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Mahatma Gandhi's Perspective on Women's Participation in Freedom Struggle

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Abstract---Large numbers of women participated in India's freedom struggle. Indian society wasn't so congenial for women's participation in the political and social sphere of India. India has a long history of women's victimization and slavery. Women were kept deprived of education, freedom, rights, and privileges for ages. But, the British attracted the attention of Indians toward the miserable condition of Indian women during the nineteenth century. As a result of the social and political scenario, women's enlightenment movements gained traction in the nineteenth century. Women gradually started receiving education. They became aware due to education and participated in the political and social sphere of India. Some elite, upper-class, and socio-politically inherited women were already involved in the freedom struggle movement. Due to the influence of Tilak, women started participating in the freedom struggle movement during Tilak era. In 1920, importance was given to Mahatma Gandhi's persona for the participation of women in the freedom struggle during Gandhi's era. But, Mahatma Gandhi's perspective was too conservative regarding women's participation in the freedom struggle. Later on, his perspective became all-pervasive and many women dedicated their lives for the sake of freedom struggle, and some of them martyred in it.

Keywords---education, freedom struggle, Indian society, perspective, women participation.

Introduction

Women significantly participated in the freedom struggle movement. But, their participation wasn't motivated by their representation and leadership at all. Their participation was quantitative instead of qualitative. Their participation in the freedom struggle didn't prove beneficial in promoting their leadership. Their contribution to the freedom struggle wasn't beneficial in uplifting women's

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standard of living. Women's assimilation in the freedom struggle was motivated by the patriarchal structure. To analyze the aforesaid objections regarding women's participation in the freedom struggle, it is necessary to meticulously comprehend Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts and perspective regarding women's participation in the freedom struggle.

Objectives

- To study the nature of women's participation in freedom struggle whether it was qualitative or quantitative.
- To study the influence of Mahatma Gandhi's persona on women.
- To analyze and interpret Mahatma Gandhi's perspective regarding women participating in the freedom struggle.

Hypotheses

- Women's participation in the freedom struggle was quantitative.
- Mahatma Gandhi's 'saintly' figure positively influenced society and women.
- Mahatma Gandhi's perspective regarding women's participation in the freedom struggle was unclear it had changed timely.

Research Methodology

The data has been collected from various books and the internet. A descriptive and analytical method has been used for the present paper.

Mahatma Gandhi's perspective about women

Before Gandhi, women's participation in the freedom struggle was too moderate. When Gandhiji led the movement, his leadership was too pious and sanctified like a saintly figure. Freedom struggle movement got religious color under his leadership. India was widely known as 'Maa Bharati' (Mother India) and patriotism was their religion. Gandhiji's unstained character and immaculate image appealed to the downtrodden women i.e. agricultural laborers, poor, illiterate women to participate in the freedom struggle movement without any hesitation. His persona remarkably influenced women ([Psacharopoulos, 1994](#); [Vesper & Gartner, 1997](#)).

In 1930, the Civil Disobedience movement was started under the stout leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Indian National Congress entrusted the leadership of this movement to him. He commenced the movement by organizing a salt march. It was set off on foot from Sabarmati to Dandi from 12th March to 6th April. Mahatma Gandhi selected 61 people for this passive resistance. But, there wasn't a single woman. Some of the women opposed this policy of Mahatma Gandhi. But, Gandhiji assured women that they would be assigned to even greater responsibilities. According to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Gandhiji deliberately kept women aside from the Dandi march. All India Congress Committee decided not to allow women in the movement. Kamaladevi pleaded to Gandhiji that he should appeal to women to participate in the movement. But, Gandhiji smiled and said that he could do so. As per the recommendations made by Kamaladevi,

Gandhiji wrote a letter and Kamaladevi went to Congress Committee with this letter. Congress Committee took back the veto by signing it. It paved the way for women to lead the passive resistance. Billions of women participated in the salt march (Simms, 2000; Alderman et al., 2021).

Gandhiji said that he developed the concept of 'Satyagraha' (Passive Resistance) based on strong determination observed among South African women and Kasturba when he was in South Africa. While writing on Mahatma Gandhi, Madhu Kishwar said that Mahatma Gandhi completely sidelined and neglected women and didn't expect anything from them though they had the potential to lead the movement as well as they actively pressurized Gandhiji to appeal them to participate in the national movement. Gandhiji's perspective regarding women's participation in the movement had changed with time. In reality, Mahatma Gandhi gave importance to the motherly figure of women. 'Self-sacrifice' is the nature of motherhood; and, according to Gandhiji, pregnancy and motherhood develop peace and non-violence among women. A woman who bears the labor pain can bear any type of pain in her life (Srivastava, 2006; Shenthar et al., 2016).

According to Gandhiji, men and women have biological differences and they have taken birth to play different roles. Earning income is the duty of men while the management of the house and nurturing is the duty of women. Reformists clarified the nature of motherhood referring to 'Bharat Mata' as 'Victimized Woman' and 'Kaali' as 'Gallant Savior'. Feminists defined motherhood as a parent and equivalent to the males. But, Gandhiji considered motherhood as the storehouse of moral and spiritual qualities as well as hailed her as the teacher of males. According to Gandhiji, we have a lot to learn from women. Numerous things only can be done by women. Foreign women should learn various values from Indian women (Williamson, 1987; Chrisman et al., 2003).

Gandhiji deemed 'home' as the center for social reformation and said that women should play their part at home. He felt that women's roles should be confined in the public sphere. So, he appealed to women to take part in the Swadeshi movement. He also considered that women have control over running Charkha (the spinning wheel) and using khaddar. Gandhiji, who once deemed home as the center for social reformation, appeared requesting women to come out and take part in the 'Non-cooperation' movement in 1920. But, women's role was restricted in the movement. Ex. Women were assigned the tasks such as boycotting foreign medicines and wine shops, organizing protests and marches. But, at the same time, they were denied permission to take part in the Salt Satyagraha. According to Gandhiji, banning wine is related to sanctity and morality whereas the issue of salt is associated with the public domain and is financial. Therefore, their participation in it was inappropriate. Assimilating women in the Swadeshi movement and motivating them accordingly was the prominent motive behind the aim of complete independence. On contrary, according to some critics, women were deliberately kept at the forefront assuming that the police wouldn't attack them (Agarwal, 2009; Caspi et al., 2008).

In the 1930s, remarkable changes had been observed in Mahatma Gandhi's perspective regarding women. He appreciated the contribution made by women to

the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930. Gandhiji's concept of passive resistance was greatly based on non-violence, capacity to bear the sufferings, and tolerance, and these qualities, which were essential for the passive resistance, were abundant among women. The nature of Gandhiji's protest was significantly based on the qualities of women. According to Gandhiji, 'Voluntary Widow' was the best activist. He stressed the importance of serving the nation honestly and devotedly rather than immolating herself after her husband's death. He gave importance to moral sanctity. In 1925, he was enraged over Bengal Congress Committee's move to allow prostitutes to take part in the freedom struggle. He considered these types of women even more inferior to the thieves. Thieves only steal but these women take away the sanctity of the society and their contribution is worthless. Gandhiji strictly opined that women wouldn't allow in the social works until and unless they develop the capacity to bear the sufferings and pain as well as they are ready to uplift their lives by using spinning wheel and khaddar. Gandhiji, who once allowed women to take part in freedom struggle as per their convenience, later on comprehensively assimilated them at a large scale in the 'Civil Disobedience movement of 1930 and other movements (Sukiada, 2017; Peter, 2015).

Findings

The assimilation of women in the freedom struggle was motivated by the particular patriarchal structure. Gandhiji allowed women to take part in the movement by prioritizing women-centric roles and their roles were too restricted. But, taking the cognizance of the intensity and comprehensiveness of the movement, he appealed for the all-pervasive role of women in the movements and appreciated their contribution to it.

Conclusion

Women's leadership didn't proliferate as the freedom struggle movement was influenced by and developed in a particular patriarchal structure. As well as, women's participation in the freedom struggle was colored as a spiritual one instead of political and social. Therefore, the contribution made by women in the freedom struggle didn't significantly help women in uplifting their standard of life.

Recommendations

Women's participation, whether it is political or social, should be qualitative and independent to uplift women's standard of living in the post-independence era.

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