Mahatma Gandhi’s Philosophy On Women

Women for Mahatma Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like faith, sacrifice, humility, tolerance and knowledge. ‘Women are the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. He admired women’s qualities of self-suffering and spirituality, as can be seen by his words that to me the female sex is not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two. According to Mahatma Gandhi to call women the weaker sex is libel. It is man's injustice to women. The capability of enduring suffering can be witnessed only in women. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained prevalence. For Mahatma Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Men and women both are the complements of each other. The wife is not the husband's slave but she is the companion of man and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows. She is as free as the husband to choose her own path. She has the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of man. Gandhi is the champion of the rights of women as equal partner of men. Mahatma Gandhi cited the instances of ancient role models who were embodiments of Indian womanhood like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi to show that Indian women could never be feeble.

In detail, the first Non Co-operation Movement of 1921, Mahatma Gandhi Consciously involved women in an attempt to link their struggle with struggle for national independence, but the programme for women was devised in a way that they could remain at home and still contribute to the movement. As a part of Non Co-operation, Congressmen were asked to boycott government educational institutions, law courts and legislatures, and to defy the government and its unjust laws in a peaceful manner, but the constructive programme of Swadeshi pivoted around boycott of goods, and the spinning and weaving of Khadi. The restoration of spinning to its central place in India’s peaceful campaign for deliverance from the imperial yoke gives her women a special status. He sees women as a potential resource for the success of his moments both political and social and advocates their increased participation.

However Mahatma Gandhi’s socio-political philosophy, as far as he addresses to the question of gender equality is progressive but constructed on patriarchal values. According to Mahatma Gandhi, a woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed that the happiness of mankind will be realized only when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the companion of the other. In fact, one cannot live without the other’s active help. As souls man and woman are equal. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone – both men, as well as women. Since nature has created sexes as complements of each other, their functions are also defined as are their forms. Mahatma Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. Taking a critical and rational approach, Mahatma Gandhi said that ‘it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide.’

Mahatma Gandhi remarked that the wages payable to women for an hour’s spinning should be the same as are paid to men and we know that equal wages for equal work is an important aspect of feminist thought. He remarked, the times have changed when man was regarded as

woman’s master. That we do not admit this is a different matter. God has made man and woman one complete whole. One must not lord over the other. Woman thought Mahatma Gandhi is the personification of strength, endurance and self-sacrifice but she does not realize what tremendous strength she possesses. Once a woman realizes this, she can exhibit to the world the infinite strength that is latent in her. The beauty of a woman does not consist in the beauty of her clothes and jewellery, but in the purity of her heart. It was this immense faith in Mahatma Gandhi laid emphasis on the dignity of household work i.e. both men and women need to be educated equally in homework because the home belongs to both. Mahatma Gandhi strongly felt that men must participate in the house work and reduce the drudgery of women’s homework. Therefore Mahatma Gandhi even a century before could perceive the hardships that woman would face performing the dual responsibility i.e. of a home maker and of a professional woman contributing towards the economic subsistence of the family. Until and unless men come forward and show their participation, willingly and happily, in performing domestic tasks as well as rearing and bringing up of children, Mahatma Gandhi’s ideal of woman as a home maker may act as a protective shield for her. Mahatma Gandhi had suggested that woman has a right to decide for herself. She may remain single and fulfil her wishes of being a progressive working woman.

There is something in Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas that is essentially radical. He did not see women as helpless objects of reform. Neither did he think of bringing change only in some spheres of life such as marriage or education. His vision of change was comprehensive. He connected the moral with the political, the social and the economic, presenting an eclectic view of life.