



RESEARCH PAPER

**GANDHIJÍ'S VISION ON GENDER BIAS AND SOCIAL EVILS**

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Gender bias is a partiality or chauvinism toward one sex over the other. Bias can be cognisant or cataleptic, and may manifest in numerous ways, both subtle and apparent. It is a primeval problem. There are two main disparities as pointed out by Amartya Sen: educational inequality and health inequality. In India irrespective of the caste, creed, religion and social status, the overall status of a woman is lower than men and therefore a male child is preferred over a female child. Mahatma Gandhi paid attention towards these issues and raised his voice against the disparities regarding women. He tried to enlighten the society and encouraged women to empower themselves. My paper's focus is on his opinions on gender disparity and social evils persisted in his life time.

**Keywords:** *Gandhiji-Gender Disparity- Social Evils- Women Empowerment.*

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"To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior." (Mahatma, vol.3, p.33)  
-Gandhiji

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi revered as Mahatma Gandhi was not only one of the greatest leaders of Indian independence but a foremost social and political reformer, who struggled to purge the Indian society of its intrinsic evils. Throughout his life,

he fought for the enhancement of the socially downtrodden, and to bring revolutionary change in the status of women in all walks of life India. When he entered the political scene, he observed the condition of women in a pathetic state. Social evils like gender bias, child marriage and dowry system were rampant. Indian women had an average life span of only twenty seven years. Death of women in labor was a common phenomenon. The percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. They were treated as subordinates and



treated as inferior sex under the patriarchal system. Gandhiji believed that India's deliverance depends on the forfeit and elucidation of her women.

Gandhiji was absolutely divergent to gender discrimination. He described prejudice against women as an 'anachronism'. He said:

"I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and for mourning over the birth of a daughter. Both are God's gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going."<sup>1</sup>

According to Gandhi a Woman is an embodiment of 'sacrifice' and 'ahimsa'. He thought believed that a daughter's share in the property must be equal to that of a son. The husband's earnings are a cooperative property of husband and wife as he makes money by her support. In spirituality woman is superior to man. He says "woman is the incarnation of non violence i.e. Ahimsa. Gandhi opined that Gender justice is possible with mutual co-operation and consultation".

Gandhiji advocated against child marriage and widowhood and practice of 'Sati' which were in practice. Prof. Yogendra Yadav in his blog on "Social Evil of Child Marriage and Mahatma Gandhi" quotes Gandhi's comment on child marriages:

A girl of fifteen can never be fit for delivery. A child born of such a girl is deficient in vitality. Our children are so sickly that bringing them up becomes a veritable job indeed, with the result that many children die within a year of their birth. Along with child-marriage, we should hold ill-matched unions responsible for the deaths of a great many infants. It is not at all surprising that the children of men who marry when they are no longer fit for marriage do not survive.... If, however, it were literally followed in practice, Hindu society would have no men at all."<sup>2</sup>

In his opinion, child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as much as a moral evil. With the efforts of reforms like Gandhi **The Child Marriage Restraint Act**, also called the **Sarada Act**, came into force on April 1, 1930 to prevent child marriages. Gandhiji opposed

dowry system, one of the rampant evils not only of those times but today also. Dr. Meena Gaikwad in her book *The Ideas of Modern Indian Political Thinkers on women* mentioned that 'Gandhi preferred girls to remain unmarried all their lives than to be humiliated and dishonoured by marrying men who demanded dowry...He advocated that the system has to go and marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by parents for money.'(p.240) He found dowry marriages "heartless". He opined that the system is confidentially coupled with caste. So long as the choice is limited to a few hundred young men or young women of a particular caste, the system will persist, no matter what is said against it. The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be exterminated.

Gandhi was exceptionally agitated by the predicament of the widows, particularly child widows. He set forth a formal entreaty to the young generation to wed the widows. He was also relatively optimistic about the enormous potentials of the widows in supplementing nationalised issues. He also opposed the systems of Sati and purdah. He found the pedigree of the 'sati' practice in the selfishness of men. He argued that 'if wife must prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, then the husband must also prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife'. Gandhi believed:

To prove her sati hood or loyalty she must not mount the funeral pyre of her dead husband but prove it through utilization of every opportunity to add to her stock of knowledge and increase her capacity for cultivating renunciation and self discipline."<sup>3</sup>

He supposed that 'sati' was a pointless custom because instead of restoring the dead husband to life, it takes away one more life. He believed that 'sati hood is the acne of purity. As purity cannot be attained or realized by dying but can be attained only



through constant striving, constant immolation of spirit from day to day'.

Gandhi thought purdah system a "vicious, brutal and barbarous" practice and commented:

It denied women freedom as well as free gift of God like light and fresh air. It also crippled the free movement of women; interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing useful work for the society. It weakened instead of strengthening morality for it did not help in preserving chastity as chastity is not a hot-house growth and cannot be superimposed.<sup>4</sup>

Another evil Gandhiji thought of opposing was prostitution. He regarded prostitution as a 'social disease or moral leprosy promoted by men who lack morality. He felt it to be a matter of bitter shame, sorrow and humiliation that a number of women have to sell their chastity for men's lust'. He condemned prostitution as well as cabaret but apprehended that men were liable for driving women into flesh trade. He recommended women to renounce this vocation and start living by spinning khadi. He assumed that such women can be transformed by getting social recognition by involvement in a righteous cause and by initialising opportunities of education and employment. Gandhiji thought that education was essential to stimulate the minds of women about their present condition. He believed that education will enable them to state their natural right and to apply them wisely and to work for their growth. However he also understood that as home life is exclusively the field of women, they ought to have awareness concerning domestic affairs and rearing of children. Hence courses of instruction should be based on an appreciation of basic roles of men and women.

Gandhiji requested women 'to cease to consider themselves the object of men's lust. (Agrawal, C. M: 2000). They should stop adorning themselves to please their husbands and others. He believed it will save women from subordination of men and wives would be saved from beating by their husbands (Jain, Pratibha:1985). He thought

ornaments to be a source of submission plus coercion. He believed that Indian women had vigour, aptitude, spirit and fortitude to stand on their own and work 'shoulder to shoulder with men in every walk of life'. He had full faith in their sincerity and was sure that they would not lag behind in ideal performance.

Gandhi encouraged women to partake in freedom struggle. His views on the woman's role in independence were complex and rooted in the concept that she personified the spiritual and moral courage of Sita and Draupadi-the mythological heroines of Hinduism. Madhu Kishwar wrote in her article on "Gandhi on Women":

Representing Gandhi's perception of the ideal Indian woman, female followers were encouraged to embody the "pure, firm and self-controlled" virtues symbolized by these heroines, He urged women to be as "self-reliant" as Draupadi and upholders of "superior moral courage" as seen in the chaste Sita."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Mahatma used spiritual and conventional codes of Indian womanhood to convey a complex "socio-political message". Prominent women like Annie Besant., Kasturba Gandhi, Madam Cama, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Nehru, Sucheta Kriplani, Swarup Rani Nehru and other women participated in the freedom struggle. They put in practice, the ideals of Gandhi, the beacon light of cherished women's upliftment and empowerment.

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