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## GANDHI'S APPROACH TO WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Many reformers before Mahatma Gandhi had struggled hard for the liberation of women in India. Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833), Swami Dayananda Saraswathi (1827-1883), Justice Mahadev Govinda Ranade (1842-1901), Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), Gopala Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) are some of the pioneers in the cause of Women's liberation in India. In addition to them, there were many women reformers who contributed to this cause. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Ramabai Ranade (1865-1922), Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887), Francina Sorabji (1833-1910), Annie Besant (1847-1933) are some of the well-known illustrations.<sup>1</sup> However, it remains an unquestionable fact that few have actually contributed more to the cause of women's liberation than M.K. Gandhi. What then are the actual achievements of Gandhi in respect of women's liberation? This is the question which crops up to any inquisitive mind. So, the first section of this article devotes itself to recount some of the most illustrious ways in which Gandhi espoused the women's cause.

The achievements of Gandhi consist not merely in what he did at a particular point of history but also in what he said about women's status, conduct and the role they have to play in the society. That is, the greatness of the Gandhi consists in not merely being "somebody who belonged to the past", but also in continuing to be relevant to the present, and contributing to an overall liberation of women in today's context too. Hence it becomes necessary to recall what Gandhi said about women's role in society today and to re-educate ourselves in the precepts of the great mentor. Hence in the second section, an effort is made to present some of his thoughts which can serve as an unerring guide to women in their work of liberating themselves.

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1. For a summary knowledge of the work done by the various reformers mentioned here, see S. Sridevi, *Gandhi and Emancipation of Women in India* (Gandhi Sahitya Prachuravalayam, Hyderabad, 1969), pp. 27-46.

More than what Gandhi did and said about women's liberation, his very approach to the whole question of women's liberation is distinctly different from that of others. Hence there arises the need to indicate the specificity of his approach. This is attempted in the final section. For it is pertinent to ensure the quality of humanity in general, and the equality of women in particular.

## 1. Gandhi's Contributions to Women's Liberation

### a. Liberation at Home

In the early stages of his married life Gandhi was a lustful husband indeed. Yet the very same husband, after full discussion and mature deliberation with his wife took the vow of *brahmacharya* (Celebacy). Again the earlier approach of Gandhi to his wife was that of an authoritative 'slave holder'. But the same husband, later gave full scope for liberating his wife from the usual ghettos of tradition and law and enabled her to exercise her full ability and power so as to rise to great heights of service and sacrifice.

The vow of *brahmacharya* which Gandhi had taken was fortunate and providential, indeed! For, when the *satyagrahis* in South Africa were imprisoned and deported, it was he who looked after their wives and daughters as a real brother and father on the Tolstoy Farm. And that gave him a unique opportunity to know womankind and their minds sufficiently well. That is why he could later say the following: "I claim to know them (women) and their minds. There was a time in South Africa when I was surrounded by numerous women, all their men-folk having gone to jails. There were some sixty inmates, and I had become the brother and father of all the girls and women".<sup>2</sup>

### b. The Cause of Indian Women in South Africa

The first ever opportunity for Gandhi to fight for the liberation of women was provided by the Supreme Court judgment of Cape (1913) to the effect that all marriages were outside the pale of legal marriages except those that were celebrated according to Christian rites and registered by the Registrar of Marriages. Thus the many married Indian women in South

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2. M.K. Gandhi, *Women* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1958), p. 3. (This work is actually a compilation of the different sayings of Gandhi on the subject, edited by Bharatan Kumarappa).

Africa whose marriages were celebrated according to the Hindu, Mussalman and Parsi rites, ceased to rank as the wives of their husbands and were degraded to the rank of concubines. Gandhi succeeded in educating the women living on Tolstoy Farm in all these implications of the Cape Judgement. He also persuaded them to join the *Satyagraha* struggle, duly educating them of course about all the hardships with respect of food, dress and personal movements. To the great surprise of Gandhi, they were all glad to enter the struggle, despite the fact that one of them was pregnant, and six of them had young babies in arms. The women's imprisonment worked like a charm upon the mine-labourers near Newcastle and other places. When they all joined the strike, it finally contributed to the success of the *dharma-yuddha* of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

### c. Liberation from Economic Disability

After his final return to India (1915), Gandhi made a tour of the length and breadth of the whole country so as to acquaint himself with firsthand knowledge of the situation. He came to know the naked poverty in which people in general and women in particular were living. In one of his penetrating visits to a village he found some women dressed themselves in very unclean clothes. He asked his wife Kasturba to inquire them why they did not wash their clothes. She spoke to them in turn. One of the women took Kasturba into her hut and said: "Look now there is no box or cupboard here containing other clothes. The sari I am wearing is the only one I have. How can I wash it? Tell Mahatmaji to get me another sari, and I shall then promise to bathe and put on clean clothes everyday".<sup>4</sup> It is against the background of such a knowledge of the naked poverty of women that Gandhi introduced *khadi* and spinning as a powerful instrument of a constructive programme for the economic liberation of women. The rich may not look upon spinning as a means of livelihood. But Gandhi held that for the middle class it should supplement the income of the family, and for very poor women it is undoubtedly a means of livelihood. And it should be, as it was, the widow's loving companion.<sup>5</sup>

3. M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1928), Third impression 1961), pp. 276-290.

4. M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, Part V, Ch. XVIII.

5. M.K. Gandhi, *Women*, p. 36.

#### d. Emancipation from Enforced Widowhood

Together with economic disability, suppression of women under custom and tradition, was still prevalent in Gandhi's days. Hence he set out for a radical alteration of the customary status of women in the country.<sup>6</sup> One of the customary servitudes suffered by Indian women of his times was enforced widowhood. When a child-wife lost her child-husband, sometimes even before attaining puberty, she was considered a widow, and was forbidden to marry in future. Her life was miserable. She had to live in the house of the father-in-law, often despised and cruelly treated, because she was held guilty for the death of her husband on account of the sins committed in her former birth. Already in 1856 an Act was passed which legalized the marriage of widows. But the Hindus were not willing to change the practice because of the religious sanction attached to it. Hence, Gandhi said: "No outside imposition, but only strong public opinion could bring about the desired change". He was convinced that the reform must come first by the force of enlightened public opinion among the Hindus.<sup>7</sup> Therefore he made use of his masterly pen to educate the public with concrete facts and figures and to severely attack the religious sanction of this cruel custom. Reproducing the figures of Hindu widows below 15 years of age according to the Census of 1921, he gave the following observation in his *Young India*:

They only demonstrate still further the enormity of the wrong done to the Hindu girl-widows. We cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl-widow! We would not resort to force in religion. But in the name of religion we force widowhood upon our three lakhs of girl-widows who could not understand the import of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily paying dearly. If our conscience was truly awakened, there would be no marriage before 15, let alone widowhood and we would declare that these three lakhs of girls were never religiously married. There is no warrant in any *shastra* for such

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6. Cf. M.K. Gandhi, *Constructive Programme Its Meaning and Place*, (Navajivan Publication 1941, Reprint, 1981), pp. 21-22.

7. Cf. *Harijan*, March 20, 1937.

widowhood.—Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke, and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion<sup>8</sup>.

Gandhi made it clear to people that a girl of ten or fifteen years old who was no consenting party to the so-called marriage, who having 'married', having never lived with the so-called husband is suddenly declared to be a widow, is not a widow. So "It is a crime against God and man to call the union of the children a married state and to decree widowhood for a girl whose so-called husband is dead".<sup>9</sup> Hence he appealed to the parents of child-widows to arrange for their "re-marriage".

I do not regard a girl married, who is given away in marriage by her parents without her consent and for pecuniary or some other advantage. If such a girl is widowed, I think, it is the duty of her parents to marry her again".<sup>10</sup>

If a woman becomes widowed at a ripe age, Gandhi held that it should be left to her freedom to decide whether she would remarry or remain widowed. "Voluntary widowhood, consciously adopted by a woman who has felt the affection of a partner, adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself".<sup>11</sup> It is a priceless boon in Hinduism.. But enforced widowhood is a curse.

#### e. Deliverance from Early Marriage

While tackling the problem of enforced widowhood, Gandhi was simultaneously concentrating his efforts on a more basic issue, namely, the age-old practice of giving children in marriage, even before or at the age of puberty. It was even held to be a serious religious duty imposed by the *shastras*. Already from the time of Raja Ram Mohun Roy many efforts were made to wean Hindu society from this evil custom. However, given the religious sanction attached to it, the British Government was not ready to pass any law directly to prevent child marriage. Hence they

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8. M.K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1942, Fourth Enlarged Edition, Reprint, 1958), p. 103.

9. Quoted from J. Thekkinedath, *Love of Neighbour in Mahatma Gandhi* (The Pontifical Seminary, Alwaye, 1973), pp. 140.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

11. M.K. Gandhi, *Women*, p. 53.

took indirect measures such as making it an offence to have intercourse with the girl below a certain age. Thus in 1860 an Act was passed raising the age of consent to ten. Then in 1925, the age of consent was raised to 12, for the already married, and 14 for the newly to be married girls. However, the desired result was not forthcoming. In these circumstances Gandhi was convinced that creating public opinion was the only really effective weapon for women's liberation. He writes:

Any sensible legislation in the direction of raising the age of consent will certainly have my approval. But I am painfully conscious of the fact that even the existing legislation has proved abortive for want of public opinion to support it. The task before the reformer in this as in many other directions is most difficult. Constant and continuous agitation is necessary, if any real impression is to be made on the Hindu public.<sup>12</sup>

Again on another occasion he wrote:

But it is not legislation that will cure a popular evil; it is enlightened public opinion that can do it. I am not opposed to legislation in such matters, but I do lay greater stress on cultivation of public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi knew well that the popular evil was based on religious grounds. Hence, Gandhi had the courage of his convictions to question such a basis. Commenting upon a tragic case of a suicide committed by a girl of 13 who was given in marriage to a boy of 26, Gandhi wrote in *Young India*:

It is irreligion, not religion, to give religious sanction to a brutal custom. The Smritis bristle with contradictions. The only reasonable deduction to be drawn from the contradictions is that the texts that may be contrary to known and accepted morality, more especially to the moral precepts enjoined in the Smritis themselves, must be rejected as interpolations. Inspiring verses on self-restraint could not be written at the same time and by the same pen that wrote the verses encouraging the brute in the man.<sup>14</sup>

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12. M.K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 31.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

**f. Deliverance from Purdah**

Another custom that kept women in bondage was the purdah system, the traditional seclusion of women from public activities. This was more strictly followed in northern provinces like Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal. Once Gandhi was called to address in a meeting at Darbhanga. Some ladies were seated behind the screen. He never knew of such an audience until his attention was drawn to it. The sight of the screen behind him made him sad. It pained him and humiliated him. Referring to this experience Gandhi wrote that it was an unpardonable wrong done by men to the women of India by clinging to a barbarous custom which, whatever use it might have had when it was first introduced. He asked: Why do not our women enjoy the same freedom that men do? Why should they not be able to walk out and have fresh air? He further argued:

Chastity is not a hothouse growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the *purdah*. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. It must be as defiant as Sita's. It must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men. Men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk even as the latter are compelled to trust them. Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed.<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi made his ardent followers work for the total abolition of the *purdah* system. They started intensive campaigns by sending appeals, signed by both men and women volunteers, by involving themselves in mass education for both men and women, organizing demonstrations against the custom in many important centres, forming *Mahila Samithis* in towns and villages, *Mahila Ashrams* to train "good wives", "good mothers" and "useful servants" of the country.<sup>16</sup>

As in the case of other evil customs, here also Gandhi had to severely oppose many Hindus who tried to defend it on the basis of religious sanction. He denounced the so-called religious sanction ascribed to it.

I am unable to subscribe to the doctrine of their infallibility in every detail. And who shall say what is really ancient? Are all the hundred

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15. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

and eight Upanishads of equal sanctity? It seems to me that we must test on the anvil of reason everything that is capable of being tested by it, and reject that which does not satisfy it even though it may appear in an ancient garb.<sup>17</sup>

### g. Eradication of Devadasi-System

Gandhi's concern for the liberation of women was so comprehensive that he opposed to the age-old *Devadasi* - system - the institution of temple prostitution.

The Devadasi-system is nothing but a euphemism for prostitution, Gandhi said. Once after meeting a deputation of such unfortunate sisters, Gandhi observed:

Whether they be known as *devadasis* or by any other name, the problem is the same. It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow, of deep humiliation, that a number of women have to sell their chastity for man's lust. Let the Indian man ponder over the fate of the thousands of sisters who are destined to a life of shame for his unlawful and immoral indulgence.<sup>18</sup>

On another occasion he said:

By calling them *devadasis* we insult God Himself in the name of religion, and we commit a double crime in that we use these sisters of ours to serve our lust and take in the same breath the name of God. To think that there should be a class of people given to this kind of immoral service, and that there should be another class who should tolerate their hideous immorality, makes one despair of life itself.<sup>19</sup>

Gandhi knew that the *devadasis* were visited mostly by married men. Pitying them he pointed out to them that they were committing a double sin.

They sin against their wives to whom they have sworn allegiance, and they sin against the sisters whose purity they are bound to guard with as much jealousy as that of their own blood sisters.<sup>20</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

20. Cf. *Women*, p. 92.



Many people thought and may still think that the evil could be eradicated through legislative measures. But Gandhi pointed out that to regulate these things by law "would be a remedy worse than the disease. What is wanted is an intelligent, sane, healthy and pure public opinion".<sup>21</sup> Gandhi suggested to the women that they themselves could take a major share of responsibility to agitate against the evil. They could carry on a double propaganda, (a) amongst women who sell their honour for a livelihood, and (b) amongst men whom they must share into behaving better towards their sisters.<sup>22</sup>

While the work of creating public opinion is carried on, on the one hand, care must be taken also to train people in spiritual discipline on the other. Particularly in regard to Youth, who are helplessly and thoughtlessly drawn to the vice, Gandhi says:

They must understand too that nothing but a rigorously disciplined life will save them and the country from utter ruin. Above all, unless they visualize God and seek His aid in keeping them from temptation, no amount of dry discipline will do them much good. Truly has the seer said in the *Gita* that 'Desire persists though man may by fasting keep his body under restraint. Desire goes only when one has seen God face to face'. Seeing God face to face is to feel that He is enthroned in our hearts, even as a child feels a mother's affection without needing any demonstration. Does a child reason out the existence of a mother's affection without needing any demonstration? Does a child reason out the existence of mother's love? Can he prove it to others? He triumphantly declares, 'It is'. So must it be with the existence of God. He defies reason. But he is experienced. Let us not reject the experience of Tulsidas, Chaitanya, Ramdas and a host of other spiritual teachers, even as we do not reject that of mundane teachers.<sup>23</sup>

To the prostitutes themselves Gandhi showed his extremely compassionate attitude. He viewed them as "fallen sisters" and "unfortunate sisters". He recommended to them spinning, weaving, embroidery, or other fancy work which would bring them fair remuneration and at the same time be a source of decent and honourable living. He agreed with them that they could not marry.

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

They must, herefore, become the true *sannyasinis* of India. Having no cares of life but of service, they can spin and weave to their hearts' content. One million fifty thousand women deligently weaving every day for eight hours means that number of rupees per day for an impoverished India.<sup>24</sup>

#### **h. Political Liberation**

The different kinds of achievements of Gandhi mentioned above may be called "liberation from". For they were concerned with liberating the Indian women from the servitudes of Custom, Tradition and Religion. If all that was achieved by Gandhi were to be restricted to them, then he would not have done anything different from other reformers who preceded him. The only difference would have been in the comprehensiveness of the success he was able to achieve, the depth of perception and the clarity of vision that he brought to bear on the subject. However, Gandhi was not content with any work of a 'liberation-from' alone. On the contrary he was constantly trying to instill in the minds of women an ideal of 'liberation for'. Not only that, he was always imbuing them with a sense of a power of their own, and providing them with a movement far beyond the thresholds of their homes in which they could not only participate but also take a leading role. In fact he achieved a spectacular success in his endeavours. Thanks to his ingenuity the women-folk of India were roused with such a political conscience that they could all join the political life of the country and work for the national Freedom, with a breadth-taking abruptness in the whole history of India. They were liberated from the varied bondages of Custom, Tradition and Religion for the sake of their political liberation, which in turn touched upon other departments of life. How was Gandhi able to achieve the "liberation-for", almost miraculously and so suddenly while none of the earlier reformers did not achieve it for years? It is worthwhile to go into it in some details.

The multi-dimensional liberation-from could not but have made a deep impression on the people. As a consequence women began writing to him, begging an appointment from him, seeking his considered opinion on their problems, asking him to help them secure rights for them. There were times when even rustic women, and even prostitutes en bloc hap sought an appointment with him, to get his guidance for their problems.

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24. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

He also readily responded to every demand of women's problems in the country. Against this background it is small wonder that they, when called upon by Gandhi to join the Indian National Congress and work for the liberation of the nation, responded readily. Whenever Gandhi announced a political campaign, they flocked in great numbers and served the cause of the nation's liberation. It was the ingenuity of Gandhi to take a trivial but telling example of salt as an issue to awaken the consciousness of the women to rise against British Imperialism. Even the most ignorant women of the remotest villages could be conscientized about the injustice of the foreign power and volunteer to be co-workers and co-sufferers with Congress men volunteers. It is no wonder that the English observers themselves exclaimed: "There was a breadth-taking abruptness about the entry of Indian women into political life. One moment they were not there, the next they had sprung, like Athene from the head of Zeus, fully armed into the forefront of the scene". This observation of Molley may be corroborated by the incident told by Shri Dhondo Keshav Karve, and re-told by R.R. Divakar. It may be recalled that D.K. Karve had dedicated his whole life to the cause of women. He was the founder of the first women's University in India. He had to go to Japan in 1930, when Gandhi began his Dandi March and inaugurated the *Salt-Satyagraha*. When Karve returned from Japan, he witnessed something which was far beyond his imagination. The *Satyagraha* had been being carried on in Bombay. Hundreds of ladies, high and low, old and young, were marching towards the sea through the crowded streets of Bombay. They were all cordoned off by the police with lathies and armed white Sergeants. Fearlessly with heroic songs on their lips phalanx after phalanx of saffron-clad ladies were advancing in an orderly manner to reach the sea and break the salt-law. No wonder then Karve exclaimed: "What decades of my work and work similar to mine has failed to achieve, this wizard of Sabarmathi has achieved by a single stroke of imaginative action".<sup>25</sup>

Salt-Satyagraha was not the only one which evoked the participatory response of Indian women. They showed a phenomenal response to all the campaigns Gandhi conducted for achieving the political liberation. The non-co-operation movement, the demonstration against the Partition of Bengal, the burning of foreign dress and the subsequent Trials in the

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25. R.R. Divakar, *Gandhi The Spiritual Seeker* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1964), pp. 96-97.

Courts, the No-tax campaign in Bardoli, the campaign for Charka as a sign of casting off economic dependence on the foreign Power and of our attitude of self-sufficiency in economy are some of the stages of the Freedom Movement in which Gandhi was able to evoke the full co-operation of women. He filled them with enthusiasm, inspired them with the great cause of the National liberation and launched them forth into every one of the campaigns for freedom.

Gandhi's greatness lies not only in having brought women to the forefront. He also succeeded in persuading them to accept responsibilities with men on equal terms. In all his institutions or programmes of work he paid equal attention and gave equal place to girls and women. There was an air of freedom and self-confidence in the girls and women that lived with him or were under his care. The Spinners' Association is in essence a women's association. There were many eminent women who were influenced by Gandhi or who flowered into heroines in the history of modern India only because of Gandhi.

Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Amrit Kaur, Kamaladevi, Kasturba herself, Kamala Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sucheta Kripalani, Sushila Nayyar, Mridula Sarabhai, Yeshodharamma Dasappa, Dr. Soundaram, Amtus Sallam, Mirabeheh<sup>26</sup> are just illustrative samples of those who were personally trained in one sense or the other by Gandhi's leadership.

Thanks to the great success of those stalwarts of Gandhian ideals equality of status and rights were accorded to all women in the Constitution. As a result we find today women holding high offices and responsible positions in various walks of life. Some are prominent teachers, professors, principals, doctors. Even as careers are growing the number of women in employment is also growing. Many have opted to become lawyers, judges, journalists, engineers and police. Our ladies have led the polls in the General Elections and captured many seats in the legislatures. They have held the most responsible posts like that of Chief Minister and Prime Minister.

Gandhi was not content with the advance of the women who were born and bred in the cities of India and who were fortunate to have facilities for higher education. In fact he was sorry for certain aspects of the

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26. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

so-called 'advance' in the life of women modelled after the Western European countries bereft of moral virtues and spiritual pursuits. On the contrary, he was keenly interested in seeing the rise of the least of the women in the remotest villages of India. This will be clear from the fact that when, on Kasturba's death, money was donated for the "Kasturba Memorial Trust", Gandhi earmarked Rs. 10 million for the uplift of rural women. The objectives he proposed for the Trust included welfare of the village women and children. It should train large number of women workers who would settle themselves in villages with a population less than two thousand. Even when it was pointed out to him that some of the proposals were difficult to achieve, Gandhi stuck to them. Thanks to him, intensive training is being given even today for the rural girls to be effective housewives, nurses, doctors, teachers, peace-makers.

## **2. Gandhi's Call to Humankind for Women's Liberation**

From the foregoing section it is clear that Gandhi's liberation work for women was distinctly different from that of his forerunners. While they were all interested in "liberation-from" of women, Gandhi was concerned also with their "liberation-for", setting a greater cause as a goal for them, viz. political liberation of the nation as well as economic self-sufficiency. Now I should like to establish that Gandhi's distinctness lies also in another respect. I should like to contend that while the earlier reformers tackled particular problems of women, arising at a particular point of history, Gandhi touched also upon such fundamental issues that his views remain greatly relevant for other times as well. Therefore, while other reformers have a historical importance, Gandhi has a prophetic thrust, which needs to be spelt out. Hence in this section I try to collect those of his statements which deal with the fundamental issues of women's liberation. They deserve to be voiced again and again, because of their perennial relevance.

### **a. The Problem**

Today there is so much of talk about women's Liberation. But are we all clear about the root cause of the problem which we want women to be liberated from? According to Gandhi it is male domination which is the first and foremost cause of women's problems.

It is necessary to understand what we mean when we talk of the regeneration of women. It presupposes degeneration, and, if that is so, we should further consider what led to it and how. The point for us to consider is the regeneration of our women relatively to our men. Legislation has been mostly the handiwork of man; and man has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task.<sup>27</sup>

Further, according to Gandhi women also have a fair share in the blame:

But, somehow or other, man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's interested teaching that she is inferior to him. But the seers among men have recognized her equal status.<sup>28</sup>

That mutual lust too has played an important part in bringing about the disqualifications of the fair sex hardly needs any demonstration. Woman has circumvented man in a variety of ways in her unconsciously subtle ways, as man has vainly and equally unconsciously struggled to thwart woman in gaining ascendancy over him.<sup>29</sup>

Man has regarded woman as his tool. She has learned to be his tool, and in the end found this easy and pleasurable to be such, because when one drags another in his fall the descent is easy.<sup>30</sup>

#### b. The Solution

If the root cause of the problem is male domination over women, than its solution lies only in getting rid of it and recognizing equality of sexes.

To call a woman a member of the weaker sex is a libel. In what way is woman the weaker sex, I do not know. If the implication is that she lacks the brute instinct of man, or does not possess it in the same measure as man, the charge may be admitted. But then, woman becomes, as she is, the nobler sex. If she is weak in striking, she is

27. Cf. *Women and Social Injustice*, pp. 3-4.

28. Cf. Jag Parvesh Chander, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi* (The Indian Printing Works, Lahore), p. 607.

29. *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 13.

30. J. P. Chander, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

strong in suffering. I have described woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and *ahimsa*. She has to learn not to rely on man to protect her virtue or her honour. I do not know a single instance of a man having ever protected the virtue of a woman. He cannot, even if he would. Rama certainly did not protect the virtue of Sita, not the five Pandawas of Draupadi. Both these noble women protected their own virtue by the sheer force of their purity.<sup>31</sup>

Gandhi even contends that woman is stronger than man in certain respects, for example, in 'suffering love' for the family. He suggests, further, that by transferring this love to the society she can establish herself as a powerful maker of and leader in the society, equal to man.

Woman is the incarnation of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means infinite love which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Who, again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar. She can become the leader in *Satyagraha* which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man, I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.<sup>32</sup>

Gandhi emphasized the equality of the sexes:

My own opinion is that just as fundamentally man and woman are one, their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a

31. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 604.

complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help.<sup>33</sup>

What is needed is that women realize their strength:

Would that woman realize the power she has latent in her for good if she has also for mischief. It is in her power to make the world more livable both for her and her partner whether as father, son or husband, if she would cease to think of herself as weak and fit only to serve as a doll for man to play with. If society is not to be destroyed by insane wars of nation against nations and still more insane wars on its moral foundations, the woman will have to play her part not manfully, as some are trying to do, but womanfully. She won't better humanity by vying with man in his ability to destroy life mostly without purpose.<sup>34</sup>

Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his.<sup>35</sup>

People may cite passages from the *Shastras* as a support of the unjust custom. But Gandhi says those texts are interpolations. He gives the following argument:

It is sad to think that the *Smritis* contain texts which can command no respect from men who cherish the liberty of woman as their own and who regard her as the mother of the race. Of course, there are in the *Smritis* texts which give woman her due place and regard her with deep veneration. The question arises as to what to do with the *Smritis* that contain texts that are in conflict with other texts in the same *Smritis* and that are repugnant to the moral sense.... all that is printed in the name of scriptures need not be taken as the word of God or the inspired word.<sup>36</sup>

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33. *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 25.

34. J. P. Chander, *op. cit.*, p. 609.

35. *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 4.

36. *Women*, pp. 3-4.



With reference to texts in Manu, Gandhi says :

The saying attributed to Manu that "for woman there can be no freedom" is not to me sacrosanct. It only shows that probably, at the time when it was promulgated, women were kept in a state of subjection. The epithets used in our literature to describe a wife are *ardhangana*, 'the better half', and *sahadharmini*, 'the helpmate'. The husband addressing the wife as *devi* or goddess does not show any disparagement. But, unfortunately, a time came when the woman was divested of many of her rights and privileges and was reduced to a status of inferiority.<sup>37</sup>

Gandhi further says that these interpolations can be proved meaningless by women living a pure, liberated life and thereby, demonstrating the contrary of what those *shastras* say. Women's Associations, according to Gandhi, should aim at producing new prototypes of liberated women:

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. Who will attempt this and how? In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt we will have to produce women pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. If we do produce them, such modern sisters will receive the same homage from Hindu society as is being paid to their prototypes of yore. Their words will have the same authority as the *Shastras*. We will feel ashamed of the stray reflections on them in our *Smritis* and will soon forget them. Such revolutions have occurred in Hinduism in the past, and will still take place in the future, leading to the stability of our faith. I pray to God that this Association may soon produce such women.<sup>38</sup>

### c. Specific Suggestion

Gandhi also gave many concrete suggestions for achieving women's liberation. We may arrange them in the following order. First,

Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn

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37. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

38. *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 4.

herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man. I cannot imagine Sita ever wasting a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charms.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly she should not merely cater to the egoistic pleasure of her husband:

More often than not a woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but in catering for the egoistic pleasure of her lord and master and for her own vanities. To met this domestic slavery of woman is a symbol of our barbarism. In my opinion, the slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our womankind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.<sup>40</sup>

This implies that we should take to a life of purity and simplicity rather than a life of bounty and enjoyment.

All of us men must hang our heads in shame, so long as there is a single woman whom we dedicate to our lust. I will far rather see the race of man extinct than that we should become less than beasts by making the noblest of God's creation the object of our lust. But this is not a problem merely for India, it is a world problem. And if I preach against the modern artificial life of sensual enjoyment and ask men and women to go back to the simple life epitomized in the *charkha*, I do so because I know that without an intelligent return to simplicity there is no escape from our descent to a state lower than brutality. I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women.<sup>41</sup>

Fourthly, women must not decorate themselves with a view to pleasing men.

I am told by feminine friends that she does so for pleasing man. Well, I tell you, if you want to play your part in the world's affairs, you must refuse to deck yourselves for pleasing . . . Refuse to decorate yourselves, don't go in for scents and lavender waters. If you want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man but humanity. It is your birthright. Man

39. J.P. Chander. *op. cit.* p. 602.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 609-610.

41. *Women and Social Injustice.*, p. 125.

is born of woman, he is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver your message again.<sup>42</sup>

The reason is obvious. The purpose of marriage according to Gandhi is a union of two spirits for spiritual development rather than for the fulfillment of carnal love. So, the fifth condition conducive for women's liberation is the realization of the real goal of marriage:

The ideal that marriage aims at is that of spiritual union through the physical. The human love that it incarnates is intended to serve as a stepping stone to divine or universal love. The wife is not the husband's bonds slave, but his companion and his helpmate, and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows – as free as the husband to choose her own path. Therefore, spiritual development ought to be given the first place in the choice for marriage. Service should come next, family considerations and the interest of the social order should have the third place, and mutual attraction or love the fourth and the last place. This means that love alone, where the other three conditions are not fulfilled, should not be held as a valid reason for marriage. At the same time, marriage where there is no love should equally be ruled out even though all other conditions are fully complied with. I should score out the condition of eugenic fitness, because the begetting of offspring being the central purpose of marriage, eugenic fitness cannot be treated as a condition; it is the *sine qua non* of marriage.<sup>43</sup>

Gandhi also realized the need of cultivating the woman's strength and forming a movement for women.

Women's strength must be cultivated. Realizing their dependence, they cry out for women's rights. Instead of doing this, however, women workers should enrol as voters, impart or have imparted to them practical education, teach them to think independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel man to realize woman's strength and capacity for sacrifice and give her places of honours.<sup>44</sup>

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

43. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Selections from Gandhi* (1948, Second Enlarged Edition, Reprint, 1972), pp. 273 & 278.

44. *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 186.

However, women's liberation movement in India cannot be after the Western model :

They may not ape the manner of the west, which may be suited to its environment. Theirs must be the strong, controlling, purifying, steadying hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejecting what is base and degrading. This is the work of Sitas, Draupadis, Savitris and Damayantis, not of amazons and prudes.<sup>45</sup>

For, Gandhi stresses the complementary and not the competing aspects of woman's nature.

But I do not believe that woman will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running a race with man. She can run the race but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be the complement of man.<sup>46</sup>

To explain the complementary aspects further Gandhi stresses the division of spheres in our nature:

Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake requires qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active. He is the bread winner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. In my opinion it is degrading both for man and woman that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end. In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down. The sin will be on man's head for tempting or compelling his companion to desert her special calling. There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there is in defending it against attack from without. There are no women blacksmiths and carpenters. But men and women work on

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45. *Women*, p. 13.

46. J. P. Chander, *op. cit.* p. 806.

the fields, the heaviest work being done by the males. The women keep and manage the homes. They supplement the meagre resources of the family, but man remains the main bread-winner.<sup>47</sup>

If woman should not be taken out of the hearth and if, at the same time woman should be freed from domestic work – is not then Gandhi inconsistent in his approach? This inconsistency will vanish if we remember that Gandhi's emphasis on women's employment in cottage industries. The home-based industries provide women with a means not only of providing additional income to the family as well as to the nation, but they will also draw them out of the drudgery of kitchen labour, at the same time preserving their role as house-wives and mothers. This is the true liberation of women, according to Gandhi!

### **3. The Specificity of Gandhi's Approach**

From the last section it is clear that Gandhi's views on women's liberation are quite different from those of the liberation movement of women in the Western countries. Certainly Gandhi is like the Feminist of today in advocating education of women, training of women in basic vocational skills so as to bring about their economic emancipation, equal pay for equal work, their right to vote as well as to stand for elections. Gandhi was also opposed to considering women as the weaker or inferior sex, and to a rigid distinction between social roles based on sex differences. Despite these common points, a Feminist of today is unlikely to see a common approach with him in Mahatma Gandhi. He is likely to see him more as belonging to another era, having worked in a different context, talking an idiom more of a reformer than a revolutionary. He seems to be very much interested in holding seminars and conferences in world capitals, and organizing many demonstrations and marches to fight for women's rights. He would like to call out all women to come out of their homes and take part in all types of jobs and responsibilities in society with a view to establishing equality of status with men. And he is keen on bringing about a lot of changes in legislation and governmental policies in favour of women.

No doubt, Gandhi was in support of taking legal and constitutional measures to end legal discrimination against women in matters like marriage, inheritance, divorce, and the like. However, what Gandhi wants

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47. M.K. Gandhi, *Voice of Truth*, pp. 480-481.

to emphasize is that the legal safeguards and governmental concessions are of little use in our work of liberation of women. They are at best means for social change; they do not necessarily ensure it. What really matters is transformation of attitudes in people, and a change in the actual practices of people even in the remotest villages of India. He wants first and foremost to destroy woman's bondage to the drudgery of labour in the kitchen. He insists on simplified cooking and even eating raw food as far as possible. He wants to do away with the debasing of women as sex object. He wants women to resist the husband if he is only interested in carnal love. He is keen on women taking to simplification of clothing avoiding jewellery and other ways of alluring their lords. He accepts equality of sexes but he is not ready to grant equality of occupations. Of course, he was the first in the history of India to give women the opportunity to come into their own by participating in *satyagraha* movements, and other political activities, like boycotting of foreign clothes etc. But he insists that these were extraordinary circumstances, more so because the non-violent movements were best suited to women, because they are the embodiment of suffering love. But in ordinary circumstances, he insists, the difference of roles must be maintained. He reiterates that the vocation of women is to be mothers, leaders at home, and makers of leaders of the country. They are more suited to inculcate in the minds of children the attitude of 'suffering love' and train the future citizens of the country in an active and yet non-violent resistance. Gandhi approaches the question of women's liberation not so much emphasising the functional equality of sexes as the fundamental equality of sexes.

Another major point of difference between the approach of Gandhi and that of others lies in the integral view of life. Unless one sets the approach of Gandhi against the background of his over-all view about the whole course of evolution and the place accorded to women by nature, it is difficult to appreciate the specificity of Gandhi's approach to women's liberation. That is why great people like R.R. Divakar, while dealing with the subject "Gandhiji's Work for the Uplift of Women", took pains to analyse the whole course of evolution as necessary background material.<sup>48</sup> Evolution of beings is beyond dispute today. When life started it was unicellular which in turn gave rise to multicellular beings. They started life as asexual creatures. Then they grew into bisexual creatures,

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48. See, R.R. Divakar, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-84. The account given here is largely based on R.R. Divakar's account itself.

that is, having both male and female sex in a single being. Then emerged the hetero-sexual animals, that is, animals having the male and female sex as separate individuals. Hence with these animals propagation of the race was possible through the copulation of the male and female of the same species. This is how animals and mammals and finally man and woman have developed.

A striking point about the human species is that while the whole of the animal world has stood still in the kind and way of life prescribed for it, and is guided mechanically by what is called instinct, man is endowed with self-consciousness and self-determination. He is not only capable of penetrating into the secret laws of nature and of discriminating the right from the wrong (the faculty of conscience), but also he has the power to decide for better or worse, using and manipulating his knowledge for satisfying either the lower animal urges of life or for striving after the highest Realization, Perfection and Transcendence.

Evidently there are two courses of action which human beings can choose for themselves. One is materialist the other is spiritualist. The materialist course of action is to lay the highest store by the body and its pleasures and raptures, to hold that man and woman need not have any restraints except what the laws of health well-being and social decency dictate. Sex is meant not merely for propagation of the race, but for the highest carnal pleasure which man and woman are capable of. Whereas the other approach is to review the evolutionary stages which have been left behind, to emphasise the joys and delights which far surpass those of the body, to see the body merely as a vehicle of what is usually called soul or spirit, seeing the heights reached by the noblest of human beings, the saints and sages, to try to strive after them so that we manifest more and more the higher dimensions of the spiritual life. Now, of the two approaches, Gandhi certainly belongs to the latter one, namely the spiritualist approach. For as Divakar puts it Gandhi<sup>49</sup> perceived very early in his life that human life had a deep spiritual meaning, that the body was but a vehicle of the inner soul, and that to realise the immanent presence of the transcendent and to act always with the inner-most Spirit as witness was the *Truth*.

With this spiritualist bent of mind, Gandhi was quick to see that the modern civilization of the West was catering more to the bodily pleasures

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49. R.R. Divakar, *op. cit.* pp. 75-76.

and luxuries of materialist life. He also genuinely feared that there were in our country strong tendencies to speak of equality of sex in a purely materialistic way, so as to provoke and stimulate baser passions be it sex-fulfilment or the attitude of violence in life. This explains his earnest desire to raise man and woman to higher levels of existence, and his anxiety to liberate woman as well as man from the present day animal life, the life of indulgence, to which most of us seem to be condemned by our narrow and short sighted outlook and numerous weaknesses.

Some of the restraints Gandhi has prescribed for men and women, married or otherwise seem to be impossible to practice. However it must be borne in mind that Gandhi insists on that difficult path because only then we, in the present stage of evolution, would be in a position to choose to use our powers and opportunities correctly so as to move forward towards higher perfections and lead humankind to further stages of evolution. Otherwise, there is every likelihood of misusing our powers and opportunities and degrading humanity. There is no need of any special training for indulgence in sensual pleasures, because we are prone to it by nature, whereas we constantly need to train our senses and discipline ourselves if we want to rise higher in perfection. So, in the process we cannot avoid rigorous restraints of our baser qualities. Again it is good to remember that Gandhi never preached and prescribed to others anything which he did not put into practice first. So, one can be sure that what he says about the restrictions on sex is not impossible to achieve, but has already been achieved by him.

Animals are led purely by instinct and hence the abuse in the matters of sex is perhaps the least. But if man were not careful in controlling his sensual inclinations, he would make use of his ingenuity to find out peculiar ways of enjoying sex, with the result that he would abuse his sex instinct to such an extent as to degrade himself and human nature to a further level than imaginable. Thus there arises a need for a careful exercise of the human faculty of "will" which will either lift humankind to higher levels of evolution or will degrade him lower to a merely animal life. Now, Gandhi is interested in moving further in the line of reaching Perfection. Hence he insists on self-restraining measures in dealing with the sacred field of sex.

Gandhi calls upon men to remember their deep debt to their mothers and to respect every woman as the representation of motherhood. At the same time he calls upon women to look upon themselves not as mere



pleasure giving playthings of men but as mothers of humanity. Hence his emphasis on a real education of women and not merely literacy education. That is, he insists that education of women must suit the role she has to play in life, and bring out the full potentialities inherent in her, so that she will be able to form the citizens of the country soundly. It is in this context that his emphasis on the biological differences, and the consequential differences in the spheres and functions of the two sexes, becomes more meaningful. No wonder then he could not agree with what went in the name of 'Women's Liberation' in the West. Mere mimicry of man by a women or sheer competition with him does not constitute women's liberation. In contrast to such a position Gandhi emphasised equality of sex so far as the spiritual goal and the way to it was concerned. Hence he was uncompromising in upholding the rights of women as equal to there of men, although he asserted that equality sex did not mean equality of occupation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

If we are right in the way we have argued in the foregoing section and in the account we have given of Gandhi's deeds and words in respect of women's liberation in the first two sections, then we can legitimately say that very few social reformers have thought so fundamentally and deeply as Gandhi did while being himself involved in the work of women's liberation. Nor is there any social philosopher who has so candidly written about the problems of women, and that too, with a religious/spiritual approach. Nor is there a theologian who has tried to apply his theological insights so comprehensively to the varied problems of women. However, Gandhi never wrote a systematic treatise on women's liberation. Nor did he deal with the varied problems of women in a theoretical way. Whatever he has said was said in some contexts of other, on some specific occasion or other, as and when problems arose in the varied contexts of his eventful life. It was only because he was meticulously systematic in his thought, and ardently spiritualist in his approach, that he could be so consistent in his views about women's liberation all through his long public life. It is only in the light of this basic approach of Gandhi that one can really appreciate all that he has done and said about women's liberation.