

SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES OF JOTIRAO PHULE AND M.K. GANDHI ON GENDER EQUALITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Gender is conceptualized as a social and cultural construct based on the biological category of sex. Gender is an analytical instrument bestowed by feminist philosophy and is widely used by social researchers to analyse the societal relations. It is well understood that gender constructs are shaped by culture, caste, class, religion, nation and so on. They also depend upon the variables like space and time.

This paper by using primary and secondary sources tries to capture the trajectory of development of ideas of both Jyotirao Phule and Mahatma Gandhi on gender equality as they developed over the time. It will further bring out several similarities and differences in the two philosophies and the historical and social reasons to which those similarities and differences could be attributed. There is need to fully understand the salient features of both the philosophies and seeing the best features of both to apply while formulating policies for the betterment of women.

Gender justice, patriarchy, subordination, discrimination and empowerment

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Both Phule and Gandhi appreciated good deeds of British Government and disliked the wrong policies. Both the leaders had to suffer fatal attacks on their lives. However, one survived the stabbing of two swords, while the other's life was shot dead. Both the leaders kept on working for emancipation of women and the downtrodden. Phule wanted a social revolution first and Gandhi wanted a political revolution first. Phule desired to awaken the society through the medium of education. Gandhi desired to awaken the country through the medium of Satyagraha. Both were the followers of truth.

Both of the Mahatmas believed in the equality of sexes. According to both, 'it is a sin to discriminate human beings on the basis of sex'. Both of them were perturbed to see the predicament of women, endeavored through out their lives for the emancipation of women and raised their voice against the burning issues of women such as; Polygamy, Child Marriage, Enforced Widowhood, Purdah, Sati, Infanticide, Prostitution, Devadasi Pratha and propagated for widow remarriage, equal share for girl in her father's property, female education, equal treatment for men and women to enjoy rights. Phule touched several aspects of women, particularly relevant into his contemporary society, but Gandhi touched every aspect related to women, be it modern girl, real ornament of women, the power to say 'no' to your husbands if they approach carnally, methods of birth-control, love, friendship etc.. Gandhi's statements are available on every problem associated with women or any social evils. However during the time of Gandhi, public was already aware, and he spoke only to create public opinion. On the other hand, during Phule's time, to awaken the society was an uphill task. Therefore, Phule spoke wherever people mustered, thus, through his literature, drama, skits, poems and so forth, he endeavored his best to awaken the society from deep slumber. Both of them believed that the lack of education is the root cause of all evils.

A comparative analysis on some of the relevant issues/factors is given below:

Shastras a Root cause of women's degeneration

Both the leaders were convinced that root cause of women's degeneration lies in the Shastras. According to Phule the religious texts, scriptures, Upanishads and Manusmriti, all which held women to be inferior, were penned down by Brahmins in Sanskrit language, where the power of pen was misused. Phule was first to realize the narrow mindedness of Manu and similar other authors. Manu's system treated women, (all women irrespective of varna) as shudra

and dasa. Therefore, Phule included all women in his definition of shudra and atishudra. He did not think of women's problems in terms of Brahmin, shudra and atishudra. In his book 'Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak' he talks of 'Sarva Ekandar Stree Purush' that is all women and men together. Phule had not used common word Manus, "human beings" as being used in the earlier Dharmagranthas, but he insists on using, stree purush, thus emphasizing gender equality, while pleading for equal and common human rights for women and men. He is the first Indian to do so in India.

According to Gandhi also, to remove the root cause of women's degeneration diagnosis is to be sought in Hindu culture and age old religious customs, in man's lust and in the woman herself who has succumbed to the enjoyments. Gandhi looked to the Hindu culture and religious customs for the cause of women's lowering of status in the society. He was of the view that Hindu culture has erred on the side of excessive subordination of the wife to the husband, and has insisted on the complete merging of the wife in the husband. This has resulted in the husband sometimes usurping and exercising authority that reduces him to the level of the brute.

He further accused man for the maltreatment of women and stated that legislation has been mostly the handiwork of man, and man has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed task. The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our Shastras as the necessary ingrained characteristics of women. Here Gandhi puts the blame on men who wrote the Shastras.

There is an important difference in the philosophies of the two leaders regarding Shastras. Phule wanted that Hindu Shastras should be condemned and rejected in totality. Gandhi's views on Hindu Shastras are rational. His approach was to accept which is acceptable and neglect which is sheer the matter of orthodoxy. It would be interesting to examine the dilemma which Gandhi, apparently, seems to have faced vis-à-vis the Hindu Shastras. It should be noted that whilst Gandhi had immense faith in the wisdom of the Shastras, he, in the spirit of the true rationalist, believed in the application of reason on every issue which an individual or society confronted.

Use of mythological characters

Both the mahatmas extensively used mythological characters in order to prove or elucidate their points. Phule, in his book '*Gulamgiri*', described the principles for starting the new social institutions and advised the demolition of the traditional social institutions. This book describes mythological character Parshuram, one of the chiefs of Brahmins, and his dastardly act of killing not only several Kshatriya men but also snatched from the arms of their orphaned wives their innocent infants and mercilessly sent them to a cruel death. Phule stated that these women must have experienced the great amount of pain and agony when they were persuaded by Parshuram. He depicted the clear picture of atrocities on women Phule also mentioned the first from mythology, the demon-killer Ambika in order to prove the bravery of women.

Gandhi used mythological characters while describing the role of women. Gandhi's ideal for a wife was Sita and for a husband was Rama. He held the view that Sita was no slave of Rama. Or each was slave of the other. About marriage, using Ram-Sita symbols he delineated his ideal relationship between husband and wife, that they have equal rights and status. This brings us to an interesting aspect of Gandhi's use of traditional symbols of womanhood. He extolled women to emulate Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi who were 'pure, firm and self-controlled'.

Thus both the reformers used the mythological characters. However, while the former used into destructive manner and the later used into constructive manner.

Equality

Both the leaders were equivocal in claiming equality for women, though both were convinced that man and woman are basically different and hence their requirements are different. According to Phule, Male and female are two different species, biologically they are different, yet there is equality in some factors among them. This is the basic theory or his philosophy of equality. He asserted all human beings are equal naturally therefore male and female should be treated equal. A woman is physically feeble, able to discharge the responsibility of motherhood on the contrary male is not so. Man is different, but he can not be superior, due to his intrinsic quality to woman as a natural law. But if woman treated equal to man, then only social justice can be established. Therefore he laid stress on marriages based on equality. As there cannot be a combat between a weak person and boxer. As for boxing and wrestling two persons and having equal bodily strength and facilities is a must, so also in society unless more facilities are provided to weaker section in society, social justice cannot be established and for social equality,

social justice is a prerequisite. Phule demanded the right of inheritance and right of property for women.

Though Gandhi is also uncompromising in upholding the equality of sexes and their respective rights, he is equally clear that equality does not mean either uniformity or mere mechanical similarity. Equality for him meant equal opportunity to play one's role in life. He holds that men and women are a peerless pair being complementary to one another; each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived. He recognizes the biological differences which nature has made and the two consequent differences in the spheres and functions of the two sexes. The duty of the motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which men need not possess. She is essentially the mistress of the house. He is bread winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread, and she is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The act of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct.

One difference that is apparent in the philosophies of two leaders regarding equality is in the extent and notion. In all his principles, Phule took man and women together and at equal footings. The Membership of the Samaj was open to all. In the Samaj, both the men and women were to discuss ways and means of enforcing prohibition, compulsory education, use of indigenous goods, conducting ceremonies without Brahmin priest, performing wedding at minimum cost, and freeing people from the clutches of ignorance. According to Phule, both men and women are entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex. He envisaged a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

According to Gandhi, equality of the sexes did not mean equality of occupations nor did it mean equality in the realm of work and power. He was in favour of maintaining a 'harmonious' division of labour between men and women which had been operative since the time of Adam and persists to the present day; 'Adam wove and Eve spun'. He did not believe in women working for wages or undertaking commercial enterprises. Gandhi did not envisage any fundamental change in the traditional role of women.

Gandhi envisaged the role of women as 'complement' of men. Gandhi saw, male and female in terms of the "active-passive" syndrome which has been an important ideological device for denying women any chance to acquire power and decision-making ability in the

family and the society. He felt that since man is supreme in the outward life. It is appropriate that he should have a greater knowledge of that world. On the other hand, home life is entirely the sphere of women, and, therefore, in domestic affairs women ought to have more control. “True they are equals in life, but their functions differ”. Furthermore, as nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain difference between the educations of the two.” So he concluded, “it is woman’s right to rule the home. Man is the master outside it. In his view, “the woman who knows and fulfills her duty realizes her dignified status. She is the queen not the slave, of the household over which she presides”¹

While coming to Phule’s ideology, in this book ‘Sarvjaniksatya Dharma Pustak’, Phule talks of ‘Sarva Ekandar Stree Purush’, i.e. all men and women together. He insists on using ‘Stree Purush’, thus emphasising gender equality, while pleading for equal and common human rights for men and women.² Phule was against the male dominated family. Phule drew the attention of the people towards the ills of the male dominated family structure which was prevalent where wife was supposed to be the slave of her husband she could not do or speak of her own will. Phule envisaged that Women should work along with men shoulder to shoulder in order to earn livelihood for the family.

However, according to Gandhi, there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocations of the two must also be different. Even the fact that in rural India, women among the agricultural labourers and small peasants are equally, if not more, involved in the actual production process could not shake Gandhi’s belief that the women might ‘supplement the meagre resources of the family, but man remains the main bread-winner.’ This he saw as the most natural division of spheres of work. In his opinion, it was degrading for both man and woman that woman should be called upon or induces to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity.

Women: The better half of men

Phule’s views about the differences between men and women is available in his text, Phule states that in the universe he considers human beings as the superior race and in the human

race he considers women as superior to men. When asked by Balwantrao, that why is the woman superior? Phule replied, “The Creator has created in this world, sources of pleasure for both man and woman. They also enjoy each other’s company. Woman is however self-restrained and bashful by nature. She permits a man to make friends with her. The clever man however plays upon the natural desire of the woman. Above all, the patient woman carries child into her womb for nine months without complaint, considering her husband life-partner, considerate and supporter. She is the mother of us. She brings us up by cleaning the excretions, feeds us, and teaches us to walk and to speak. She does her duty and brings up the child. He continued, one can repay all debts except the mother’s debt. Therefore, undoubtedly woman is superior to man.

Gandhi also said that, there was no occasion for women to consider them subordinate or inferior to men. It was proclaimed that woman was half of man and by parity of reasoning man was half of woman. There were not separate entities but halves of one. Gandhi considered woman as the noble sex. If she is weak in striking, she is strong in suffering.

In Phule’s book ‘*Satsar*’ part two, there is a important conversation between Phule and his son (adopted) Dr. Yashwant proving that women is more loving than men and hence the nobler sex. Yashwant asks that “Why do many people say that women have all the vices like brazenness? If you tell us, it will open people’s eyes?” Jotirao replied “It is men, who are more partial, deceptive, thuggish, daring, cruel, and atrocious over women indulging into horrible, daring and cruel acts over women. He supported this statement by citing five reasons.

In a nutshell, both of them agree that woman is soft-hearted, sympathetic and man takes advantage of this nature. However, Phule gave five reasons of man, being atrocious towards sympathetic, chaste and bashful woman, desired to change the male chauvinist attitude. On the other side, Gandhi tacitly acknowledged the natural difference of male and female attitude, and asserted that woman should transfer all her love to humanity, forgetting that she ever was or can be the object of man’s lust, while occupying her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader.

Women to rebuild society

Both the leaders believed that women should not only work for their upliftment but also for the betterment of society, though the extents envisaged by the two are obviously widely different.

Phule asserted that all Shtree-Purush should follow the righteous path, as prescribed by him, in order to rebuild the society. Some of the principles are given below:

- 1) Our creator has created all human beings. All men and women are by birth independent and are entitled to enjoy all due human rights. Those who accept this view are the followers of truth.
- 2) Those who do not trouble human beings created by our creator unnecessarily, are the votaries of truth.
- 3) Our creator has graciously bestowed all human rights on all men and women, without any distinction. No particular man or group of men has any right to oppress any human being.
- 4) Our creator has created all human beings. Each woman will choose one man as her husband, and each man will choose one woman as his wife. Barring such legitimate instances, if all men and women behave towards others all other human beings as brothers and sisters, are follower of truth.
- 5) To cohabit with a prostitute and next day again assume sacredness is no religion but degradation. According to him, those who regard except their wives, all other men and women as their brothers and sisters are followers of truth.
- 6) Men or women who do not discriminate against human beings, but who are ever ready to help, to the best of their ability, lepers, physically handicapped persons or orphans, or honour those helping such persons should be designated as the votaries of truth.
- 7) Every man or woman has a god-given right to freedom of expression in writing, speaking and publishing; he or she should not do it in such a way as to deprive others of their rights, those who do not condemn others for their political views or religious beliefs and do not harass them are followers of truth.
- 8) Such men or women who take proper care of their parents in their old age, such people duly should be designated as the votaries of the truth. Phule explained, that parents bring the children up and educate them with bundlers affection when they are mere dumb children, than it becomes their duty to look after their parents where in their old age they

are helpless and crippled. Men or women who do not indulge in immoral acts or who do not treat with respect persons indulging in such acts should be designated as the followers of truth.

- 9) Phule propounded his theory that God has provided for mankind; but human beings are not living peacefully as brothers and sisters. People forget their mothers, their brothers and their sisters. They do not behave well with their mothers, sisters, daughters and daughter-in-law. Many, on the contrary, give them bad treatment and charge them with cunning, deny them human rights, and do not lead a truthful life, otherwise there would have been kingdom of God on earth and mankind would have been happy. If men do not behave with one another lovingly, loyally and piously, fraternity will not be awakened in their mind. Unless fraternity is awakened in men's minds, god's kingdom will not come down upon earth. "Do unto others as you would be done by," is the message of the great and good man. God has given us freedom and religion those who do not deprive others of their rights or put others to a loss are followers of truth.
- 10) Men and women should be appointed to village and Government posts according to their qualifications. Those who ensure that the appointments are given to the proper persons are followers of truth.
- 11) Those who protect the rights of all men and women to property and freedom, and protect them from harassment, those who do not take wine or opium, or those who do not help such drunkards, those who do not kill beings except bugs, lice, scorpions. Serpents, jackals, lions and tigers, and do not help greedy persons and murderers or suicides are followers of truth.
- 12) Those men or women who for selfish ends do not tell lies to ruin others or do not help liars are followers of truth. Those who do not exploit poor people either in the name of religion or because of astrological superstitions are men of right conduct. Those who do not exploit the poor by selling them amulets are men of right conduct. The men, who live in a brotherly way with men of different habits and styles of dress or food, are men of right conduct.

Phule firmly believed that if all the men and women follow the above mentioned path, ideal Samaj would be established.

According to Gandhi, women should not only to confine their concerns, what are normally seen as women's issues but to have a say in the rebuilding of the whole society. However, Gandhi wanted women to act as moral guardians of society, as social workers and do-gooders without competing with men in the sphere of power and politics because that would be a 'reversion to barbarity'³ He urged to the women of India, "Dear sisters, the future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation. You can bring up the children of India to become simple, God-fearing and brave men and women, or you can coddle them to be weaklings, unfit to brave the storms of life and used to foreign fineries which they would find it difficult in after-life to discard".

One of the most important contributions of Gandhi to the women's cause was that he gave women's entry into political field as a moral legitimacy. The tradition was set for patronized entry of a handful of urban middle class women into politics and for tailoring the movement in such a way that some women's issues could easily be accommodated within the parameters of male domination and supremacy without throwing a serious challenge to it. Despite great concern for women's rights, Gandhi did not encourage women to organize as a political force in their own right around their own issues. In the course of his social reform work the realization came of him, he told a woman worker, that if he wanted to reform and purify society of the various evils that had crept into it, he had to cultivate a mother's heart. And so partly to expiate for a state of things in which as a man he felt he had a share, he became as mother in a special sense to one of them as he had been before to thousands of girls in a general way.

He sadly stated that very few women come out to serve their fellow-countrymen, "Women are the very incarnation of service, but at present they minister only to their own families. Why should they not extend the field of their ministry so as to embrace the whole of India?" He says, "Multitudes of women live in idleness, which will induce them to take to the industry?" He did not like women to decorate herself, he stated, "I am deeply pained when I see women heavily bedecked with ornaments. Who will explain to them that these trinkets are no aid to beauty? Women in the west are doing much work that was supposed to be reserved for men. I do not mean that all their activities are worthy of imitation, but they have certainly upset many calculations of man. When woman, freed from man's snares, rises to the full height and rebels against man's legislation and institutions designed by him, her rebellion, no doubt non-violent,

will be none-the-less effective. I will far rather see the race of man extinct than that we should become less than beasts by making the noblest of God's creation the object of our lust".

Gandhi does not see women as objects of reform, as helpless creatures deserving charitable concern. Instead, he sees them as active, self-conscious agents of social change. His concern is not limited to bringing about change in selected areas of social life such as education and marriage as a way of regenerating Indian society, as was that of most 19th century social reformers. He was primarily concerned with bringing about radical social reconstruction. He saw women playing the major role in the task of social reconstruction. He thought in the process of reconstructing society, they would also free themselves from the specific forms of bondage that affected them as women. When Phule prescribed the path for 'truth seekers' for rebuilding society or when he dreamt of establishing Satya Shodhak Samaj, he probably would have thought that the conditions of women and downtrodden would definitely improve in the process.

Marriage

Both the leaders have rendered valuable thoughts about ideal marriage, marriage deal and evils associated with the marriage ceremony.

Phule observed that the characteristics on which marriage should be based, are the mutual consent of girl and boy along with the consent of their parents, older and elders, friends and relatives, also thinking about their past and future. He stated, marriage should be settled by a girl or boy in consultation with their elders. The boy and girl should give proper thought to the matter. They should take a vow just after the marriage. They should give gifts to poor men irrespective of caste or creed. The marriage ceremony should be performed by simple rituals of Satyashodhak Samaj.

Phule supported contract marriage, According to him marriage is not holy sacrament but it is a holy contract. This kind of marriage known as Satyashodhak marriage in which, the bride asks the groom to take an oath for providing her the entire human rights after the marriage. Phule wrote all the procedure of marriage along with "Mangalashtaks" in Marathi which was formerly in Sanskrit language and hardly comprehensible to common masses. Thus, Phule took initiative in the celebrations of marriage ceremonies with very little amount of expenditure. Phule composed 'Mangal Gatha' in Marathi which is now available in Hindi version also.

Phule asserted that ideal marriage should be based upon mutual respect for each other and not merely on sexual desires. His sentiments are reflected in the following pledge which he prescribed for the groom. Phule criticised the lewd men who go for second marriage or remarriage to fulfill their sexual desires. He stated that first, the moment the husband starts disliking her first wife he brings a young woman into his home right in the presence of his first wife. Then he brings a third and then a fourth. Those who marry more than one at a time create a hell in their home, his lust becomes the bone of contention, besides this, many people cohabit with women in menstruation get dangerous diseases like leprosy and these epidemics doesn't spare the off-springs for a long time.

Gandhi has also expressed valuable thoughts on the marriage ideal. He said that ideal that marriage aims at is that of spiritual union through the physical. The human love that it incarnates is intended to serve as a stepping-stone to divine or universal love. Marriage is a natural thing in life, and to consider it derogatory in any sense is wholly wrong..... The ideal is to look upon marriage as a sacrament, and therefore, to lead a life of self-restraint in the married estate.

According to him, the true purpose of marriage should be, and is, intimate friendship and companionship between man and woman. There is in it no room for sexual satisfaction. That marriage is no marriage which takes place for the satisfaction of the sex desire. That satisfaction is a denial of true friendship. He even cited his example by saying, "I may say that my wife and I tasted the real bliss of married life when we renounced sexual contact and that in the heyday of youth. It was then that our companionship blossomed and both of us were enabled to render real service to India and humanity in general. Indeed, this self-denial was born out of our great desire for service.

Gandhi also expressed his views on evils associated with marriage ceremony. He strongly favoured simplification of the marriage rites and suggested that the religious ceremonials should not cost more than rupees ten. He said that by exercising self-restraint the rich people should lead the poor and thus be helpful in preventing the waste of national resources.⁴

Though both the leaders were staunchly against the extravagance in the marriage ceremony, Phule while prescribing the Satya Shodhak marriage, asserts tacitly that parents of bride should present clothes and jewellery to the parents of groom as gift. On the other hand, Gandhi was totally against the dowry system. According to him, it is nothing but sale of girls and it defiled the pure character of the marriage institution. Its immediate impact was nightmare for

the parents who had marriageable daughters, and in the long run it was also the source of discrimination in the Indian society against the birth of daughters. Furthermore, not being able to arrange money, the parents were forced to give their daughters in marriage to absolutely unsuitable matches. He condemned the system and said that it was nothing but sale of girls.⁵

Phule has also expressed his views on the family. Phule felt that the family, being at the centre of the organization of society, was also the centre of oppression in society. Its roots are to be traced to the Jati system. Phule did not believe in the Varna system and the patriarchy system. He considered that gender inequality and oppression are the outcome of the system of patriarchy. The women's question was of course a central question of nineteenth century. Phule took the question farther than anyone else. He was convinced that the family and the marriage system must be reformed, if not transformed altogether. He reviewed and revised the traditional marriage rites.

Both the leaders had some differences in their opinions about necessity of marriage of a girl. According to Phule, our creator has created all human beings. Each woman will choose one man as her husband, and each man will choose one woman as his wife. Barring such legitimate instances, if all men and women behave towards others all other human beings as brothers and sisters, are follower of truth.

However, one distinct point in Gandhian philosophy is that he believed that every girl is not born to marry. He asserted, that it was not essential for every Indian girl to marry and that he had examples of many girls, 'Who are today dedicating themselves to service, instead of serving one man'.⁶ He held very strong views about the marriage of girls. According to him, in India orthodox parents frown upon the institution of spinsterhood. They do not encourage their daughters to remain unmarried after they have attained maturity. To him, all this was abomination. He wanted full freedom for girls to grow up and remain brahmacharis as long as they liked. But suppression is bad. He did not want to encourage suppression through false modesty. It was their bane and undoing.

Gandhi did not see marriage and motherhood as the only mission in life for every young woman. To choose to remain unmarried for the nobler purpose for serving society was a much more preferable ideal for self-realization. He repeatedly lamented that a vast majority of girls disappear from public life as soon as they are discharged from schools and colleges". However,

in Gandhian view, dispensing with marriage and motherhood would necessarily involve dispensing with sexual relations altogether.

Gandhi's ideal of womanhood was Sita but his message to Indian women was to rise above wifedom and become 'sisters'. He felt a wife could never become a sister in full sense of the word. He held up many of those women as role models who stepped out of the confines of marriage, like Mirabai, to themselves to a higher cause. He evoked the idea of woman by and in her, woman as sage and social regenerator. Therefore, according to Gandhi, marriage was utopia but not a necessity.

Birth of a Son/Daughter

Both the leaders were unhappy to see the preference of parents for having a male child. Phule asserted that the birth of a daughter should be as pleasing to man as the birth of a son.

Gandhi attributed the Hindu Shastras bias for the male offspring to historical reasons and expressed his views in clear words; "I make no distinction between son and daughter. Such distinction is in my opinion is invidious and wrong. The birth of a son or a daughter should be welcome alike".⁷ He viewed that the soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings and considered each to be the complement of the other.

Gandhi also constantly warned women against depending on patronage. For example, he did not favour reservations for women of the kind that dalits were beginning to demand. "Merit should be the only test..... it would be a dangerous thing to insist on membership on the ground merely of sex. Women and for that matter any group should disdain patronage. They should seek justice, never favours."⁸ Yet, even while he thought women's primary work ought to be the care of the home, he vigorously asserted the need to give a special weightage to women; "Seeking however that it has been the custom to decry women, the contrary custom should be to prefer women, merit being equal, to men even if preferences should result in men being entirely displaced by women"⁹ Gandhi wanted women to be self-reliant; there should not be any kind of special consideration or favour because of their sex.

Purdah

Both the leaders were against the Purdah custom, because it became the obstruction for full-fledged emancipation of women. They wanted to eliminate this through thick and thin with the weapon of education.

Phule took the weapon of education to fight against the prevailing old and cruel customs rationally. According to Phule, “With the awareness of education, and coming out from the four walls of the house for education, women were no longer to remain in purdah”. Phule drew the attention of British government to put a check on conservative society through newspapers, writing articles, composing poems describing the predicament of woman.

Gandhi too was very perturbed to see the Purdah system existing in the society. He said that Purdah is a ‘barbarous custom’. According to Gandhi, it had become useless and doing incalculable harm to the country. Instead, he observed, it was a virtue which should grow from within and “To be worth anything, it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation”.¹⁰ It was his firm conviction that a fearless woman who knows that her purity is her best shield can never be dishonoured; however, beastly the man might be, he would ‘bow in shame before the flame of her dazzling purity. Such women, he maintained did not need protection by Purdah. Interference with the free growth of womanhood meant an injustice to the future generation. It revealed India’s weakness to the world, its indecision, narrowness and helplessness; hence it was that he asked everyone to join in and help him “To tear down Purdah with one mighty effort.”

Sati

Phule has asserted in his book ‘Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak’, that when the husband adorned with all ill-qualities dies, a woman has to hold the toe of the husband’s dead body and have her head shaven by a barber. She had to hand over all her ornaments to her old and dying father-in-law and become like a beggar women wearing bangles of tulsi wood. She has to give away all her rich clothes to her mother-in-law to wear and show off in her old age, and she herself must prepare to live in a poor cotton saree, she has to stop eating delicious food and fast on many days and if she does not even get to eat ground nuts on those days she should eat hard and dry rotis and live the rest of her life like a servant doing all the house work. If she does not have the courage of being called a strict religious woman by doing all these things then, for the greed of attaining immense virtue she should follow the Arya scriptures and sit down with the husband’s head in her lap and then all the utterly soft-hearted men burn alive this living and

conscious and ignorant woman. Therefore, after the death of the husband she has to undergo the cruel hardship of widowhood till death, besides earlier they used to become sati. Phule was convinced that the SATI tradition had become extinct and if there are some sporadic cases, they occur clandestinely.

Gandhi compared Satihood with the miseries of widowhood deprived of all worldly happiness in modern perspective. The ideal of the 'twentieth century Sati' is "She would prove her Satihood with every breath that she breath.....by her renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country. She would refuse to be enslaved by the narrow domestic cares and interests of the family, but would utilize every opportunity to add to her stock of knowledge and increase her capacity for service by more and more cultivating... self-discipline, and by completely identifying herself with her husband learn to identify herself with the whole world".¹¹ Such a sati would ever strive to "Make her husband's ideals and virtues live again (after his death) in her actions and thereby win for him the crowd of immortality." And since the average wife who strives to attain the ideal of sati will be a mother too, "She must add to her various qualities....a knowledge of rearing and bringing up the children so that they might live to be true servants of humanity...Satihood is the acme of purity. This purity...can be attained only through constant striving, constant immolation of the spirit from day to day". He further stated, no ruffian would dare to cast an evil eye on such a sati, however beastly the man, he will bow in shame before the flame of her dazzling purity"¹²

Therefore, it may be fairly concluded that the above thoughts on women are relevant even today. The ideas of the two great leaders on various issues related to women are not only realistic and relevant but also they depict the true story of womanhood. Both of them enumerated the problems of Indian women and provided commendable solutions for them. It is beyond doubt that their thoughts on women shall ever be the guiding principle for the feminist to follow. As long as the exploitation of women will continue, society can not practically prosper and both firmly believed it. Their thoughts on women are the golden chapters for the feminist to understand and pursue. So far as the women masses of Indian do not get their equal socio-economic status, their thoughts on women shall ever remain the most forceful agenda to be executed by the people and the government alike.

¹ C.W, Vol.LIX, p. 147.

² Phule, Stree Ani Purush, 1988, pp. 374-375.

- ³ Harijan, February, 24, 1940.
⁴ Young India, Sept. 26, 1926.
⁵ Harijan, May, 23, 1936.
⁶ M.K.Gandhi, 'To the Women' (ed.) A.T.Hindorani, Karachi, 1946, p.120
⁷ Harijan, 24, 2, 1940
⁸ Harijan, Vol.X, No.9, April 7, 1946, p. 67
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Young India, Feb.3, 1927.
¹¹ Young India, May,21, 1931, p.115.
¹² Harijan, March, 1, 1942.

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