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### Gandhi's role in social reforms (untouchability, women and rural development)

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**Abstract:** This report examines the significant contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to social reform in India, focusing on three major areas: the eradication of untouchability, the upliftment of women, and the transformation of rural society. Gandhi believed that political freedom would be meaningless without social justice and moral reconstruction. His approach to reform was rooted in truth, nonviolence, equality, and self-reliance, making social change a central part of the Indian freedom movement. In the struggle against untouchability, Gandhi treated it as a moral crime that weakened Indian society. He referred to the oppressed castes as Harijans (children of God) and worked to restore their dignity. Through campaigns, fasts, public speeches, and personal example, he encouraged people to reject caste discrimination and accept social equality. His efforts led to greater awareness and opened the path for legal and constitutional safeguards for marginalized communities. Gandhi also played a crucial role in the empowerment of women. He challenged traditional restrictions placed on women and encouraged their participation in public life. By involving women in national movements such as Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience, he helped them gain confidence and visibility. Gandhi emphasized education, self-discipline, and economic independence for women, viewing them as equal partners in nation-building. Rural development formed the foundation of Gandhi's vision for India. He believed that the soul of the nation lived in its villages. Gandhi promoted self-sufficient village economies through khadi, cottage industries, sanitation, basic education, and local governance. He encouraged people to depend on local resources and reduce exploitation. Overall, Gandhi's social reforms were not limited to laws or institutions; they aimed at transforming individual attitudes and social values. His holistic vision continues to inspire efforts toward equality, dignity, and sustainable development in modern India.

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## **Introduction**

Mahatma Gandhi was not only the leader of India's freedom struggle but also a powerful social reformer who worked to transform Indian society from within. He believed that political freedom would be incomplete without social justice, equality, and moral upliftment. For Gandhi, Swaraj did not merely mean independence from British rule; it meant the creation of a society free from discrimination, exploitation, and social evils. His ideas and actions were deeply rooted in truth (Satya), non-violence (Ahimsa), self-discipline, and service to humanity. These values shaped his efforts to reform Indian society, especially in areas where injustice had become deeply embedded through tradition. During Gandhi's time, Indian society was divided by caste discrimination, gender inequality, and rural poverty. Millions of people were treated as "untouchables," women were denied equal rights and education, and villages suffered from economic neglect and lack of basic facilities. Gandhi considered these conditions as major obstacles to national unity and moral progress. He believed that freedom from British rule would be meaningless if social oppression continued within the country. Therefore, he dedicated a large part of his life to fighting social evils alongside the freedom movement. Gandhi's approach to reform was unique. Instead of using force or hatred, he relied on moral persuasion, personal example, and constructive work. He lived a simple life, worked with the poorest sections of society, and encouraged people to change their attitudes rather than only laws. His campaigns against untouchability, his advocacy for women's dignity, and his efforts to revive village life were not isolated actions but part of a larger vision of an inclusive and self-reliant India. He believed that social change must begin at the grassroots level. According to him, every Indian had a moral responsibility to remove discrimination and promote harmony. Gandhi emphasized that true progress could be achieved only when the weakest sections of society were uplifted. His constructive programmes aimed to transform people's thinking and behavior so that equality, compassion, and cooperation could become the foundation of the nation.

Thus, Gandhi's role in social reforms was as significant as his role in the freedom struggle. His efforts towards the abolition of untouchability, empowerment of women, and rural development laid the moral foundation of modern India. Even today, his ideas continue to inspire movements for social justice, peace, and human dignity across the world.

### **1. Gandhi and the Fight Against Untouchability**

Gandhi considered untouchability a sin against humanity and a stain on Indian society. He believed that no individual could be considered inferior by birth and that caste-based discrimination was against moral and spiritual values. To show respect, he referred to the so-called untouchables as Harijans, meaning "children of God."

He actively worked to bring them into the mainstream. Gandhi encouraged temples to open their doors to all castes and urged people to eat and live together without discrimination. He travelled across villages, speaking against caste prejudice and asking people to purify their hearts. Through his journals and speeches, he spread awareness about the injustice faced by Harijans.



Gandhi also established schools and ashrams where people from all castes lived together. He personally cleaned toilets and performed tasks that were traditionally assigned to lower castes to show that no work was impure. His efforts helped to change social attitudes and prepared the ground for legal reforms against untouchability in independent India.

## **2. Gandhi's Views on Women's Empowerment**

Gandhi believed that women were equal to men in dignity and capability. At a time when women were confined to household roles, he encouraged them to participate in public life and national movements. He viewed women as symbols of courage, patience, and moral strength.

Gandhi strongly supported women's education and believed that educated women could uplift families and society. He opposed child marriage, dowry, and purdah, which restricted women's freedom. He encouraged women to become self-reliant by spinning khadi, learning skills, and participating in constructive work.

During the freedom struggle, thousands of women joined movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience under his guidance. Gandhi's trust in women's leadership gave them confidence and visibility. His ideas laid the foundation for the growth of women's rights and participation in independent India.

## **3. Gandhi and Rural Development**

Gandhi believed that India lived in its villages and that national progress depended on rural upliftment. He was deeply concerned about poverty, illiteracy, and poor sanitation in villages. His vision of development was based on self-sufficiency, simplicity, and community cooperation.

He promoted khadi and village industries to provide employment and reduce dependence on foreign goods. Gandhi encouraged villagers to use local resources and skills so that they could become economically independent. He also emphasized cleanliness, education, and health care in rural areas.

Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj focused on decentralized power and self-governing villages. He wanted each village to manage its own resources and solve its problems collectively. His rural development programmes aimed to create dignity of labor, economic stability, and social harmony.

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