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, religion, colour, language, mortality, birth status etc. Women's rights can also be termed as Human Rights for the mere fact that they are also human beings. It is in this context that the ideas and ideals of Gandhi are worthwhile to remember and practice, because he championed the cause of women's rights and empowerment in its totality throughout his life. It was he who first realized the truth that for the progress of humankind

in this world for a better tomorrow, women are as important for men.

In his political programme, on priority basis he worked for the depressed and the deprived and women were the biggest block of this segment. As he believed in the concept of Sarvodaya, meaning comprehensive progress of both men and women, he said "womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen, only when the women is liberated from the slavery of kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered. It was indeed his first attempt not only to place women at par with men but also to empower them. Mahatma Gandhi was mainly responsible for involving women in India in the national struggle for independence, thereby proving their equal importance in society. However, the name of Mahatma Gandhi is hardly referred to in the cause of women's liberation, perhaps due to the fact that the Gandhian attitude towards women's liberation is not properly understood.

### **viii. Gandhian Concept Of Dowry and sexuality**

According to Mahatma Gandhiji dowry taking is a sin. He preferred girls to remain unmarried than to be humiliated by marrying men who preferred dowry. He called dowry as a heartless demand. He wished for mutual consent mutual love & mutual respect between husband & wife. According to Mahatma Gandhiji sexuality should be kept inside the marriage limits. He said all sexualities outside the marriage should be banned, referring to his own life he observed that he began to enjoy his married life only after abandoned sex. For him, "the conquest of lust is the highest endeavour of a man's or a woman's existence".



### **ix Gandhian Concept of Women In Political Participation**

The independence movement gave a definite impetus towards bringing a change in the attitude towards women in India. In order to extend the movement among the masses, a number of depressed groups, namely, untouchables, peasants, workers and, above all, women, were included in it. The participation of women in the movement was intended partly to mobilise entire families and partly it drew inspiration from the Jaina and Bhakti ethic which stressed the equality of women in India.

Mahatma Gandhi realised that by awakening national consciousness among women in India and involving them in the struggle for independence, they would come out of their traditional restricted domestic role. He provided women in India with an opportunity to break from tradition. Consequently, a great number of women in India, rural and urban, literate and illiterate, from all sections of society, joined the freedom struggle. This gave women in India a consciousness of equality with men and brought them to the forefront of thought and action. An overwhelming number of women politicians distinguished themselves in the national struggle for independence.

Gandhian philosophy and his thoughts relating women's rights and empowerment are highly relevant today than what it was during his time i.e., during the pre-independence period. Sixty nine years have passed since independence, but women still continue to suffer from disabilities and miseries afflicted on them by century's old vicious customs and beliefs. They are still considered as the weaker sex, still face

subtle discrimination in almost all fields of life; still are denied equal opportunity and rights. In fact despite the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention for Elimination of Discrimination against women, the traditional denigration of women and underestimation of their potentialities, capacities and talents still continue.

### **Conclusion**

It can be said without an idea of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi experimented in all fields a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of women and the improvement of the status of women in the country. But practically we can see completely an opposite picture of the empowerment of women. It is a great regret for us that even today employment of women is still restricted. They are not allowed to enter into certain jobs, beyond doctors, nurses, teachers and clerical jobs. In the family, the women become the victim of domestic violence and in the society they are also exploited by the social evils like dowry system, prostitution, witch- hunting etc. Again two thirds of the world's illiterates are females. Of the millions of school age children not in school, the majority are girls. And today, HIV/AIDS is rapidly becoming a woman's disease. In several southern African countries more than three- quarters of all young people living with HIV are women. Again in many countries due to the current world food price crisis a significant percentage of women eat only once. These women are already suffering the effects malnutrition, which inevitably will be their children's fate as well. Studies show that when women are supported and empowered all of society benefits. But even today at the beginning of the 21st



century Gandhi's vision remains unfulfilled.

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