

GANDHI AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

By Krishnan Nandela

ABSTRACT

The perception of the self is a matter of conditioning. The way men and women perceive themselves is also a matter of conditioning that had and is taking place since the dawn of human race on earth. Given the biological differences, can woman be psychologically different from man? Can women be cerebrally inferior to man? I am sure that the answer would be clear 'No'. Yet, differential conditioning over many a millennia have contributed to the perception that both men and women are different, both psychologically and cerebrally. Religion, customs and laws from times immemorial had relegated women to the backyards of human civilization. **When you fear the power of the other and when you have no means to equal the other, you connive and lay traps for the subjugation of the other.** This is what the history of hitherto existing man's civilization has done to women, save exceptions like the Mahatma.

Unlike many other noble souls who wrote and worked with the principle of sexual equality in mind, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century.

This paper examines the importance and relevance of Gandhi's views on issues that directly or indirectly impacts the status of women in India.

The Research Methodology used for this research paper is analytical research. The views expressed by Mahatma Gandhi in his famous work "India of My Dreams" and a host of other books and articles written by Mahatma and other thinkers who wrote on the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi have been analyzed in this paper.

On a scale of one to ten, the Mahatma scores very highly for his views on the various aspects concerning women in our society. Considering the fact that he wrote his ideas about 70 to 80 years ago, we can set aside some of his retrograde views such as the women being a complement of men in matters of occupation and education and female chastity in the context of women's honor. **The Mahatma, by far, can be considered the best friend of women in India and the world.** The Mahatma's purity of thought and honest intentions are beyond question.

INTRODUCTION

*The perception of the self is a matter of conditioning. The way men and women perceive themselves is also a matter of conditioning that had and is taking place since the dawn of human race on earth. Given the biological differences, can woman be psychologically different from man? Can women be cerebrally inferior to man? I am sure that the answer would be clear 'No'. Yet, differential conditioning over many a millennia have contributed to the perception that both men and women are different, both psychologically and cerebrally. Religion, customs and laws from times immemorial had relegated women to the backyards of human civilization. **When you fear the power of the other and when you have no means to equal the other, you connive and lay traps for the subjugation of the other.** This is what the history of hitherto existing man's civilization has done to women, save exceptions like the Mahatma.*

*Unlike many other noble souls who wrote and worked with the principle of sexual equality in mind, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century. **The views expressed by the Mahatma and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely with the current times because the times have irreversibly changed but the honesty of the Mahatma, the love and respect he had for women can never be doubted.***

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his views and had written on numerous issues that concerned the Indian Society in particular and humanity in general. This paper examines the importance and relevance of his views on issues that directly or indirectly impacts the status of women in India. The following issues are being considered:

1. Equality of Sexes.
2. Marriage.
3. Purdah.
4. Dowry System.
5. Widow Remarriage.
6. Divorce.
7. Women's Honor.
8. Education and Co-education.
9. Birth Control.
10. Sterilization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Methodology used for this research paper is analytical research. The views expressed by Mahatma Gandhi in his famous work "India of My Dreams" and a host of other books and articles written by Mahatma and other thinkers who wrote on the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi have been analyzed in this paper.

THE MAHATMA ON WOMEN

The Mahatma said that women have been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. Rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and consultation. Women have been taught to regard themselves

as slaves of men. Women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of men. (Ref. Constructive program, pp. 17-18)

THE MAHATMA ON WIVES

Wives should not be dolls and objects of indulgence but should be treated as honored comrades in common service. The educationally ill-disposed should be educated by their husbands. The customary and legal status of women is bad and demands radical change. (Ref. Constructive program, pp. 17-18).

THE MAHATMA ON TRADITIONAL RULES AND REGULATIONS

Legislation has been mostly done by men and has not been always fair. The blemishes represented in our **Shastras** should be removed by women. Women of firm, pure and self-controlled character like **Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi** should be produced and they will be able to remove these blemishes from our Smritis.

Women are gifted with equal mental capacities and therefore she has equal rights. However, due to the force of custom, ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women. (Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, ps. 424-425).

MANUSMRITI ON WOMEN

The blemishes referred to by the Mahatma as obtained in Manusmriti can be found in Chapter IX which deals with the Eternal Laws for Husband and Wife. There are in all 336 verses in this Chapter which describes women in abysmally lowly words. While a great part of this body of laws are hateful and deserves to be immediately expunged, I must say that every Indian women and men must read Manusmriti to know what great damage it has done to women and Indian society. (Ref. Manusmriti translated by George Buhler, www.sacredtext.com).

1. EQUALITY OF SEXES

Women must not suffer any legal disability which is not suffered by men. Both are perfectly equal (**Young India, 17th October, 1929**). 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, 02nd 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.

2. MARRIAGE

Marriage is a sacrament. It is a natural thing in life (**Harijan, 22nd March, 1942**). Thinking of the state of affairs in our country, very few Indians need marry at the present time. **The purpose of marriage is to get progeny but all progeny that is born now is the issue of passion, mean and faithless.** Gandhi advised young men not to marry till 25 or 30. He preferred arranged marriages but the young man needs to be consulted by the parents if he is more than 25 (**A Handbook of Sarvodaya, Part-2, p55, compiled by Subhash Mehta**).

Marriage has become a contract between consenting individuals. It is an artificial fact of life. However, considering the fact that the population of India grew from 23 crores in 1891 to only 25 crores in 1921 and that from 25 crores in 1921 to 36 crores in 1951, a phenomenal increase in the latter period, the Mahatma was duly alarmed by the rapid increase in population and therefore was right in saying that “very few Indians need marry at the present time”. His views on the age at marriage for young men are however relevant to this day. His view that marriages should be arranged by parents and that a young man of more than 25 should be consulted by the parents reflects upon the fact that the Mahatma had a traditional view of life and that he wanted reforms within the tradition.

3. PURDAH

Chastity cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the Purdah. It must grow from within and it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation (**Young India, 3rd February, 1927**). Why is there all this morbid anxiety about **female purity**? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? Female or male purity cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self effort (**Young India, 25th November, 1926**).

The Indian man has been unduly obsessed with female chastity right from the ancient times. The Mahatma was different to the extent that he demanded male chastity also. That the Hindu Purdah or the Muslim Purdah cannot protect chastity and that only self-control and purity of mind can do that is absolutely right.

4. THE DOWRY SYSTEM

The dowry system is a product of the caste system. The abolition of caste will lead to the abolition of dowry (**Harijan, 23rd May, 1936**). Demanding dowry is akin to discrediting womanhood. Young men who demand dowry should be excommunicated. Parents of girls should cease to be dazzled by English degrees and should not hesitate to travel outside their little castes and provinces to secure true, gallant young men for their daughters (**Young India, 21st June, 1928**).

The Mahatma was a very complex personality. He expected the women to play a complementary role in the society and wanted women to scale the highest peaks of life in the female domain, not realizing the fact that the complementary status of women was a product of the caste system. However, when it came to the dowry system, he wanted the abolition of the caste system. He came down on the dowry system very strongly and wanted the dowry demanding husband to be ex-communicated. He advocated inter-caste marriages and expected gallantry or chivalry from men. He wanted women to wait till the ideal suitor comes. The Mahatma had a very sublime and soft view of women and did everything to protect the pleasing side of the traditions.

5. WIDOW REMARRIAGE

Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. In order to save Hinduism, enforced widowhood must be ridden. Child widows must be duly and well married and not remarried. They were never really married (**Young India, 5th August, 1926**).

One cannot have a better view on Widow Remarriage than what the Mahatma has presented. He was clearly against Child Marriages and wanted child widows to be well married because they were not really married. He was the man who led the country by example. In 1918, when Hiralal's wife died of influenza, he was fifty and wanted to remarry. Gandhi did not allow his son to remarry. He later on relented but wanted Hiralal to marry only a widow. Hiralal was emotionally bankrupt after his wife's death and took to alcohol and women, only to be found dead in the Sewree hospital in midtown Bombay (Mahatma Gandhi, His Life and by Times, p261 by Louis Fischer and Mahatama versus Gandhi, p15 by Dinkar Joshi).

6. DIVORCE

Marriage confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other. However, divorce is not the only alternative. Marriage is a state of discipline. When one partner breaks discipline, the other can break the bond. The breach here is moral and not physical. It precludes divorce. Hinduism regards each as absolute equal of the other. Hinduism leaves the individual absolutely free for the sake of self-realization, for which and which alone he or she is born (**Young India, 21st October, 1926**).

The Mahatma believed that marriage was not serfdom for men and women and that men and women had equal status. The loss of discipline is a moral breach and divorce is not a solution. Moral breach can be corrected by moral restraint and repentance. More importantly, he says that Hinduism offers the freedom of self-realization for both men and women. The Mahatma is clearly against any kind of male chauvinism.

7. WOMAN'S HONOR

It is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds in violating her, for example, Sita (**Harijan, 14th January, 1940**). When a woman is assaulted, her primary duty is self-protection. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and if need be, die in the effort (**Harijan, 01st March, 1942**).

Perhaps due to the overriding importance given to female chastity in the Indian society, the Mahatma emphasizes once again on female chastity and purity. His solution for the helpless woman under sexual assault to die before the violation takes place is a very traditional view of what women should do when they are sexually assaulted. It is akin to hara-kiri or jouhar. In the days of armed sexual assaults and gang or group sexual assaults on women, the Gandhian solution is no solution. Further, chastity is not an exclusively female virtue. The male person who assaults sexually also loses his chastity and therefore, he must also die. In fact, chastity as a virtue has been imposed upon women since times immemorial and has been the single most important cause of her degraded status in the society.

8. WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Education enables women to uphold their natural rights. Men and women are complementary to each other. Man is supreme in the outward activities and therefore he should have a greater knowledge thereof. Home life is entirely the sphere of woman and therefore in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children women ought to have more knowledge. Unless courses of instruction are based on a discriminating appreciation of these basic principles, the fullest life of man and woman cannot be developed (**Harijan, 27th Febraury, 1937**).

The Mahatma's views on women's education are definitely retrograde because he assumes that man is supreme in the extra-mural activities and that woman is supreme in intra-mural activities. Hence, education imparted to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life. The Mahatma wanted to remove the blemishes mentioned in Manusmriti, his views on women's education are no less than a blemish in the modern context and should also be removed.

9. BIRTH CONTROL

Brahmacharya is an infallible sovereign remedy. Artificial methods are like putting a premium upon vice. They make man and woman reckless. Adoption of artificial methods must result in imbecility and nervous prostration. The remedy will be found to be worse than the disease.

It is immoral to seek escape from the consequences of one's acts. Moral results can only be produced by moral restraints. All other restraints defeat the very purpose for which they are intended (**Young India, 12th March, 1925**). The use of contraceptives kills the desire to exercise self restraint. Man must understand that woman is his companion and not a means of satisfying his carnal desire. The purpose of human creation was wholly different from that of the satisfaction of animal wants (**Key to Health, pp.52-54**). Sex is only meant for creation. Any other use is a sin against God and humanity (**Harijan, 28th March, 1936**).

Woman must be taught the art of saying no even to her husband. She has rights as well as duties. The first thing is to free her from mental slavery, to teach her sacredness of her body and to teach her dignity of national service and the service of humanity (**Harijan, 02nd May, 1936**).

If Brahmacharya was to be taken as a solution to birth control, we would need to spiritualize India as a whole. Given the impossibility of the task, the Mahatma's solution of Brahmacharya, although virtuous in every sense of the term, can only be considered as one of the remedies of birth control.

10. STERILIZATION

I consider it inhuman to impose sterilization law on the people. 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** (**Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 12th January, 1935**).

*While the Mahatma conceded Sterilization for men because he thought that man was the **aggressor**, he was clearly against the use of contraceptives by women. His thoughts about self control and purity seems to have clouded his mind and prevented him from making practical big time solutions to big time problems like the problem of population explosion.*

The Mahatma was convinced about the need of self control in matters of sex. The overriding belief in self control was also because of his personal success in pursuing Brahmacharya. While self control is a very good solution, a virtuous solution by every means, it cannot be expected from the entire population. The Mahatma always led the society by example. In South Africa, a young Indian married woman successfully assaulted Manilal's continence (brahmacharya). When the dereliction was discovered, Gandhi made a public scandal, fasted, persuaded the woman to shave her hair and said he would never allow Manilal to marry. He only relented under Ba's pressure, in March 1927 when Manilal was thirty five.

CONCLUSION

On a scale of one to ten, the Mahatma scores very highly for his views on the various aspects concerning women in our society. Considering the fact that he wrote his ideas about 70 to 80 years ago, we can set aside some of his retrograde views such as the women being a complement of men in matters of occupation and education and female chastity in the context of women's honor. **The Mahatma, by far, can be considered the best friend of women in India and the world.** The Mahatma's purity of thought and honest intentions are beyond question.

REFERENCES

1. 'India of My Dreams' – A compilation of Gandhian writings by RK Prabhu, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. Eighth Reprint, May 2001. (Chapters 54 to 57).
2. 'A Handbook of Sarvodaya – Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayaprakash Narayan: The Triumverate of Sarvodaya' – A compilation by Subhash Mehta (P.No.55 – Social Institutions.)
3. 'Mahatma Gandhi – His Life and Times' by Louis Fischer.
4. 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth' by MK Gandhi.
5. 'Gandhi – A Life', by Krishna Kriplani
6. 'Mahatma versus Gandhi' by Dinkar Joshi, Jaico Publishing House, MG Road, Mumbai – 400 001.
7. 'A Tribute to Mahatma Gandhi: His Views on Women and Social Changes' by Sita Kapadia, Director, Self Enhancement Learning Forum, Houston, Texas, United States.
8. 'Gandhi and Women' by Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, an associate and follower of Gandhi.
9. 'Gandhi and Empowerment of Women' by KD Gangrade, Vice Chairman, Gandhi Smiriti and Darshan Samiti, Rajghat, New Delhi..
10. 'Gandhi and Women's Empowerment' by Jaya Jaitly.
11. 'Gandhi's Feminist Politics, Gender Equity and Patriarchal Values' by Kiran Saxena.
12. 'Women the Comrade' by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, an associate and follower of Gandhi.
13. Gandhi on Gender Violence and Gender Equality' by Dr. Anupama Kaushik, Reader in Political Science, Basnasthali University.
14. www.sacredtext.com

Bio:

Krishnan Nandela is working as an Associate Professor and Head, Department of Economics at Dr. TK Tope Arts & Commerce Night Senior College for the last 25 years. He has published 10 text Books on Economics for professional courses like BMM, BMS etc through Vipul Publications. He has also published several articles in ISSN and ISBN journals and seminar publications. The author can be reached at krishnannandela34@gmail.com.