



THE CEASELESS CRUSADER

Who said, 'Frailty, thy name is woman'?

Mahatma Gandhi was a ceaseless crusader of women's equality. He brought the women out of their homes and made them equal participants in all walks of life – social as well as political. His entourage always consisted of several women and many of his closest associates were women. Under Gandhi's leadership thousands of women took leading roles in several movements. Gandhi never considered women to be unfit for any position or task. Because of Gandhi's support and initiative, women's groups were formed all over India and there was hardly a week when Gandhi did not address a women's group. It was mainly because of Gandhi that the first Cabinet of Independent India consisted of two women ministers. What is significant here is his image of woman and his hope for her, so radically different from that of any earlier reformer. He was not the first to address women's issues in India. Before the advent of Gandhi on the scene, the attitude to women, though sympathetic, was patronising; leaders and social reform groups functioned in such a way that made women look helpless. They wanted to protect, uplift and bring relief to women. No doubt there was value in all of it. Yet, with Gandhi a new, unique element emerged. Woman to him was neither man's plaything, nor his competitor, struggling to be like him. What she needed most was education, the recognition of her birth right to be free and equal, to steer her own destiny side by side with man. He argues:

Therefore, ultimately, woman will have to determine with authority what she needs. My own opinion is that, just as fundamentally men and women are one; their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help. But somehow or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's concept that she is inferior to him. But the seers among men have recognised her equal status.

Gandhi was no advocate of blind adherence to tradition; its strong current could help us swim far, or sink us; for him the deciding question was whether it would take us closer to God (Truth), selfless service and love of all human beings. He declared to a tradition-bound India:

I do not subscribe to the superstition that everything is good because it is ancient. I do not believe either that anything is good because it is Indian... Any tradition, however ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land. Untouchability may be considered an ancient tradition, the wide prevalence of child widowhood and child marriage also may be considered to be a part of our ancient tradition along with some of the horrible beliefs and superstitious practices which offend the human dignity. I would sweep them out of existence if I had the power.

What do our ancient books say about women? The woman's father protects her in her childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Gandhi saw how wrong that was, how unjust, how harmful to all; he spoke out strongly against child-marriages, the isolation and subjugation of widows, the cruel domination of men over women, and women's own subservient mentality.

He says:

True morality consists, not in following the beaten track, but in finding out the true path for ourselves and in fearlessly following it.

Gandhi's life-long "experiments with truth" served that very purpose. And when he felt sure he knew the way of truth, he not only followed it fearlessly himself, but inspired millions of men, women and even children. The title of his life story he aptly called, 'An Autobiography - The Story of My Experiments with Truth.' For, to him God was Truth, but whereas the definition of God, he said, was difficult to grasp, the definition of truth every person could find in his or her own conscience. Even from his childhood he was such an extraordinary lover of truth that he tried to understand and verify the truth of any new thought he came across, and every personal experience. Among various youthful experiments with truth, the most pertinent in relation to women was his relationship with his wife, Kasturba. They were both born in 1869, and married very young in 1882, when she was thirteen and he was but twelve years old. Having read that a wife must always be subjugated to her husband's will, he took on the role of a domineering husband, and a boy husband at that!

Little was he prepared to face the challenge posed by his strong and spirited wife, who stood up to him for her rights with dignity and self-possession, which, in the early years he construed as stubbornness, and later extolled as moral courage. He evolved his ideas on women, and the relationship between men and women, thanks to a series of experiences with his wife during his formative years. He wanted implicit obedience from her. He never allowed her to go out without his permission. Once, in South Africa, he had wanted her to clean the chamber pot of a low-born clerk with a smile. When she had resisted and cried, he behaved rudely to get the work done, using the words, "Have you no sense of shame? Must you so far forget yourself?" That was enough for the sincerest of all votaries of truth; he thought a great deal, constantly, all his life. He never forgave himself for causing Kasturba to suffer pain. His own pain and regret are evident in his words:

Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity - to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two, for it is even today the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.

He valued these qualities highly, considering them to be indispensable for resistance by satyagraha, whether in the home or in society. He held ancient models of womanhood - Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, Draupadi - in high reverence and venerated them for their moral strength; they were not passive, weak women. Passive resistance, he explained, was not the right translation of satyagraha, which means, "soul force" or "truth force", the power of enlightened non-violence, neither passive nor timid.

According to Gandhiji:

To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?

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The wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows – as free as the husband to choose her own path.

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Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in all debates, deliberations and activities and offer her suggestions along with men for bringing about a better social order and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him.

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If only the women of the world would come together they could display such heroic non-violence as to kick away the atom bomb like a mere ball. Women have been so gifted by God. If an ancestral treasure lying buried in a corner of the house unknown to the members of the family were suddenly discovered, what a celebration it would occasion. Similarly, women's marvellous power is lying dormant. If the women of Asia wake up, they will dazzle the world. My experiment in non-violence would be instantly successful if I could secure women's help.

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I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then approach it with much greater confidence than if men predominated. I would dread the latter's violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak.

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'Ahimsa' means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by the pangs of labour? But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Who again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar.

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My suggestion is that women can play a very important role in establishing peace. Instead of being carried away by science and its marvel they should follow the path of non-violence because women by nature are endowed with the quality of forgiveness. Women will never succeed in aping men in everything, nor can they develop the gift nature has bestowed on

them by doing so. They should neither allow their family members to have, nor should they themselves have any connection with anything relating to war. God has endowed women with hearts overflowing with love. They should utilise the gift properly. That power is all the more effective because it is mute. I hold that God has sent women as messengers of the gospel of non-violence.

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But it is my firm conviction that if the men and women of India cultivate in themselves the courage to face death bravely and non-violently, they can laugh to scorn the power of armaments and realise the ideal of unadulterated independence in terms of the masses which would serve as an example to the world. In that women can take the lead for they are a personification of the power of self-suffering.

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My work will be finished if I succeed in carrying conviction to the human family, every man or woman, however weak in body, is the guardian of his or her self-respect and liberty, and that his defence prevails, though the world be against the individual resistor. Is the society ready to give equal status to women? Equal status to women is a far cry. Does it mean that we will continue to be a male chauvinistic society? Who is to blame?

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I blame the men. Men have legislated against them. Man has regarded woman as his tool. She has learnt to be his tool and in the end found it easy and pleasurable to be such, because when one drags another in his fall the descent is easy.

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Woman, I hold, is the personification of self-sacrifice, but unfortunately today she does not realize what tremendous advantage she has over man.

How apt these words are and look at the faith Gandhi has both in nonviolence and women –

If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with women.

Let us join Otway in saying –

*O woman! Lovely woman!
Nature made thee to temper man;
we had been brutes without you.
Angels are painted fair to look like you;
there is in you all that we believe of heaven –
amazing brightness, purity and truth,
eternal joy and everlasting love.*

Glossary:

crusader: one who fights for a cause with determination

frailty: weakness of character or behaviour

entourage: people who surround and follow

advent: arrival

patronising: supporting

complement: that which completes another

seer: visionary

adherence: sticking to

superstition: a belief not based on reason or scientific knowledge

subjugation: suppression

subservient: being slavish

pertinent: relevant

libel: a printed or written statement in bad taste about persons

dormant: inactive

preponderance: the state of being more in number

nectar: a sweet liquid produced by flowers

armament: weapon

unadulterated: not spoilt, pure

conviction: belief or fixed opinion

chauvinistic: feeling strongly and unreasonably in favour of something

personification: perfect example

Choose the synonyms of the italicised words from the options given.

1. Mahatma Gandhi was a ceaseless crusader of women's equality.
(untiring, determined, conscious, faithful)
2. Yet, with Gandhi a new, unique element emerged.
(submerged, identified, arose, found)
3. in the early years he construed as stubbornness.
(configured, confused, contrived, interpreted)
4. Has she not greater intuition?
(insight, intimidation, courage, mentality)
5. if the men and women of India cultivate in themselves the courage to face death bravely and non-violently
(culture, develop, fertilise, plant)

Choose the antonyms of the italicised words from the options given.

1. Frailty, thy name is woman.
(strength, knowledge, loyalty, pity)
2. radically different from that of any earlier reformer.
(dull, miserably, moderately, drastically)
3. He took on the role of a domineering husband.
(subjective, objective, powerful, submissive)
4. Women's marvellous power is lying dormant.
(ordinary, magnificent, bright, dull)
5. nor can they develop the gift nature has bestowed on them
(denied, obtained, betrayed, belied)