

RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN OUR SOCIETY- A CRITIQUE OF THE GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE AND ITS CURRENT-DAY RELEVANCE

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi, in his role as a feminist, has been considered a champion of women's rights and issues. While one appreciates the positive changes which were an offspring of his efforts, there is no denying the fact that a fair amount of critique of his ideology can be done as far as women's rights as human beings are concerned. In a world that we have inherited, it is important to question what was envisaged by the Mahatma in good faith for the emancipation of women but had more flaws than what could be overlooked and test it on the touchstone of achievements of the women's rights movement.

Key words: Gandhi, women, right, family, work.

Introduction: The Ideas of Freedom and Feminism in India, Coupled Together: In old feminist texts like Tarabai Shinde's *Stri-Purush Tulna*, the fact that feminist thinking isn't a new thing in India finds its place powerfully. Tarabai asserted that the very fact that a woman is a woman makes her vulnerable and subject to the tyrannies of men. She emphatically wrote about this almost a century before Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* appeared. Tarabai is being mentioned primarily to reinforce the point that though in a very infant form, feminism had begun germinating in India (even before Gandhi's coming into scene) around the time the country was fighting for independence from colonial rule. It is remarkable to note that unlike elsewhere in the world, in India, feminism was started by men.

The Mahatma's Swaraj and his Ideas of Freedom: Mahatma Gandhi envisaged and guided millions towards *swaraj* that was his dream and made them realize what freedom should actually mean. In the *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi says that freedom should not only mean freedom from the British but something more. Gandhi's views on issues relating to women matched those of the other reformers of his times and before and wanted to emancipate them from the pitiable position which they held in society. Remarkably, Gandhi gave more importance to the earlier law-givers of the ancient Indian culture than the later ones (for example, Manu who has been attributed for saying that for women there can be no freedom) and said that the epithets used in our literature to describe a wife as "Ardhangini" and "Sahadharmini" indeed showed that there was no disparagement but unfortunately, somehow, a time came when women were divested of many of their rights and privileges and were reduced to a status of inferiority. Gandhi was against the pernicious system of child marriage, dowry-system and promoted widow remarriage of little girls. He was also against the Purdah-System. He said that a woman who can't bear the gaze of men must be a very poor thing and

that men had an obligation to trust their womenfolk in the same way they were trusted by the latter.

Gandhi on Women: A Critique: Gandhi knew that the condition of women was indeed pathetic. Women were illiterate, poor and ignorant. The reformers wanted to and were making efforts in the direction of bringing them at par with men but such efforts were too few and far between. Gandhi's views interest the author on many counts which she will now discuss.

Gandhi's position on widows was slightly dichotomous. Gandhi said that though child-widows should be allowed to remarry and child-marriages should be condemned, he preferred that adult widows did not remarry and remained chaste if they wished to but this shouldn't be forced upon them since chastity comes from within and cannot and should not be thrust upon someone.

Gandhi was a strong believer in the sanctity of the family, and saw marriage, like religion, as a force of 'restraint'. And in this, he failed to take notice of the fact that the entire burden of restraint fell on women; any failure on their part was not to be allowed while the misadventures of the husbands were overlooked. He said that in matters such as sex, women had more power than men and they could make their strength prevail when faced with compulsion from their husbands. What is surprising is that Gandhi acknowledged that women were mentally stronger though physically weaker than men and simultaneously thought it possible for women to remain chaste if they wished to even if their husbands forced themselves upon the former.

Gandhi's position on rape comes as surprising. He said that women who were faced with rape should give up their lives rather than surrender their virtue and chastity. A defense to this can be that he had in mind the kind of trauma and social ostracism a woman had to face if she remained alive after being raped. But this defense falls flat on its face when faced with the most important right, i.e., the one to life. Also, stripping the victim (woman) of her right to justice comes across as shocking. He argued, of

course, to the dismay of anyone who knows anything about human rights, that in circumstances where the “honour” of the family was at stake, i.e., in cases of sexual violation, rape or murder, a father would be justified in killing his daughter.

In his later years, Gandhi had modified his opinions on this issue to some extent. He made it clear (around 1942) that a woman should not be held responsible for something as heinous as rape and her wounds should be healed by friends and family rather than making her an outcaste. During the time of partition when women were being abducted or raped and the families refused to accept them back into themselves, he made repeated appeals asking the family to take back their women since they were as pure as the women who worked with him.

Also, Gandhi openly said that children born out of wedlock are like vermin who should not be preserved. It is hard to comprehend the violence of thought underlying this sentiment considering that he never used similar language and expressed such sentiments even against well-known exploiters of society, and would not have condoned violence against them as he does against little babies, wholly innocent of any wrong, moral or otherwise.

Gandhi on Public-Private Binary: The essential mantra of feminism, “the personal is political”, signifies the first attempt to break down the gendered division between the private sphere attributed to women and the public sphere, to men. Though there is no clear origin of this public/private division, Gandhi truly believed in it and encouraged men and women alike to abide by it. He wanted that women be educated like men since they also deserved the same treatment by the society. But a stark contrast appears when it comes to women’s right to put to use this education for earning money. He made a statement on this subject after his return to India at an Educational Conference in Gujarat in October, 1917. His belief was that as nature had made the two different biologically, it was necessary to maintain the difference between the educations of the two. He said that though they were equals in life, their functions differed. In essence, women’s education should be such that it helps them to run the household properly and give better education and care to children while men’s education should be such that they are able to earn money. He wanted that women did not work to earn money and certainly not as “typists, telegraph clerks or compositors”.

Two questions arise here. One, it may well be considered that Gandhi wanted women to not work outside since he considered them better teachers for children and managers of households. But one might ask that shouldn’t the responsibilities be shared equally by both, husband and wife, since Gandhi called them equals. There seems to be a lingering

patriarchal thought behind this argument that Gandhi gives. He calls women “Queens of Households” in *Hind Swaraj* but forgets the fact that such queens existed in upper and middle class homes only where the income from the male members was sufficient to support the entire family. Sujata Patel, in *Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi* argues that there was a strong caste and class bias in Gandhi’s prescriptions for women. Most of the women he talked about were from a middle class, higher caste background. She has criticized Gandhi’s claim that women were more biologically suited to life in the home than working outside it for wages, arguing that his understanding in these respects was that of an upper-class/middle class male, whose ideal woman was cloistered in the home. The women in the lower income households or poorer families went out to work and such work wasn’t easy by any means and included hard, physical labour. Spinning the *charkha* would have fetched them a very meager sum. Patel is also critical of Gandhi’s opinion that a woman had to make a choice between being either a housewife or a political worker dedicated to an unmarried life of service to the nation.

Two, Gandhi says that women should not work as typists, telegraph clerks or compositors. So, did he mean that these professions were not suited for the dignity of women because of the kind of work involved and he would have supported a woman’s cause had she wanted to become a doctor, engineer or a lawyer? Also, equality would essentially mean economic equality too, and not just social and political. An economically independent and hence, equal woman, wasn’t something Gandhi’s ideology was willing to spare a thought to.

Gandhi: An Essentialist Feminist?: In the author’s view, Gandhi can be said to be an Essentialist Feminist. An Essentialist Feminist is one who believes in an inherent, natural, eternal female nature. This nature manifests itself in positive characteristics such as gentleness, goodness, sensitivity and the ability to nurture. Gandhi’s belief that women were superior to men when it came to bearing and suffering stems from this. But this may also mean that one, if a woman was suffering, it was in her nature to be able to bear and hence, should ideally bear and two, it heavily extolled the image of a “suffering woman” and in a way, encouraged women to suffer.

While notable women leaders like Sarojini Naidu considered him their father, leader and master, the more contemporary ones like Madhu Kishwar hold, despite their specific criticisms, that Gandhi was far more radical in his actions than in his theory for he asserted openly and without any hesitation that women were superior to men as *Satyagrahis*. She also says that Gandhi’s initiative in this respect was so huge that by 1931, Congress was able to pass a

resolution committing itself to the equal rights of women. But the problem with the Gandhian movement was that it didn't do much for women outside of the political arena and in places where still a huge quantum of reform was needed. Tanika Sarkar, argues, "Whether in Gandhian movements or in more militant alternatives to it, nationalists rarely sought a permanent reversal of the customary role of women in and outside political action".

The Pro-Women Gandhi: Having said how Gandhi wasn't a champion of the feminist cause, it would be extremely unfair to say that he did nothing for women. Perhaps his greatest effort was his call to men and women alike to participate in the Independence Movement. The quintessential feature of Gandhi's independence movement was non-violence or *ahimsa* and he felt that woman was "ahimsa incarnate". He openly said that for a non-violent struggle which needed more mental strength than physical, women were better than men because of their inherent qualities. This, in turn, gave women a new found sense of confidence and a feeling that they were of some great use, i.e., service to the nation. They felt for the first time that they were equals of men. Gandhi asked them to go for picketing liquor shops (during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921-22) and early morning processions known as *Prabhat Pherees*. He also sent them to riot-infested areas such as Noakhali for carrying out relief work. Gandhi had said in his *prarthna-sabha* that he wanted women to retain their religion post marriage if they married a man of another faith. Gandhi's views on contraception were also pro-women in nature. He said, "Sterilization is a sort of contraceptive and though I am against the use of contraceptives in case of women, I do not mind voluntary sterilization in case of man, since he is the aggressor".

A very important and ahead-of-his-times-phenomenon can be seen when Gandhi asked women to renounce jewelry, make-up, perfumes, etc. and adorning themselves for men since their grace lay in their character. He called ornaments of women worn in nose and ears as "frightful and full of dirt and causing slavery to women" in *Harijanbandhu*. He said that woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust and this will be possible if she stopped doing things supposedly attracting male attention. In today's feminist discourse, for instance, in the entire campaign against fairness creams and the zero-figure, we find the exact same thing being said, i.e., women should not try to follow the norms set by the society as to what would be attractive to men/society or would look/feel more feminine. He also insisted on simple cuisine in homes so as to save women from unnecessary long hours in the kitchen and also urged men to abstain from making sexual demands. Gandhi was even open to prostitutes (calling them "fallen

sisters") joining his movement, provided they left their profession which he clearly didn't approve of.

Gandhi and Kasturba: The beginnings in South Africa: Kasturba Gandhi has been an important chapter in the life of Gandhi in the context of women. Reading about Gandhi, we know that she (along with his mother, Putlibai) has been an important inspiration for Gandhi when it came to removing inequalities between man and woman. Gandhi also confessed later that it was she who taught him the true meaning of Satyagraha. Gandhi's sensitivity to women's concerns originated in a home he and Kasturba shared in Johannesburg with an English couple, Henry and Millie Polak. Millie was a feminist who pressed Kasturba to stand up to her husband, and chastised Gandhi for having such a conservative attitude towards women. By his own account, Gandhi wasn't a good husband for quite some time and when he realized that, he gave up his rights as a husband so that Kasturba could be free. In the letters he wrote to Kasturba, it is evident that he had deep love for Kasturba in his heart but this love was like he would have for a sister. He told Kasturba once he took his vows of celibacy that she was free to do as she wished. But that has also been criticized since such a unilateral decision didn't leave Kasturba with much choice even in case she did not want the same.

Kasturba's public life began after she joined her husband in South Africa in 1897. From 1904-14, she worked tirelessly for the 'Phoenix Settlement' and from Kasturba she became Kasturba-mother to the inmates, a role she continued at Kochnab, Sabarmati, and Sevagram Ashrams in India. It is not to say that Gandhi never used his patriarchal attitude on Kasturba since we have the incident where he almost drove her out of his ashram when she refused to clean the toilet. But when he realized that this is the kind of inequality women needed to be freed from, a sense of being inferior to men and subject to commands from them, he decided to change himself. One really wonders as to what would have been the case had Kasturba herself been a feminist.

Woman as the Family's Earning Member: The earlier discussion on how Gandhi was not in favour of women working outside their homes has tremendous current-day relevance. Under the Indian Constitution, women have as much right to work as men and the equality provisions should ensure that all the benefits associated with earning come to women equally. In this context, it is pertinent to bring our attention to the *Shramshakti Report of 1988*. This report has been reviewed in a detailed manner by Howard Spodek who writes that numerous published surveys showing 20% of all women as full-time earning workers and another 10% as part time have been cited by the report. But, it cautions, these surveys define "work" too narrowly. If

one includes such activities as the free collection of goods, vegetables, roots, firewood and cattle feed, sewing, tailoring, weaving for house-hold use, fetching water, tending poultry, and maintaining kitchen gardens, then the percentage of women workers, paid and unpaid, rises to about 50%. The report also states that “among the poor, all women work”. Clearly, Gandhi was either not aware of this or was just talking about women other than these.

The commission also found that almost 60 per cent of the women interviewed were the sole bread-winners in their families, yet, they continued to earn less than half of what a man earned. This invisibility of work is most detrimental to the dignity of the work that women do and causes a lot of damage to their equality demands as well as their psyche. Although it has almost been 30 years since the Report came, it is still as relevant since the situation is still not much better. One can only imagine the dismal state of women in the unorganized labour sector which itself is reeling under immense hardship in the absence of a cogent legal regime. An important takeaway from this critique is the fact that the right to live and work exists equally for both men and women and no ideology can be majestic enough to dissuade either from pursuing this. Since women need it more today (considering how important it has become to achieve economic independence), as a side-thought, the State can try and emulate Gramin Banks started by Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh where women were successfully involved resulting in low default rates

and more productive use of capital. This may be that one lesson even India can learn from a lesser developed country.

Concluding Remarks: The positive social and political benefits women derived from the Gandhian movement and ideals far outweigh the negative aspects of his patriarchal attitude. For instance, they got the Right to Vote immediately after independence while in many advanced nations, women had to fight for it real hard. Gandhi has been hated and loved equally for his views on women and a vision for their emancipation but the truth remains that even though he lacked at many important points, the efforts he made and the results he achieved wouldn't have been possible but for his consistent and persistent mobilization of people in this direction. One does feel, at times, disappointed that he did not take up some issues more seriously or in a way that would have been more and better acceptable to the feminist thought (and perhaps, the reason why feminists' complaint with Gandhi is so loud in this regard is that they expect too much from great men, and unfairly so, without considering that after all, they too are products of their times only!) but on the whole, his contribution to the cause of women is greater than any other person of those times. Perhaps we would have known better had he lived a little longer but unfortunately, he didn't and thus, in the words of David Hardiman, we shall never know how the father of our nation would have responded to a strong feminist critique today.

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