
Women in Gandhi's Movement

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi played a positive role in changing women's image in society and polity at large. He played a constructive role in their image building. He made women aware of their rights as well as made them participate in nationalism.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, women, movement, India

Gandhiji played a creative role in the creation of women as a political entity. He believed in empowering women while making them creative members of the society. He believed that the Indian national movement faced crisis due to the backward condition of the womenfolk. In this mentality Gandhiji was far ahead of his time. The concept of womanhood in the 19th C was far backward and based on domestic work. They weren't equal status like their male counterpart. In his book 'Young India' he criticised the native menfolk of not considering the womenfolk as their compatriots. He even wanted women to have equal rights and treated Kasturba in comparison to other women. He gave 'Ba' equal rights and let her shape her destiny.

The Gandhiji's notion of womanhood was ahead of his times. He considered women had equal rights like men. Gandhiji was a custodian to the women's rights. He wanted women to have equal rights as the majority of the women population are unaware of the political rights. He considered men and women to be part and parcel of the same soul. Women are gifted with equal capabilities like the men. So they should be equal rights like men. They should not be debarred from the societal works merely on the grounds of customary old traditions. Men and women are complementary to each other. One will be incomplete without the other. They have contribution towards the society. He divided the spheres of work for women and men. He never believed any work separate for men and women. Even he never considered any work as manly or womanly.¹

He gave importance to family bondage, he considered women as home makers who would bring up their future generations. He considered to give up a healthy child mothers contribution is prime. Gandhiji even wanted women to economically independent. He considered the work of house wives and working women equally important, though the first one is honorary service. Gandhiji considered women as great leaders in their own capacity in their household. Gandhiji belonged to a period

when the age was of world wars. Ahimsa or nonviolence was considered as utopia. But he brought the concept of love and brotherhood as his guiding principles. He considered women as the representation of Ahimsa. The women have the qualities of sacrifice, bearing pain, and courage to safeguard her family and nation at large in times of crisis. Gandhiji opined that societal upliftment will not be possible without women's amelioration. Gandhiji had contact with the grassroots. So he had direct knowledge of the conditions of the women of the peripheries. He emphasizes on the means which was based on honesty and nonviolence. Women were more patient, gentle according to him. He introduced nonviolence in political front and this flag of nonviolence was carried forward by the women more than men.²

He criticised menfolk for labelling women as weaker. He even said to the extent that nonviolence is the power of the strong people not of the weak. Women themselves weren't aware of their rights. Gandhiji made them aware of their rights. So during the Swadeshi movement women participated whole heartedly than the menfolk. They wove in charka and in this way became economically independent. He brought the best version of native women in front of the menfolk and the colonisers.³

He felt pity for the womenfolk who were made to feel happy for not being granted any rights. The women were made to feel glad for not allowing any rights. Women were representative of peace in the society. He believed that women were given the power of ahimsa by nature. The mothers of India are ready to sacrifice anything for the sake the freedom. The idea of swadeshi was best implemented by the womenfolk. The congress under the leadership of Gandhiji introduced women into mainstream politics. The three distinct characteristics of the Gandhian movement are worth mentioning. He introduced the concept of Deshpuja and concept of Shakti which made the women entry in politics easier.

Women were more devoted to the national issue, Gandhiji considered women as silent flag bearer of ahimsa. He considered women more eligible for nationalism. Women leaders like Basanti Devi and Hemaprobha Debi were among the women freedom fighters who came to the fore front. Kasturba Gandhi worked in Gujrat for the economic upliftment. Sister-in-law of Basanti Debi, Urmila Debi took part in women empowerment programmes. Hemaprabha Mazumder organised Mahila Karmi Sansad (1922) for vocational training. She was the greatest associate of Sarojini Naidu. These two women along with Kamala Debi Chattopadyay were the main leaders of the nationalism. In Midnapur boycott was the initiative taken by the womenfolk. In Dhaka Ashalata Sen spread the philosophy of Gandhi and noncooperation with the Britishers among the masses. The womenfolk were always besides Gandhiji in his thick and thin.⁴

From 1914 women in the nationalism surpassed men in their will power. Women forgetting their caste, class, creed voluntarily accepted non violence. He raised his voice against injustices meted out to the womenfolk. He questioned the *purda*⁵ system prevalent among the women in India. He was also against child marriage and dowry system. He even questioned the education system which didnot promote value education among masses. He even wanted more spinsters⁶. He was in support of widow remmariage. He questioned the double standard of the societal norms in regard to men and women. With regard to the existence of brothel and prostitutes he condemned the male for it. He condemned the concept of devdasis⁷. In the name of religion brahmins were practising prostitution. He emphasized on reasoning rather than following blindly the age old tradition.

Gandhiji was a person who not only made laws but practiced it. Satyagraha was therefore a tool to change the societal approach to the women as well as against the Britishers. His views reflected his respect for the women. His letters to his Ashram sisters like Manibehn, Mirabehn, Amrit Kaur prove his respect for the womenfolk⁸. Gandhiji introduced women's right to vote in Congress session in Karachi. All these was implemented by the constitution of Independent India. Therefore we find Gandhiji played a positive role in shaping the lives of the women folk.

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4. Mahadev Desai, The Diary, Vol 1, Navjivan trust, 1953
5. Purdah was the system of keeping women under veil in antahpur/interior.
6. Spinsters are unmarried women
7. Devdasis were temple prostitutes, run in the name of religion
8. K.Kalelkar (ed.)To Ashram sisters, Ahmedabad, 1960