



Revisiting Gandhi in Uplifting the Status of Women in India

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Introduction:

When we think of status of women in India, it is a sad reality check of how for ages and ages women have been subjected to extreme patriarchal norm. Although the situation has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia, patriarchy still dominates the Indian society. Taking in account the period of 20th century India, the country has gone through revolutionary changes in improving the status of women in which Gandhi played a crucial role. He worked not only for the freedom of the nation but also for the freedom of suppressed and oppressed sections of the society of including women. He was against barbaric beliefs such as caste based discrimination, child marriage, *Sati Prathā*, *Purdāh*, and dowry system, which is very commendable for someone living in an era where having an opinion was a crime for women. To raise a voice against these deep-rooted patriarchal systems and encouraging women to participate in the freedom moment, surely one would say Mahatma Gandhi was a symbol of women empowerment.

In the subsequent part of the paper I desire to discuss how far Gandhi's philosophy, with special reference to his view on women, is successful in uplifting the status of women in India.

In the doing so, first, in the Second Section, I will try to understand the status of women in Gandhi's perspective against the backdrop of Gandhi's upbringing and daily life practice. Third Section of my discussion will centered around Gandhi's take on prevailing regressive customs and beliefs which bothered him and developed his philosophy on women. In the Fourth Section, I will critically discuss certain problems pertaining to Gandhi's Beliefs which includes issues such as, equality of sexes in occupation, purity of women and sex, the concept of *Brahmachāryaas* conceived by Gandhi. Finally, I will pose a critical estimate of Gandhi with regard to his philosophical stand on women and how far his brand of philosophy is really uplift the status of women in India.

2. Women in Gandhi's Perspective:

How a person perceive himself or herself depends upon his/her upbringing and conditioning. The values and principles with which he/she has been brought up plays a crucial role in shaping one's perspective of the society he/she lives in. Indian society has always held onto patriarchy. Although in the Vedic period things were different. Women were not deprived of education, the society did not practice child marriage and widow remarriage was also encouraged. However things got worse for women somewhere in the medieval period. Rules and laws concerning women became extremely harsh and biased and women were subjugated. And since then the society has been conditioned to believe that women is the weaker sex and inferior to men in every aspect, be it physical or intellectual. Gandhi highly objected this notion. For Gandhi men and women were both complementary to each other. They are equal in all aspects and women deserved equal rights as men. Women must not be taken as an object to fulfil men's carnal desires. He lashed at the age old laws and customs which deprived women of their basic rights and as well at the men who formulated these laws without considering the potential of women power, making the laws in favor of men exclusively. What I strongly believe is that when one fear the power of other, and fails to find any means to overcome that fear or to be able to equal the other, he lay traps to subdue the other. This is a fear that man feels towards a woman and forcefully imposing himself on her, he feels superior. But in reality, man still hasn't conquered this fear. Gandhi, however figured out that after being oppressed for centuries, women have lost their voice, and they don't have any self-confidence. Gandhi wanted women to shed their inferiority complex and emerge out as strong independent citizens. One might question that

how Gandhi was not influenced by religion and what rules it imposed on women? Gandhi was an “orthodox Hindu”¹, but he wanted to rid Hinduism of its defects and regressive practices and restore its raw form. Just because these texts and scriptures are written in Sanskrit, doesn’t mean that it’s the Word of God. The people who had written them were human beings with flaws and insecurities. He wanted *Shāstras* to be read and understood in the correct manner and if they contained contradictory statements regarding particular issues, he urged people to follow the ones which were favored by reason. For example *Manusmṛti* is an ancient Hindu ‘*Dharma Shāstra*’ which says, “A woman as a little girl should obey and seek protection of her father, as a young woman, her husband and as a widow and she should never live independently.”²

Bālye piturvarśhe tiṣṭhetpāṇigrāhasya yauvane

Putrāṇām bhartari prete na bhajetstri svatantratām.

Gandhi was against this notion because it restricts the freedom of women. As a husband and a son, he had seen his wife and mother live surrounded with restrictions. As a young husband he tried to be dominant towards his wife because that’s what husbands did at that time, but Kasturba resisted. She did not rebel or fight back but resisted Gandhi’s impositions gracefully. Thushe said, “If I had the right to impose restrictions on her, had not she also a similar right?”³

Gandhi viewed women as soft, sublime beings with incredible mental strength. They may be physically weaker than men but men are no competition for women when it comes to mental strength. To Gandhi, women were epitome of strength, sacrifice and sufferance. And they were ideal for Gandhi’s *ahimsā*. In fact women, according to Gandhi are an incarnation of *ahimsā*. Gandhi strongly believed that men have to be taught about non-violence and they may perfect it with time but women are born with this characteristic. Gandhi had admitted that he had designed his strategy and chosen non-violence for the freedom struggle very deliberately and consciously so as to encourage women’s participation in them.⁴

3. Gandhi on Regressive Customs and Beliefs:

Gandhi did not only participate in the freedom struggle but also played a major part in uprooting age old taboos and restrictive customs. Gandhi claims himself to be a “victim of child marriage”. He strongly opposed the practice of child marriage saying that such marriage has no

meaning to it, that it is null and void. He emphasized on educating children rather than marrying them off, especially women because women as young as eight were married off to a man six times her age. Gandhi called these marriages barbaric, stating that marrying off such a young girl who doesn't even understand the meaning of marriage and then expecting her to jump in her husband's funeral pyre after his death is an act of inhumanity. *Sati Prathā*, which was practiced very actively in most parts of India, attracted Gandhi's hatred towards itself. Because there were no such rule for husbands when their wives died, they would simply marry someone else and Gandhi believed in equality. If a widow is forced to lead a miserable life and is not allowed to marry again, widowers should have such regulations too. Gandhi advocated opening of *Mahilāshrams* for rescuing young girls trapped in their undeserved widowhood and emphasized on widow remarriage. He said that widows should be 'well married' rather than remarried because a marriage like that held no meaning and hence wasn't a marriage at all. It's really a shame just how much regressive our society was back then but the saddest part is the following customs are still being practiced in India quite shamelessly. Inter-caste marriage was a big taboo in India. Even now people are against inter-caste marriages. Although Gandhi was not in favor of love marriages but he highly favored inter-caste marriages because Gandhi was against caste-based discrimination. But one custom that angered Bāpu most is the dowry system, which still is actively practiced in our country. Women are still burnt and murdered if their parents don't fulfil their in-law's needs. Gandhi shamed those men who demand dowry. According to him, such men are scoundrels who sell themselves for money. Such marriage is not a marriage, it's a business and such heinous and immoral criminal should be punished.

4. Some Problems Pertaining to Gandhi's Beliefs:

4.1. Equality of Sexes in Occupation

It is clear that Gandhi highly emphasized on equality of men and women. Women are not inferior in any way to men and men must acknowledge that. But what goes wrong with Gandhi's thought is he wanted women to scale the highest peaks of life in the 'female domain'. What does that mean? Well, Gandhi believed that women are more suitable for the household chores and men are more suitable for outdoor jobs.⁵ Although women should be educated and have their own opinion, they are not the true bread-earners. Education enables women to know and protect their fundamental rights. It provides them with a sense of self confidence and a voice

that matters. With education comes self-realization that you matter. You are not just a doll, an object to be used by man and bear your husband's children. Education gives you the confidence to say 'no' even to your husband. But home is entirely a woman's sphere. She must impart her knowledge on her children and make sure they grow up to be responsible citizens. However this view is not in any way suited in the 21st century. To propose this idea now will be sexist and misogynistic.

However in my point of view maybe this division of labor started not because men wanted to prove themselves superior to women, but maybe because of the structure and design of the male and female bodies. It is an irreversible truth that only the female species have the ability to bear offspring. Now considering the old times, where mankind had not advanced in technology and science, human beings were dependent on nature, animals and each other for pretty much everything. At that time there were no such luxuries as processed food items, readymade garments or suitable transportation that we are enjoying now. If we consider an ordinary farmer's lifestyle in, say, 13th century, they had to do everything from scratch. They couldn't have gotten readymade staples like flour, rice and spices like we do now. They couldn't preserve food like we do in our refrigerators. They did everything from scratch, reaping wheat from fields, threshing it and grinding it, without any machines and then going back to the fields to work. Human body has its own limits. So the division of labor was necessary. Now the question arises, why women had to stay in homes? Well, Nature has given the ability to bear offspring only to women. With that comes menstruation which is natural. During those times, the body demands rest and physically straining works should be avoided. The fact must be kept in mind that there were no sanitary pads at that time. Next, there were no methods of contraception in those times. Being pregnant also meant resting at home. What I believe, this division of labor sprouted because men don't have such characteristics and are suitable to work anytime outdoors. It was created to equally distribute the works amongst men and women and both were equally dependent on each other. It did not in any way was meant to make women feel inferior to men. It did not mean that women are not capable of doing a man's job. Women can do anything. Did Gandhi mean this when he said home is entirely a woman's sphere? Of course with time the original motive got jinxed up and the idea became that men are the bread-earners so they are superior to women and that women are dependent on them financially which gradually became infuriating. However now time has changed. Now we have resources and technology and

upgraded form of lifestyle where women are not restricted to the four walls of their houses. They can be a mother and the bread-earner of the house.

4.2. Purity of Women and Sex:

The Indian society is, and has always been obsessed with the 'purity' of women, especially sexual purity. Women were therefore forced to conceal their face and most part of their skin so as not to attract male attention. This system was known as *Purdāh*. In Hindu tradition, the women, especially married women were supposed to keep their faces hidden with a long veil of their *sāri* and in case of royalty, there was a translucent curtain partition between the section where royal women were supposed to be seated and the royal court. In the Islamic tradition, women were supposed to have their faces covered, revealing only their eyes. Gandhi was against these practices. According to him, chastity cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the *purdah*.⁶ He argued that why all the anxiety is only about the female purity? He demanded male chastity as well. A very commendable thought indeed but the disturbing part comes when he says that it is impossible to physically violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. Rapes and violence against women is rampant in India since the last decade. Rape survivors still cannot gather up the courage to share their plight because of the social stigma attached to it. Although Gandhi did say that the man who violates a woman lose his chastity and that he is definitely a criminal but he 'advices' women to kill themselves if they fail to protect themselves from the molester, an advice rape survivors still follow. The stigma attached to rape and women's honor is so deep rooted that the innocent women still opt for suicides as a solution. During his time in South Africa, when a male youth was reported for harassing two of his female followers, his response was to personally cut off the two girls' hair off. He did it to ensure that the 'sinner's eye' was 'sterilized'. This is the same pattern of 'judgment' that our society refer to when a woman is raped. All in all what Gandhi said is women are responsible for their rapes. Needless to say, this is a misogynistic opinion to have in the 21st century or any era for that matter.

Gandhi's views about women's sexuality became more and more twisted and handicapped gradually. In Rita Banerji's book called *Sex and Power* she says "He (Gandhi) believed menstruation was a manifestation of the distortion of a woman's soul by her sexuality."⁷ Now there is little awareness about menstruation in our society. Surely Gandhi would not have known

then about the reproductive system of female body. But it is not like he did not have sources to know from. For example in 1935 Margaret Sanger, an American birth control activist and sex educator visited India, speaking with doctors and activists about birth control and the liberation of women. Her talk with Gandhi has been recorded in Ramachandra Guha's biography of Gandhi,⁸*Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World 1914-1948*. Both Gandhi and Sanger agreed that women should be the mistress of their own destiny but when Sanger proposed the idea of contraception, Gandhi objected saying women should resist their husbands and men should curb their 'animal passion'. Gandhi strongly believed that sex is only meant for procreation. Any other use is a sin against God and humanity. Gandhi argued that it is immoral to seek escape from the consequences of one's acts, and that the use of contraceptives kills the desire to exercise self-restraint.

4.3. **Gandhi's *Brahmachārya*:**

With age and after a continuous series of complete victory earned by the values and principles that a human being believes in, these beliefs becomes stagnant and the mind becomes rigid. The mind completely loses its flexibility and ability to see things with fresh perspective. Those beliefs becomes 'established' and 'absolute' to that particular person and to prove its worth the person does absolutely irrational and immoral things which starkly contradicts his previous opinions.

Gandhi was 38 when he took up celibacy without even consulting to his wife. This is the same man who said that men and women are complementary to each other and women are as important as men, but still did not feel the necessity to consult his wife about such important matter which obviously concerned her too. Gandhi, as mentioned earlier, despised sex and saw it no different from lust. This hatred sprouted from Gandhi's father death. When Karamchand was on his deathbed, Gandhi had this urge to make love to his wife. But when he came back, his father was no more. He encouraged men to take up celibacy, which is okay but what exactly is Gandhi's idea of celibacy? Encouraging is one thing and imposing is completely other thing. It is recorded that Gandhi in his ashrams made young boys and girls bathe together completely naked but they were not allowed to indulge in sexual talk. If they were caught doing so, they would be punished. Married couples were restricted to sleep together or have intercourse in the ashrams. Gandhi, used to do 'experiments' to test his resistance power would often ask young nubile girls

to sleep naked beside him. One of these women were his own grandniece! It's true that he initially encouraged women to say 'no' but characteristics develop gradually with time. No matter how humiliating it would have been for the women to shed their clothes, they possibly couldn't have said 'no' to the Father of the Nation! Minor girls even today are not able to say 'no' to their relatives for any such requests. Such behavior is not a characteristic of a *brahmachāri*. Gandhi re-defined the meaning of brahmacharya to fit his own personal practices. The concept of brahmacharya, according to him is, "One who never has any lustful intentions, who, by constant attendance upon God, has become proof against conscious or unconscious emissions, who is capable of lying naked with naked women, however beautiful, without being in any manner whatsoever sexually excited, who is making daily progress towards God and whose every act is done in pursuance of that end and no other." Gandhi's this behavior was criticized by his fellow politicians and even his followers. Some members of his staff and his followers resigned after the revelation of these practices. A female follower of Gandhi, Sushila was questioned in the 1970s about Gandhi's experiments to which she responded, "Later on when people started asking questions about his physical contact with women – with Manu, with Abha, with me, the idea of *brahmachārya* experiments were developed, in the early days there was no question of calling this a *brahmachārya* experiment."⁹ This absurd bizarre and illogical side of Gandhi is hard, very hard to comprehend. Because even now this behavior cannot be justified in any way. He was blinded by his principles beyond repair.

Conclusion:

Gandhi's views are so contradictory that it is hard to believe that this is the same man who talked about women not being an object of men. No doubt it was because of him that there was mass participation of women in the freedom struggles such Satyagraha and Dandi March. Gandhi did in fact a phenomenal job, fighting against child marriage and standing up for women's rights. The participation of women in the freedom moment was revolutionary. But in the end, Gandhi stood up for women from a patriarchal point of view. After all he still believed that women were responsible if someone attempts to rape them. Can we really say that Gandhi helped in the upliftment of women's status in India? For a person who was born in the period where these type of evil practices were rampant, initially he did an admirable job. But his views are still misogynistic in today's time. The worst part is he is the Father of the Nation, a national

idol whom people look up to. So if one argues that he was from a narrow-minded society, the harsh truth is, in the present people still give his example for various issues. For such a person to have such regressive views is not justifiable. He is the one who said that one must not blindly follow the rules, one should always follow those rules which are favored by reason. But his actions seem to be contradictory. Time has changed. Things change with time and so do the way of perceiving things. Gandhi's opinion about women have some good aspects and some extremely bad aspects. If we critically analyze the latter thoughts of Gandhi about the modern women with reason, turns out his thoughts and deeds were extremely immoral and inhumane and must be discarded. Gandhi's initial values and principles might have helped liberating women from the clutches of regressive social customs, but his later views concerning women is a big hindrance in the way towards proper freedom of women in today's independent India.

Notes and References:

1. As it is generally believed, however this will not go without contest.
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5. Nandela, Krishnan, "Gandhi on Women Empowerment" retrieved from https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/womens_empowerment.htm on 12.02.2019 at 15:00 IST.
6. Ibid.
7. Banerji, Rita, 2008, *Sex and Power*, Penguin Books, New Delhi.
8. Biswas, Soutik, 2018, "Gandhi Wanted Women to 'Resist' Sex for Pleasure", retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45469129> on 12.02.2019 at 15:05 IST.
9. Adams, Jad, 2011, *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*, Penguin Group, New Delhi.

