**Title: “The Sublimity of Indian Women in Gandhian Thought: A New Approach in Indian Freedom Struggle”**

**Abstract:**

Mahatma Gandhi is undoubtedly the father figure of Indian Freedom movement. His advent from Africa changed the mood and dimension of Indian Freedom Struggle. He was the ardent exponent of Woman emancipation through their participation in political movements. He dreamed of an India where the Women would have equal right as per with their male counterparts. Gandhi, for the first time in Indian politics, felt the urgent necessity to uphold the Indian Women in the forefront of Indian Freedom struggle. The lady leaders like Sarojini Naidu. Lakshmi Menon, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sushila Nayar, Sucheta Kripalini, Aruna Asaf Ali, Usha Mehta and also millions of Indian Women who shaped the colour of Indian Freedom Struggle, were by and large influenced by the Gandhian Thought. It is only for Gandhi, the Indian Women regained their ancient inheritance of power, capability and all round development. Gandhi made the Indian Freedom Struggle a ‘unique’ by incorporating the Women into the sublime path of Nation building.

**Keywords:** Gandhi, Women empowerment, Women Consciousness, Women’s question, Women’s Emancipation, Nation building, National Consciousness, Freedom, Gandhian thought, Father of the Nation.

**Introduction:**

Before the advent of Gandhi, in Indian Politics, the Political Voice of the Indians was lacking sharpness to combat the diplomatic Colonial imperialism. Though The Indian National Congress came into existence (1885 A.D.), it failed to uphold the demands of the people. The split within the leadership of the then Congress helped the British to fulfill their goals and tactics. On that particular scenario, the Indians were struggling to raise their voice against the colonial oppression. The Women were not taken into account to fight against the British Policies. The Social reformers like Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phula, Gobinda Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati were concern with the Plight of Indian Women from the societal point of view. They tried to change their social status and dignity. It was actually the trend of that time that how to uplift the Indian Women from their misery and denigrating conditions. Everyone was concern about their social position. Nobody could look beyond that. In the second half of Nineteenth Century, when the Indians were becoming conscious against the Colonial Imperialism the Women’s question was not taken so seriously. The participation of the Indian Women in the Political sphere was microscopic in the true sense. The establishment of the Indian National Congress and its further activities were the legacy of Paternalistic Indian Society.

Gandhi came into the picture after his success against the Apartheid in South Africa. Gandhi’s return to India and his approach in Politics totally changed the existing circumstances and marked a new epoch for the women of India simultaneously with the politics of India. Gandhi openly advocated for the incorporation of Women in Indian Political arena. In Gandhi’s term, the real ‘Swaraj’ is unattainable without the awakening and upliftment of the Indian Women. (1) He wanted to shape the National Movement with the love, tenderness, renunciation, tolerance, perseverance, sacrifice and all other great qualities. To Gandhi, Women are quite natural to these qualities because they imbibe these qualities by birth.(2) By placing the Women into the core area of his political thought, Gandhi brought a fresh air in Indian Political thought which was definitely ‘unique’ in nature and pen striking in character.

**The Place of Women in Gandhi’s ideology of Ahimsa and Satyagraha**

Gandhi was the living incarnation of Ahimsa (Non-violence). According to Gandhi, those who are following the Path of Ahimsa must have the tenacity and Capability to bear the sufferings and oppression, made to them by the dominant force. To nurture non-violence, one must have to follow the path of ‘Satyagraha’. Satyagraha and Ahimsa are complementary to each other. Satyagraha is the most powerful tool in a non-violent struggle. A Satyagrahi must have some qualities like determination, forgiveness, self-restraint, humility, tolerance, love, faith, sacrifice. To Gandhi, Women by nature nurture the very kind of all these qualities. They are the greatest Satyagrahis who, at the same time, were the torch bearers of Ahimsa. Gandhi openly told that the ultimate Ahimsa and Satyagraha will come into existence when Women will rise up against all the odds of society and challenge the existing social structure by questioning the male dominance to them. Gandhi dreamed that when the women will stand to their feet and fight back for their equal right then the Nation will be prosperous.

Gandhi whole heartedly believed that women must be the leading figure in the non-violent mass movements. If we follow the Gandhian mass movements like non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience, we can easily be compelled to think that the women Satyagrahis participated in large numbers and brought marvelous results and changed the dimensions of Indian National Freedom Struggle. By incorporating the women through the path of Ahimsa, Gandhi incorporated the ethical aspects and morality in Indian mass movements.

**Women in the Idea of Swadeshi**

The Swadeshi movement helped the Indian Nationalism to find a new route against the colonial imperialism. The leaders like Gokhale, Tilak, Dadavhai Naoroji envisaged the idea of Swadeshi. Swadeshi means boycotting the foreign (British) Commodities and encourage spreading the indigenous commodities and thereby helping to grow the feeling of Nationalism and urgency of liberation. The first phase of Swadeshi existed from 1850-1904. The famous Swadeshi movement began in 1905 to protest the British strategy of ‘Divide and Rule’ or the ‘Partition of Bengal’ It is marked as the beginning of second phase of Swadeshi which existed from 1905-1917. The third phase of Swadeshi was pioneered and championed by Mahatma Gandhi. Women played a vital role in this Swadeshi Programme. Women held Public meetings and sold *Khadi*, circulated literature-pamphlates, started picketing, protesteted-against the selling of liquor, demanded excuse from the alleged Police officers for beating Women without proper and legal grounds. By marching with the tune of Gandhi, Women sacrificed their mundane properties like jewellery and other belongings and helped to fund the National movements.

Gandhi gave stroke upon the importance of Chorka and repeatedly told that the women in their leisure time must involve themselves into the greater cause of National integration and Nation Building by using charka and producing indigenous commodities and clothes. To quote Madhu Kishwar seems appropriate in this regard, “His programme for women complemented their household role and yet seemed to give them a sense of mission within their prosaic existence.(3) Gandhi thought that these ‘Constructive Programmes’ will help the Indian Women to regain their self-confidence and leadership quality. Gandhi’s thought of Woman’s emancipation was to make them an integral part of ‘National Consciousness’.

**Women and the Gandhian Movements:**

Gandhi very tactfully incorporated the Women in his movements. Gandhi knew that if the ‘struggle’ of Women is not mixed with the struggle of freedom, the question of independence will be limited. To achieve the Independence, in true sense of the term, Women must have to be liberated from all kind of discriminations and inequalities. According to Gandhi, “When Woman, whom we call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful. (4) Gandhi told the women that they must have to take the responsibility to mobilize the society and its existing shortcomings and superstitions.(5)

Gandhi thought to involve women into the mass movements only after the success in South Africa. A large number of women participated in Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement against apartheid in Africa and brought success in distinguished and fascinating manner. The women actually brought the moral aspects to the movement and hitherto determined the character of the movement.(6)

By the participation of Women into the movement, Gandhi wanted to build the ‘individuality’ of the women. During the movement, when women began to make dharnas, went to jails, faced the police atrocities and walked to the processions, all these helped women to go to the ‘next level’ of life. According to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, ‘ancient prejudices melted…new hope began to creep in.’ (7) Gandhi dreamed that Women would be the equal partners of male in the noble cause of ‘Freedom’ (8)

**Women and the non-co-operation movement:**

After the end of First World War, the demand of the Dominion Status became so powerful that the British did not cope with the situation. The British followed the path of oppression and communal division to prevent any kind of mass movement against the empire. The Rowlatt Act brought the opportunity. When the Jwalianwalabag massacre happened, the Indians began to fury against the colonial oppression. The situation became worse, when the police officers in the name of ‘searching’ the ‘Culprits’ began to harass the Women. The Women, in some cases, were used to confront foul languages, have molestations and oppression from the British Officers.

Gandhi used this opportunity. He, on the one hand collected the support of Muslims and other hand he called the non-co-operation movement. Gandhi, in the beginning of the movement, had great faith in Women. He said, “I expect great things from you, I expect the women to do their full share in the struggle…our work is so very easy that even our women can carry it and without difficulty”(9) In this movement, the women began to campaign in favour of Khadi and went to Jail. In Bengal the ‘Mahila Karma Samaj’ was set up to propagate the constructive programmes of Gandhi. Smt. Radu bibi and Inder Prabha Majumder took the leading role in Bengal. The Women broke the churis to protest against the foreign commodities. They encouraged the production of indigenous commodities In Gauhati, Women began to stop wearing foreign clothes. Smt. Basanti Devi and Urmila Devi came in forefront and protested against the drinking of liquor.

In Bombay also, women made huge processions and protested in large number against the royal visit of his highness. Kasturba Gandhi played a prominent role to congregate the women in various states. She appealed to the women to use charka and produce Khadi clothes extensively. In Punjab, Radha Rai and Kasturba Gandhi alerted the British Officials to be restraint. They threatened the Govt. to create impediments if the women were tortured. They began to organize the Punjabi Mahilas and announced that the determination of Punjabis will uproot the imperialism and fulfill the zeal of Indian Nationalism which would lead the country to Independence.

In Uttar-Pradesh Pravabati Devi was arrested on account of her firing speeches against the imperialism. She was sentenced two years imprisonment. She mobilized the women in Meerut.

Bai Amman was undoubtedly the leading women leader at that time. She had great oratory. She highlighted the causes of India’s misery. She uttered the necessity to the women empowerment. She asked women to be ‘real man’ and eradicate their age old ‘Plight’.(10)

Bai Amman advocated to use Khadi. She wanted to travel across the frontier region. But she was debarred to do that. She tuned with Gandhi to establish the communal harmony in the various parts of Lahore.

**Women in the Bardoli Satyagraha:**

Sardar Patel, the follower of Gandhi launched a campaign in Bandoli denying giving tax to the administration. The local administration imposed some unnecessary taxes which were very high in rate and forced the rural inhabitants to submit the taxes in due time. If they failed to do so, they had to face various kinds of atrocities and unnecessary imprisonments. The women of rural sector in Bardoli faced the challenge from the Authority. As they were directly involved in the agricultural sector, the heavy taxes influenced their household badly. They came heavily to protest against the administration’s decision. They all followed the path of peaceful agitation. At the outset, the Satyagrahis faced the leadership crisis. Smt. Mithyuben Petit and Smt. Bhaktben Desai came forward and gave the leadership into the movement. They all went through the ideal and objectives of Gandhi. What Gandhi wanted was reflected into the movement. The illiterate women by participating in the movement made it a ‘unique’ in character.

**Women in the Civil Disobedience**

The movement of Civil Disobedience was inseparably related with Salt Satyagraha. The Salt Satyagraha is characterized by the participation of large number of Women. The famous ‘Dandi March’ began to disobey the existing Salt tax and laws to produce Salt. When the procession came in Dandi under the leadership of Gandhi, many women joined with him. There were wealthy as well as poor women in the march. The two notable female figures were Mithyben Petite and Sarojini Naidu. At Dharasana, Sarojini Naidu took the leadership and made a prominent impact into the movement. In Bombay Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya delivered firing speeches and rebuked the Govt. laws and asked the Satyagrahis for acquiring the determination to subdue the administration. Lilavati Munshi also took a prominent role in this regard. The women persuaded the people to buy their manufactured salt. In other provinces also, women marked their significant presence.

According to Gandhi, the failure of non-co-operation movement should be avoided in Civil Disobedience movement. He entrusted the duty of picketing to the women. By incorporating women in civil Disobedience, Gandhi wanted, “…they would have an access to power and self-confidence to which they have hitherto been strangers”(11) Gandhi, apart from Salt Satyagraha, entrusted the women to lead the movement against use of liquor and foreign clothes. Kasturba Gandhi played a vital role in this regard.

By late – 1931’s, Police began to torture the women. They were sexually abused, imprisoned, Charge sheeted with false allegations. Despite, all the efforts of the administration to stop the women from Participation, the civil disobedience movement were highly characterized by the huge participation of the women. The Police atrocities did not discourage them rather took a new vitality into the movement. The interesting fact is that women from traditional and conservative backgrounds also took part into the movement. Gandhi was leader whose call for ‘National interest’ didn’t go fail as the women came heavily to fulfill his ‘Call’. Gandhi succeeded in arousing ‘Confidence’ among the women of India for the cause of Nation and Nationalism.

**Women in the Quit India movement:**

The Indian women, with the march of time, by coming into the contact of Mahatma broke the middle aged tradition of ‘confinement into the room.’ The full success was yet to come. Gandhi’s personality, charishma, call, message, all touched the Indian Women. According to Aruna Asaf Ali, “Gandhi was a leader who showed the real empathy for the Indian Women.”

It was Quit India Movement that took the opportunity to prove the valor, dignity and capability of Indian women. At the outset, Gandhi was arrested. The news of his arrest created a bolt and jolt into the British imperialism. The people became furious. They turned to be a mob. The women, in particular, wanted to see their ‘Mahatma’ out of prison and Mahatma’s call for ‘Do or Die’ influenced the Indian Women greatly. Vijaylaxmi Pandit, Mridula Sarabahai, Sucheta Kripalini, Usha Mehta came in forefront and took the charge of leadership to organize women in the absence of their leader Gandhi. The local women leaders like Basanti Devi, Bai Amman, Prabhavati Devi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Matangini Hazra, Uma Nehru played a vital and successful role to organize the women into the movement. They started picketing, mobilizing the illiterate women, selling Khadi, wearing traditional Indian Clothes, making large processions and so on. Swarnalata Barua, Kanaklata Barua, Matangini Hazra had played a fascinating role into the Quit India Movement. Matangini Hazra was called ‘Old Lady Gandhi’. The movement turned violent in some cases. The critics often point out about the violent nature of the movement which according to them doesn’t go with the ideology of Gandhi’s Ahimsa. One point must have to be remembered that it was a movement not led by Gandhi. Owing to his arrest, the leadership went to the local leaders who turned violent to establish ‘Swaraj’ at the earliest. The women in some cases became violent also. But, it was due to the atrocities made to them. Women were raped, teased, imprisoned, beaten and they faced filthy languages, misbehavior. The pregnant women and the girls also faced the inhuman military atrocities and sexual harassment. Many women did not come to the house at night owing to the fear of sexual violence. They spent their forced insomniac nights in jungles also. The women participated with their male counterparts to fight back the British oppression to bring ‘Swaraj’ in India during this movement. Gandhi, though in house arrest, was the leader of the people, leader of the nation, and leader of the women also.

Though Quit India Movement did not stay longer and bring the proposed objectives, one of its main successes was the participation of women in huge number. They got involved into the mainstream National Movement. They got confidence which Gandhi was looking for. They unconsciously broke the four walls. They consciously supported Gandhi. Their sacrifice, patriotism, valor, all, marked the success of Gandhian thought.

**Some prominent female figures who followed the path of Gandhi**

It is undoubtedly said that by openning the political gate for women, Gandhi set the trend of Nationalist Consciousness. His tireless effort brought many women in the forefront of Indian Freedon Struggle. The notable among them were:

* **Sarojini Naidu:**

She was the andent follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi chose to nominate her for the post of Congress President in 1925. She, in suppport of Gandhi, advocated for the representation of women in the legislatures. She led the satyagraha movement in various parts of india. She defied salt taxes and laws. She went to jail in numerous occasions for protesting against the British. With the tune of gandhi, she announced, womens’ work as ‘ spiritual return for the world’ (12)

She led the historic procession in Dharsana during Civil Disobedience Movement . She declared that the women were ready to face all kind of sufferings along with the male in the noble cause to lierate the country. She fought against the prevenlent custom of purdah and child marriage. She demanded the full franchaise for women. She referred gandhi as the ‘flute of sri krishna’

* **Kasturba Gandhi:**

She was the wife of Mahatma Gandhi. She helped her husband by taking his side in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. She was imprisoned. In jail, she helped other women to be organized and determined and follow the path of Satyagraha .

In 1922, she intensively travelled in various places of Gujrat. In spite of having poor health, Kasturba tried utmostly to fulfill the goal of Gandhi . She again had a remarkable role in Civil Disobedience Movement and for this she again faced the imprisonment. During Quit India Movement she also came to the forefront but was arrested soon. She was a devout follower of Gandhi. Her husband was like ‘living God’ to her.

* **Aruna Asaf Ali:**

She was also a known Congress worker and familiar face. She participated in salt satyagrahas. During Civil Disobidience she faced imprisonment . Gandhi , himself advocated for her release. She is widely remembered for hoisting National flag in Bombay (Tilak Maidan)during Quit India Movement. According to Aruna Asaf Ali – Gandhiji’s appeal was something that made to feel the equal status with men.

* **Sucheta Kripalini**:

She is known to everyone for being the first C.M. of Independent India in the United province (now Uttar Pradesh). she was close associate of Gandhi. She made significant contribution in Quit India movement also. She had her role in establishing All India Mahila Congress. She companied Gandhi during the partition turmolis in Noakhali

* **Rajkumari Amrita Kaur**

She was gandhiji’s secretary. She closely watched Gandhi and felt the urge to work for the all round development of Indian women. She mentioned, “What drove me to bapu was his desire to have women in his non-violent army and his faith in womankind…”(13)

* **Annie Besant:**

She was the first women president of congress. She met Gandhi in England and was inspired by his thought and action for the welfare and wellbeing of women. Though later thay had differences of opinion, Besant had always deep respect to Gandhi. She duly understood that the future of Indian Women were safe and secured in the hand of Mahatma.

* **Saraladevi Choudharani:**

She, following the idea of gandhi, involved herself for the cause of Indian Women. She extensively propagated for the use of Khadi and she even went to the parties by wearing khadis.

* **Manibehn Patel:**

She was the daughter of Sardar Patel. She was influenced by the Gandhian thought of ‘Swadeshi’. She organized the women in circulating the message of necessasity of using indegenous commodities. She along with Mirabehn, Mridula Sarabhai, and Sushila Nayer took the significant dicision not to marry for the rest of life to prapagate Gandhi’s thought and mission among women. They were deeply influenced by Gandhi’s thought of brahmacharya and chastity. Gandhi’s concept and attraction for mythological characters also had an impact upon them. She and her other associates looked gandhi as ‘saviour of women’

* **Some Core Concepts Of Gandhi Related with the All Round Development Of Women.**

1. Economic Upliftment:

Gandhi’s urge to use chakra was actually in tune with the economic prosperity of women. Gandhi time and again uttered for the economic independence of women so that they would become the warriors against the odds in paternalistic society. In 1919, addressing a rallly, in Nadiad, Gandhi categorically mentioned the need of charka for women. As they spent most of their time in household, the women, according to Gandhi could easily use the charka which would bring enough money to their household. Thus, it will eraidcate poverty at the same time.

1. Women And Higher Education:

Gandhi propagated for women’s higher education . A woman must have high knowledge and education and this will help the women to understand the ins and outs of their situation. The woman with higher degree of education will educate her childrens who in turn would be the ‘future’ of this country. Gandhi told that as women are quite different to man by nature , there must be different curriculum to both of men and women.

1. Gandhi’s view on Women Empowerment:

Gandhi dreamed that women must take part in public activites, coming from the barriers of household, to prove to world about their capability to take right dicission, hold respectable office position, organize a gathering , and lead a procession sucessfully. Gandhi told for the exposure of women in public sphere but at the same time, she alerted the women not to ignore their household duties. She asked them to take care for the aged of the home and their childrens also. Gandhi himself did cleaning, cooking to understand the women’s sufferings in the household activities. Gandhi asked the male dominated society to be sympathitic to the women of India because they are inheritor of ‘Sita’ and ‘Droupadi’.

Gandhi saw that the participation of women in the freedom struggle will develop their individuality, rouse confidence, consciousness and courage. Gradually they will understand their strength.

1. Communal Harmony And Women:

Gandhi feared the communalism in India. He feared that the unity will be lost and the British will take the oppurtunity to fulfil their imperial interest. Gandhi sought support from the women. He told that the women should convince their male members not to be communal and have fraternity with every religion. Gandhi hoped that the women’s active role was the need to fulfill harmony in the society. (14)

1. Caste, Untouchability and the role of women:

Gandhi was equally concerned with casteism and untouchability. According to Gandhi – “if the hindu heart is to be cured of the taint of untouchability, women must do the lions share….” (15) during his various tours, he called harijans to be stronger and fight for their right and reminded the women to take the depressed child to their lap with motherly affection.

**Conclusion**

Gandhi’s effort to bring the women in the forefront of freedom struggle has been marked as “unique” because very few countries in the world have been able to produce such a huge number of female leaders into their freedom struggles . Gandhi’s effort was ‘unique’, because he compelled others to pay respect to the women. He liberated women from the clutches of paternalistic attitude . It was Gandhi for whom the congress got its women presidents before Country’s Independence. It was Gandhi for whom the women’s right was accepted as the fundamental right in the resolution of Indian National Congress in 1931. During this time, many womens’ organization came into existance. Needless to say, Gandhiji laid the foundation to these organizations . Gandhi had empathy for women not pity or compession to them.

Today, it is India where the women are involved in politics with their dignity, power , capability and confidence whereas the Other South Asian Nations lack it. They lack it because, they did not have a leader like Gandhi. It is to be noted that lot of matter are still inhuman to the Indian women but the achievements acquired by the Indian women in the Political and National sphere, are to be acknowledged in the open minded and logical way. It is the Gandhi who laid the foundation for the present day Indian women. It is Gandhi , who broke the age old tradition and took the women in the greatest cause of Independence. Gandhi wanted to liberate the indian women from the clutches of colonialism, Gandhi wanted to liberate women from the clutches of paternalistic oppression and inequalities also. It was Gandhi who galvanized the National politics by creating a space for the women. He was the pioneer in making true reform for the women. It was Gandhi who understood the ‘sublimity’ of the Indian women and thought to indulge it in the Nationalistic approach. Gandhi was truly the ‘Father of the Nation’ who looked the women’s question in a fatherly affection.

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