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# MAHATMA GANDHI'S IDEOLOGY: SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** Though Gandhi was criticized frequently for his patriarchal attitude towards women, but he has unbelievable faith on the capacities of a woman. Many times in his writings he acknowledged that the participation of women in the national movement was recognizable and honorable. His immense faith in the qualities of a woman has made him to support equality of women in all the spheres of life i.e. political, social and economical. He advocated egalitarian society between two genders. This paper tries to analyse the views of Mahatma Gandhi on Political .Social and Economic empowerment of women.

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**Introduction:** As the most towering figure in India's freedom struggle Gandhi's role will remain unchallenged. And also Gandhi's attitudes towards women were as much shaped by his innate sense of comparison and justice as they were by the patriarchal albeit benevolent conservatism that was the sheet anchor of his cultural and social discourse. Expressing his views on gender inequality Gandhi wrote that "Women must not suffer any legal disability which is not suffered by men. Both are perfectly equal" (Young India, 17th October, 1929). And also felt that, Sexual equality does not translate into occupational equality in spite of the absence of a legal bar. Women instinctively recoil from a function that belongs to men. Nature has created sexes as complements of each other. Their functions are defined as are their forms. (Harijan, 2nd December,1939).

The Mahatma's view on sexual equality will not be taken kindly either by the modern man or the woman. The instinctive recoiling of women from a function that belongs to men is a consequence of historical indoctrination. What belongs to men and what belongs to women is deeply embedded in the psyche of men and women. The question is therefore who should complement whom. It should be matter of choice both for the man and the woman as husband and wife as to what vocation they should take up. It is unjust to expect the women to complement as a matter of an unwritten rule. To say that their functions are defined as are their forms is to emphasize on the sexual division of labor. The theory of sexual division of labor has been set aside by the developments since the departure of the Mahatma. Today men and women, compete and co-operate, complement and even supplant each other. However, the Mahatma's view on women being a complement of man should be looked at from the point of view of his intention. The Mahatma's intention was honest. He wanted to protect the institution of family and at the same time exalt women with equal status.

In a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21, October, 1936 Gandhi writes, "If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave-holder myself but Ba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?"

To begin with, Gandhi did not advocate an “active role” for women in the public sphere. However, when the issue of women’s voting rights was first raised in 1921, Gandhi supported it and even felt that the success of the *satyagraha* movement and the *Dandi* March was inextricably linked with the active participation of women. Burning of foreign cloth and picketing of liquor shops were activities which were predominantly undertaken by women. By 1939, Gandhi was thoroughly convinced that if the national movement had to be elevated to the level of a mass movement, then women have to be included as active participants. Gandhi said, “I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then face it with greater confidence, than if men predominated. I would dread the latter’s violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak.” Gandhi had an immense faith in the inner strength of women. He held that women by nature are endowed with the qualities of love, non-violence, forgiveness and a remarkable capacity for sacrifice. Gandhi once remarked

“God only knows who invented the word *abala* for the women of India. To call them *abala* is to condemn the inherent strength of women, in my view it is an insult to them. If we pursue the history of the Rajput, Mughal or *Mahabharata* period of our country we shall come across marvelous instances of bravery shown by women. They not only exhibited their bravery through arms, but by building up their moral courage they developed immense strength. If women resolve to bring glory to the nation, within a few months they can totally change the face of the country because the spiritual background of an Aryan woman is totally different from that of the women of other countries”.

Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. Taking a critical and rational approach, Gandhi said, while “it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide.” Gandhi called himself an ‘orthodox Hindu’ but one who desired to rid Hinduism of its defects and restore it to its pristine glory. According to him, the *Smritis* which do not give a woman her due place should not be taken as the word of God. In fact, scriptures that have no moral value or are contrary to the fundamentals of religion and morality should be revised. Gandhi strongly felt that the evils of childmarriage, dowry, *pardah*, the restrictions on widows and other such practices have to be eradicated. “The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our *shastras* as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women,” By participating in political struggles, Gandhi thought that the women would be gradually able to liberate themselves from *pardah* and such social taboos. He rejected the idea that the *pardah* is a means of saving women from men’s evil eye; the only means is men’s own purity of character.

Gandhi believed that the evil practice of dowry should be completely eradicated from the Hindu social order. He called marriages involving dowry as ‘marriage by purchase’. He strongly believed that in marriages where wives and daughters-in-law are ‘purchased’ cannot blossom into any harmonious relationship. Gandhi, in 1929, astounded his contemporary society by saying that “if had a girl under my charge, I would rather keep her a maiden all her life than give her away to one who expected a single pie for taking her for his wife.” Gandhi strongly opposed child marriage and when the Children’s Protection Act was brought up, Gandhi supported it whole-heartedly. He said that the issue was not just raising the marriageable age for girls from 14 to 16, but rather not forcing marriage on any individual without their prior consent. Thus Gandhi put emphasis on the consent of the people entering matrimony. This is particularly significant since we find that even today consent of the girl, quite often of boys is not considered important before family decision.

Gandhi emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone – both men, as well as, women. Gandhi believed that economic freedom would play a vital role in the empowerment of women. He consistently inspired and motivated women for spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Once addressing women at Nadiad, in 1919, Gandhi suggested that rather than spending so much time in temples, women

should spin for few hours every day. Telling the beads in temples, undoubtedly is *dharma* but real *bhakti*, Gandhi felt consisted in serving the motherland Gandhi believed that the success of the *Swadheshi* movement was possible only if women spun yarn and weave cloth in large numbers. Spinning yarn would not only enable the women to be economically independent, but would also add to the resources of middle class, sometimes even the sole source of subsistence for lower class families. Gandhi remarked that the wages payable to women for an hour's spinning should be the same as are paid to men and we know that equal wages for equal work is an important aspect of feminist thought. He remarked, "The times have changed when man was regarded as woman's master. That we do not admit this is a different matter. God has made man and woman one complete whole. One must not lord over the other. An endeavor is being made to establish this truth through Khadi.

**Conclusion:** Gandhi's critique of social evils, his consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women's moral strength made an impact on women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women participated in large numbers in 'mass' movements led by him and this made a big breakthrough in Indian women's lives. Gandhi's faith in women's moral strength made an impact on women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence.

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