

## **Mahatma Gandhi and Women: An Intertwined Narrative of Transformation in Modern India**

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### **Abstract:**

*Mahatma Gandhi, the preeminent leader of India's independence movement, remains a globally celebrated figure for his unwavering commitment to non-violent resistance. While his philosophy of Satyagraha propelled India towards freedom, Gandhi's influence extended far beyond the political realm. This paper delves into the multifaceted relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and women in the context of modern India. Examining his writings, speeches, and interactions with women, the study illuminates Gandhi's evolving perspectives on gender roles, his advocacy for women's rights, and the profound impact his movement had on their lives. By analyzing historical data, personal accounts, and scholarly interpretations, the paper argues that Gandhi's legacy vis-à-vis women remains complex and contested, marked by both progressive strides and lingering limitations. Ultimately, understanding Gandhi's engagement with women provides crucial insights into the socio-cultural transformations that unfolded in India during the tumultuous period of decolonization and beyond.*

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Indian Women, Nationalism, Gender Roles, Social Reform, Independence Movement, Satyagraha, Patriarchy, Tradition, Modernity

### **Introduction**

Mahatma Gandhi, revered as the "Father of the Nation" in India, stands as an undisputed icon of non-violent resistance. His philosophy of Satyagraha, advocating truth, love, and non-violent resistance, not only spearheaded India's struggle for independence but also resonated across the globe, inspiring movements for civil rights and social justice. While Gandhi's political achievements have been extensively documented, his views on women and the impact of his movement on their lives remain an intricate and often debated aspect of his legacy. This

paper seeks to unravel the complex relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and women, exploring how their narratives intertwined to shape the landscape of modern India.

Gandhi's engagement with women was profoundly influenced by his personal experiences, his evolving interpretation of Hindu scriptures, and the socio-cultural milieu of colonial India. Drawing upon his autobiography, letters, speeches, and the writings of his contemporaries, this study analyzes the evolution of Gandhi's views on women's roles, rights, and potential. Furthermore, it examines how his philosophy and activism provided a platform for women to challenge traditional norms, participate in the nationalist movement, and contribute to the nation-building process. By delving into historical data, personal accounts, and scholarly interpretations, this paper argues that Gandhi's legacy vis-à-vis women is multifaceted and complex, embodying both progressive advancements and enduring limitations.

This exploration begins by situating Gandhi's early life and influences within the context of prevailing social norms concerning women in late 19th and early 20th century India. It then delves into his evolving relationship with his wife, Kasturba Gandhi, and the influence she exerted on his philosophies. Moving forward, the paper analyzes Gandhi's interactions with other prominent women of the time, including Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Mirabehn, highlighting how these relationships shaped his views on women's capabilities and leadership potential.

The subsequent sections focus on Gandhi's active encouragement of women's participation in the non-cooperation movement and the Salt Satyagraha. Drawing upon statistical data and anecdotal evidence, the paper examines the unprecedented numbers of women who joined the freedom struggle, defying societal expectations and facing imprisonment, violence, and social ostracism. This analysis delves into the transformative impact of these experiences on women's lives, highlighting their growing political consciousness and their claims to public space.

The paper then critically examines the inherent contradictions within Gandhi's philosophy concerning women. While he advocated for their education, economic empowerment, and participation in public life, his views on issues like sexuality, marriage, and ideal womanhood remained rooted in traditional Hindu values. This section analyzes the critiques leveled against Gandhi by feminist scholars who argue that his emphasis on feminine virtues like sacrifice and self-suffering perpetuated patriarchal structures and limited women's agency.

Despite these limitations, Gandhi's impact on women's lives extended far beyond the realm of politics. His emphasis on Khadi, village industries, and Hindu-Muslim unity had significant social and economic implications for women. This section explores how Gandhi's constructive program provided opportunities for women's economic empowerment and fostered inter-community harmony.

Finally, the paper concludes by examining Gandhi's enduring legacy in the context of contemporary India. It analyzes how his ideas continue to influence debates surrounding women's rights, gender equality, and social justice. By acknowledging both the progressive strides and the lingering limitations of Gandhi's legacy, this paper aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of his complex relationship with women and their shared narrative of transformation in modern India.

### **Gandhi's Early Life and Influences:**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar, a coastal town in Gujarat, during a period of significant social and political upheaval in India. British colonialism had firmly established itself, and traditional Indian society was grappling with the challenges of modernity. Growing up in a devout Hindu family, Gandhi imbibed the prevailing social norms that emphasized women's roles as wives and mothers, relegating them primarily to the domestic sphere. His own mother, Putlibai, embodied the virtues of piety, selflessness, and submissiveness that were expected of women from upper-caste Hindu families.

Gandhi's early marriage to Kasturba Makanji at the tender age of thirteen further shaped his understanding of gender roles. In his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi candidly reflects on his initial attempts to control Kasturba, his possessiveness, and his struggles to reconcile his evolving beliefs with the dynamics of their relationship (Gandhi, 1927). This early period of his life was marked by a patriarchal mindset, viewing women as subservient to men and confined within the boundaries of domesticity.

However, Gandhi's experiences in England, where he studied law, exposed him to new ideas about individual liberty, social reform, and women's rights. The suffragette movement, demanding voting rights for women, was gaining momentum in England, challenging

Victorian notions of femininity and domesticity. While Gandhi did not actively engage with the suffragettes, their struggle for equality likely planted seeds of change in his mind.

Gandhi's deep engagement with the Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu scripture emphasizing duty, selflessness, and non-violence, further influenced his evolving worldview. He interpreted the Gita's message of universal love and compassion as a call for social justice and equality, extending beyond the confines of caste, class, and gender. These early experiences laid the foundation for Gandhi's evolving perspectives on women, setting the stage for his later advocacy for their rights and recognition.

### **Kasturba Gandhi: A Life Intertwined with Satyagraha**

Kasturba Gandhi, affectionately known as "Ba," played a pivotal role in shaping Mahatma Gandhi's life and philosophy. Initially, their relationship reflected the traditional power dynamics prevalent in Indian society. Gandhi, in his early years of marriage, exhibited controlling behavior, seeking to mold Kasturba into his ideal of an obedient wife. However, as Gandhi embarked on his journey of self-discovery and spiritual growth, Kasturba emerged as a pillar of strength and a source of inspiration.

In South Africa, where Gandhi spent two decades (1893-1914) fighting racial discrimination against Indians, Kasturba actively participated in his Satyagraha campaigns, enduring imprisonment and hardship alongside him. She defied social norms by participating in protests, mobilizing Indian women, and tending to the sick and wounded. Witnessing her courage and resilience firsthand challenged Gandhi's own preconceived notions about women's capabilities. He began to recognize the strength and fortitude inherent in women, qualities that he initially associated primarily with men.

Kasturba's unwavering commitment to Gandhi's principles extended beyond her role as his wife. She embraced simplicity, wearing Khadi, and actively engaging in community service. Her involvement in the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm, experimental communities established by Gandhi, exemplified her commitment to his ideals of self-sufficiency and communal harmony.

Throughout their lives, Kasturba continued to challenge Gandhi's views on various issues, including his strict adherence to celibacy, his emphasis on self-suffering, and his occasional disregard for her personal needs. While she remained deeply devoted to him and his cause, she

did not shy away from expressing her opinions and engaging in spirited debates with him. This dynamic within their relationship, though not without its challenges, contributed to Gandhi's evolving understanding of women as individuals with their own agency and perspectives.

In the later years of their lives, as India marched towards independence, Kasturba stood beside Gandhi as a symbol of feminine strength and resilience. She actively participated in the Quit India Movement, facing imprisonment once again. Her deteriorating health, however, became a source of immense pain for Gandhi. Her death in 1944 while under house arrest in Pune marked a profound personal loss for him.

Kasturba's life and sacrifices left an enduring legacy, demonstrating the pivotal role women played in India's independence struggle. Her unwavering commitment to Gandhi's principles, coupled with her willingness to challenge his views, contributed to his evolving understanding of women's strength, resilience, and capacity for leadership.

### **Gandhi's Interactions with Prominent Women:**

Beyond his relationship with Kasturba, Mahatma Gandhi interacted with and was influenced by a diverse group of remarkable women who played significant roles in India's nationalist movement and social reform initiatives. These women, hailing from various backgrounds and holding diverse views, challenged Gandhi's thinking, inspired him, and contributed to the evolution of his philosophy.

Sarojini Naidu, a poet, feminist, and political activist, shared a close bond with Gandhi. Known for her eloquence and sharp wit, Naidu actively participated in Gandhi's Satyagraha campaigns, leading protests, delivering fiery speeches, and facing imprisonment alongside him. Her ability to command attention and inspire audiences, traditionally considered a masculine trait, impressed Gandhi. He recognized her leadership qualities and entrusted her with important responsibilities within the Indian National Congress.

Annie Besant, a British socialist and theosophist who made India her home, played a crucial role in shaping Gandhi's political ideology. A staunch advocate for Indian self-rule, Besant founded the Home Rule League, demanding greater autonomy for India within the British Empire. Gandhi drew inspiration from Besant's unwavering commitment to justice and

equality. Her leadership within the Home Rule movement demonstrated the power of women to mobilize masses and challenge colonial authority.

Mirabehn, born Madeline Slade, was a British woman deeply moved by Gandhi's philosophy. Renouncing her privileged life in England, she traveled to India to become his disciple. Mirabehn's unwavering dedication, her willingness to embrace Indian customs, and her tireless work in Gandhi's ashrams challenged Western stereotypes about women's roles. She played a crucial role in promoting Khadi and village industries, demonstrating the potential for women's contributions to economic self-reliance.

These women, along with many others who crossed paths with Gandhi, challenged his preconceived notions about women's capabilities and leadership potential. Their courage, intellect, and unwavering commitment to social justice inspired Gandhi and contributed to his evolving understanding of gender roles.

### **Women's Participation in the Freedom Struggle:**

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, emphasizing non-violent resistance and civil disobedience, resonated deeply with Indian women from all walks of life. Gandhi actively encouraged women to participate in the freedom struggle, recognizing their strength in numbers and their moral authority as upholders of truth and justice. His call to action unleashed an unprecedented wave of female participation in the nationalist movement, transforming the socio-political landscape of India.

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922) marked a turning point in women's engagement with politics. Gandhi's call for a boycott of British goods, institutions, and laws resonated deeply with women who played a central role in promoting the use of Khadi, spinning their own cloth, and picketing liquor shops. Thousands of women from all sections of society, including housewives, students, teachers, and even affluent women from elite families, joined the movement, defying societal expectations and facing social ostracism, imprisonment, and violence at the hands of the British authorities.

The Salt Satyagraha of 1930 witnessed even greater participation from women. Gandhi's iconic march to Dandi, protesting the British salt tax, galvanized the nation. Women played a central role in this movement, marching alongside men, selling illegal salt, and enduring police brutality. The images of ordinary women, many of them illiterate and from marginalized

communities, courageously confronting British authority captured the world's attention, exposing the brutality of colonial rule and highlighting the moral strength of Gandhi's non-violent resistance.

Historians estimate that tens of thousands of women participated in the Salt Satyagraha, with many facing imprisonment. Official records from the period indicate a significant increase in the number of women arrested and incarcerated for their involvement in the movement. For instance, in 1930 alone, over 90,000 people were arrested in connection with the Salt Satyagraha, and while the exact number of women remains difficult to ascertain, historical accounts suggest that they constituted a significant proportion of those imprisoned (Kumar, 1997).

These experiences had a profound impact on the lives of Indian women. Participating in the freedom struggle instilled in them a sense of self-worth, empowerment, and national belonging. Breaking free from the confines of their homes, they challenged traditional gender roles and claimed their rightful place in the public sphere.

### **The Complexities and Contradictions in Gandhi's Views:**

While Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy for women's participation in the nationalist movement and his recognition of their strength and resilience were undoubtedly progressive for his time, his overall philosophy concerning women remains complex and marked by inherent contradictions. While he encouraged their education, economic empowerment, and leadership in certain spheres, his views on issues like sexuality, marriage, and ideal womanhood remained deeply rooted in traditional Hindu values.

Gandhi's emphasis on chastity and celibacy, central to his philosophy of self-control and spiritual growth, had significant implications for women's lives. He viewed sexual desire as a distraction from the pursuit of higher ideals and advocated for strict self-control, even within marriage. While he considered both men and women capable of achieving this ideal, his writings and speeches often placed a greater burden on women to control their sexuality and remain pure.

Gandhi's views on marriage also reflected traditional Hindu values. He considered marriage a sacred institution, primarily meant for procreation and companionship. While he acknowledged the possibility of love and companionship within marriage, he did not view romantic love as a prerequisite for a successful union. He believed that women's primary duty lay in fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, providing support and stability to their husbands and raising virtuous children.

Furthermore, Gandhi's idealized image of womanhood, often articulated in his writings and speeches, emphasized virtues like selflessness, sacrifice, and suffering. He often compared women to Sita, the mythical queen from the epic Ramayana, who endured immense suffering with fortitude and remained devoted to her husband, Rama. While Gandhi praised these qualities as sources of strength, feminist scholars have argued that his emphasis on feminine virtues like self-sacrifice and suffering reinforced patriarchal structures and limited women's agency (Sharma, 1994).

These contradictions within Gandhi's philosophy have been the subject of much debate and criticism. Critics argue that his views on sexuality, marriage, and ideal womanhood, while seemingly rooted in a desire to elevate women's spiritual status, ultimately perpetuated patriarchal norms and limited their choices. However, it is important to note that Gandhi's views were constantly evolving, influenced by his interactions with women, his own experiences, and the changing socio-political landscape of India.

### **Gandhi's Legacy and Contemporary India:**

Mahatma Gandhi's legacy concerning women remains a subject of ongoing debate and interpretation in contemporary India. While his contribution to India's independence struggle and his advocacy for women's participation in the public sphere are widely acknowledged, his views on issues like sexuality, marriage, and ideal womanhood continue to be scrutinized through a modern lens.

Gandhi's emphasis on women's education and economic empowerment laid the foundation for later feminist movements in India. His advocacy for women's right to vote, property ownership, and participation in politics paved the way for significant legal reforms that have empowered women in post-independence India.



However, Gandhi's views on issues like chastity, celibacy, and ideal womanhood are often seen as outdated and patriarchal in contemporary India. Feminist scholars and activists argue that his emphasis on these virtues reinforced traditional gender roles and limited women's agency. They criticize his idealization of the self-sacrificing, suffering woman, arguing that it perpetuated patriarchal structures that continue to disadvantage women.

Despite these critiques, Gandhi's legacy continues to inspire generations of Indians, including women, who see in him a symbol of non-violent resistance, social justice, and moral integrity. His emphasis on truth, non-violence, and compassion resonate deeply in a world grappling with violence, inequality, and injustice.

In contemporary India, women continue to draw inspiration from Gandhi's life and teachings. Women's rights activists often invoke his name and his philosophy of Satyagraha in their fight for equality, justice, and an end to violence against women. The spirit of non-violent resistance that he championed remains a potent force in the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and women represents a complex and multifaceted narrative that shaped the course of modern India. Examining Gandhi's life, writings, and interactions with women reveals a gradual evolution in his views, from a traditional patriarchal mindset towards a more nuanced understanding of women's capabilities and their rightful place in society. While he initially embraced conventional gender roles, his experiences in South Africa, his evolving interpretation of Hindu scriptures, and his close association with remarkable women like Kasturba Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, and Annie Besant, broadened his perspectives.

Gandhi's active encouragement of women's participation in the nationalist movement, exemplified by their unprecedented involvement in the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Salt Satyagraha, empowered a generation of women. These experiences instilled in them a sense of self-worth, challenged traditional gender roles, and contributed significantly to the advancement of women's rights in India. However, Gandhi's legacy concerning women remains marked by inherent contradictions. His views on sexuality, marriage, and ideal womanhood, often rooted in traditional Hindu values, have drawn criticism for perpetuating patriarchal structures and limiting women's agency.

Despite these limitations, Gandhi's impact on women's lives extended far beyond the political realm. His emphasis on Khadi, village industries, and Hindu-Muslim unity fostered economic opportunities for women and promoted social harmony.

In contemporary India, Gandhi's legacy continues to shape debates surrounding gender equality, women's rights, and social justice. While his views on certain issues may appear outdated through a modern lens, his emphasis on non-violent resistance, truth, and compassion continues to inspire generations of women fighting for a more just and equitable society. Ultimately, understanding the intricate relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and women provides crucial insights into the socio-cultural transformations that unfolded in India during the tumultuous period of decolonization and continue to shape the nation's journey towards achieving true gender equality.

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