



Theme of Emancipation of Women in the Writings of Gandhi

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Abstract

The arrival of Gandhi in the Indian political scenario ushered a new era of liberation and emancipation of women. He gave a new thrust to women's essentialist roles by aligning the feminine roles with the public life of the nation. Gandhi valorized these roles and made them visible in the public sphere. This is how Gandhi made women active agents in the process of formation of the nation. Gandhi's writings and speeches emphasize the existence of the 'feminine' as an important component in nation building. His ideas expressed in his writings and speeches developed women's confidence and generated a new thought process that later helped in the institutionalization of the women's movement. This paper attempts to analyze Gandhi's views on the emancipation of women through some of his writings in "Young India" and "Harijan".

Key words: private sphere, public sphere, agency, visible, emancipation

The position of women in India has experienced many fluxes during various phases of history. During the Rig Vedic age the status of women in the Indian sub continent had been that of dignity and importance. But the status of women declined through the years that followed, and the changes were of a very profound nature. This relegation continued till the later half of 19th century, when the western ideas, in some ways, motivated new ways of looking at the women question. The socio-religious movements like 'Brahmo Samaj' and 'Arya Samaj' paved the way for the process of emancipation of women.

The arrival of M.K. Gandhi on Indian political scenario ushered a renewed era of liberation and emancipation of women. He believed in the composite nature of nationalism and sought to mobilize class, caste, community and gender into a single cohesive political force. His form of nationalism was not designed for one section of the society; women were intricately connected with it. Gandhi asserted that it was this feminine strength which would act as a major political force to overpower the colonial rule. (Patel: 2000:304). When Gandhiji assumed the leadership, only 2% of the women could receive the light of education and they did not have an identity of their own. Women were the victims of widowhood, the purdah, prostitution, child marriage, the dowry system, economic bondage and material slavery. Gandhi believed that the difference between man and woman was only physical. He opined that intellectually, mentally and spiritually a woman is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity. He wanted women to outgrow the traditional responsibilities and participate in the affairs of the nation. Gandhi gave a new thrust to woman's essentialist roles by aligning the feminine roles with the life of the nation. Gandhi valorized these roles and made them visible in the public sphere. Gandhi was able to develop the idea that the spiritual and symbolic sustenance of the movement of non-co-operation lay vested in the hands of women: "If non violence is the law of our being, the future is with women" (Gandhi 1930 43: 219).

This paper attempts to analyze Gandhi's views on the emancipation of women through some of his writings in "Young India" and "Harijan."

Gandhi never had a specific programme for women, but women had an integral role to play in all his programmes. He brought women out of their homes and made them equal participants in all walks of life-social as well as political. Gandhi induced the feeling of self respect and consciousness of strength in the minds of women. In "Young India" (Dated 21- 07-1921) Gandhi wrote, "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 herself for man including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man." Again he wrote, "Refuse to be the slaves of your whims and fancies, and the slaves of man. come to your own and deliver your message again." Gandhi appealed to women to realize her place, "She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his." Gandhi emphasized on the capability of woman in nation building. He states, "Indian woman are not abalas. They are famous for the heroic deeds of the past, which they did not achieve with the help of the sword, but of character. Even today they help the nation in many ways. They can do some useful work by which they cannot only help themselves, but also the nation as a whole, thereby taking the country nearer the goal." There is no doubt that of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India, the most potent had been the field of non-violent action which Gandhi offered to women in his 'war' against British domination of India. Gandhi made women come out from their sheltered homes to stand the furnace of a fiery trial against the Raj without flinching.

Even socially conservative upper caste families applauded women's participation in the non-violent Gandhian movement. Devaki Jain has commented that Gandhi made it possible for women to come out of the narrow worlds of their homes to participate in a wider community. His success was less ideological than strategic; he drew on traditional symbols of female power, emphasized women's strength and appealed directly to them addressing them as self consciousness arbiters of their own destiny. Gandhi sought personal and ethical transformations of women not material ones. His call for the participation of women in the freedom struggle empowered women Gandhi drew on a non-violent feminine strength against the brute masculinity of British power.

Now, the paper will try to draw some light on the position of women before Gandhi. Structurally the Indian cultural framework was based on the division of gender roles analogues with the public and the private spheres. The private sphere was identified with women and imbued with feminine qualities, whereas the public sphere was associated with the external world and it was the men's domain. The denial of the right of education distinctively defined this rigid dichotomization of gender roles. Women had to abide by the rules of the scriptures which dictated strict confinement at home. Literatures on codes of conduct and law governed the life of women to make it more constricted and home bound (Manu). Social life, especially that of women, was determined by the dictates of these Brahmanical texts which legitimized and sanctioned the traditional customs which shaped the life of the women. The study of the patriarchal social system prevalent in 19th century India opens scope for understanding the position of women at that period of time. Patriarchy was sanctioned by the ancient sacred texts. Women played a passive and subordinate role. Marriage was pivotal to a women's life and spiritual merit could be earned only through the institution of marriage. Any girl who died without getting married was believed to turn into an evil spirit. Parents who kept their daughters at home until the age of eleven were censured socially. A woman's adult life was spent in child bearing. The birth of a daughter was considered to be a liability rather than an asset. Marriage was a lifetime commitment for women; on the other hand bigamy/polygamy received the sanction of the scriptures. There was no ban for remarriage of widowers at any time. Women had to undergo physical violence within the home. Women were required to do hard work whatever may be the socio- economic status The relationship of the wife with the husband was based on the ideal of husband worship and sacrifice. The women had no rights over the property. A daughter could not inherit ancestral property. She did not play a role in the economic process as a whole. Women were regarded as

objects of sexual gratification. They were confined to the inner space of the home and isolated from public life. Widowhood was a calamity in the life of a woman. The worst sufferers were the child widows. In the nineteenth century the main concern about parents were to get their daughters married to polygamous old men. Consequently these younger girls were victims of widowhood. Widowhood was seen as a condition which was related with the past sins of a woman. It was suspected that formal education encouraged them to write letters to men outside family, and even to elope with them. Even if the husband desired to educate his wife it was the wife's duty to resist out of respect for the elder women of the family. English learning was viewed as the height of offensive behaviour. The general condition of women in a community always reflects the progress of a community. A visionary like Gandhi aimed at the renovation of the Indian people in all spheres of life as he could not overlook this aspect of backwardness in Indian society.

Prior to Gandhi the problem of women was attended by a number of Individual social reformers as well as reform organizations, and much service had been rendered by them to uplift women from the general rut in which they had fallen for centuries due to ignorance and many historical reasons. According to Gandhi, a nation cannot progress until and unless, women are liberated from the social evils. According to him intellectually, mentally and spiritually women are equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity. In "Young India" he states that she must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man. "I cannot imagine Sita even wasting a single moment on pleasing Rama by physical charms." Advocating the equality of sexes he states in the "Harijan", "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality." In another powerful piece of writing in "Young India" he states, "if I was born a woman, I would rise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his plaything. I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart. I could not steal into my wife's heart until I decided to treat her differently than I used to do, and so I requested to her all her rights by dispossessing myself of all my so-called rights as her husband. And you see her today as simple as myself. You find no necklace, no fineries on her. I want you to be like that. Refuse to be slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slave of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, and don't go in for scents and lavender waters; if you (women) want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man, but humanity. Freedom is your birth-right. Man is born of woman; he is flesh of her flesh, and bone of her bone." Emphasizing on the complementary roles of man and woman he states in the Harijan "I do not envisage the wife, as a rule, following an advocacy independently of her husband. The care of the children, and the upkeep of the household are quite enough to fully engage all her energy. In a well-ordered society, the additional burden of maintaining the family ought not to fall on her. The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the woman to house-hold management, the two thus supplementing and complementing each other's labours nor do I see in this invasion of woman's rights or suppression of her freedom. The epitheses used in our literatures to describe a wife are Ardhangani, 'the better half and Sahadharamini', 'the helpmate'."

Gandhi affirmed the innate quality of sacrifice in women as positive forces. By extending these qualities to the public sphere, he attempted to establish woman's specific role in the life of the nation. Gandhi used the feminine qualities of compassion and renunciation to define women's political participation through activities like picketing in front of shops selling liquor and foreign clothes. Gandhi's writings and speeches assert the existence of the "feminine" as an important component in the life of the nation. He emphasized the private sphere of the home and child-bearing as an integral part of the nation.

Women's roles of "nurture" and "care" that restricted her to the private sphere were infused with new strength and meaning after Gandhi's entrance into the national arena. The valorization of these roles made women a significant force in the public sphere they could find new meanings in their life and perceive themselves as distinct subjects of the imagined nation. Thus, it enabled them to see their 'weaknesses' as strengths. This widened their horizon and generated a new thought process that later helped in the institutionalization of the women's movement.

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