

GANDHIAN IDEOLOGY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract: The empowerment of women is nowadays the most important issues of 21st century. Though in reality the empowerment of women is still an illusion. It is observed in everyday life how women become victim of various social evils. The father of our nation India, Mahatma Gandhiji experimented in this field a century ago and showed the way for the women empowerment and the development of the status of women. Gandhiji believed that unless and until women, on the basis of education, knowledge and skill do not acquire their esteem position in social, economic and political fields, they could not achieve self-respect for themselves. Nor they could become independent in any of the field of life. Throughout his life Gandhiji motivated Indians to take concrete and practical initiatives regarding education of women which will bring them out of these centuries' old conservative customs, rituals and rules followed in the society, which were responsible for their social slavery as well as mental slavery.

Keywords: Concept of Sarvodaya, Gandhiji's Perception of women, Gandhiji's voice against social wrongs, Role of women.

I. INTRODUCTION

M. K. Gandhi, the foremost person in the freedom struggle of India, who is the father of India, is the 'The Nation Maker'. Gandhiji put, his views about Economical, Social Political and the condition of females in the Society in any books he had written which gives right direction for the changes in the society[1]. Gandhiji was a social and political reformer and gave a strong fight for the cause. He played a vital role to remove the social evils committed against the women of the country through ages. He strongly believed that a society can develop rapidly if it takes all sections of the people together into its fold; rich and poor, high society people and low caste people and both men and women. To Gandhiji, social freedom was as crucial as political freedom.

Gandhian philosophy and his thoughts relating women's rights and empowerment are highly relevant today than what it was during his time. Women still continue to suffer from disabilities and miseries afflicted on them. Women are still considered as the weaker sex, still face subtle discrimination in almost all fields of life; still are not given equal opportunity and rights. For Gandhiji the question of women empowerment was as good as a human rights issue. And it is a well known fact that he was a strong

advocate of women's rights from the day he assumed leadership of the nationalist movement. His advocacy of women's rights was a step forward from his predecessors who championed the cause of women's liberation. No reformer or national leader prior to him had expressed so much concern about or questioned the fundamental inequality and injustice done to women in Indian society by denying them basic human rights. Since the beginning of his political career, Gandhiji kept working ceaselessly to enhance the condition of all the women socially, economically and politically and gain them back their genuine rights, honour and their privileges [2].

II. GANDHIJI'S VIEW ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In his political program, on priority basis he worked for the depressed and the deprived and women were the biggest block of this segment. He believed and also followed the principle of 'Sarvodaya' – which means comprehensive progress of all, both men and women. Gandhiji said "Womenhood is not restricted to the kitchen only, when the woman is liberated from the slavery of kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered." In view of that as a first step towards it, he gave them a clarion call during the freedom movement to come.

Though the concept of non-discrimination is central to all theories relating to women's rights, unfortunately even today we find that gender discrimination has become a global phenomenon and it is visible in every aspect of women's life. Therefore we have to look back again to Gandhiji and value his words and works for guidance to achieve success in our mission of empowering women. He indeed has indicated the path to reach the goal in an effective manner.

Gandhiji held very radical views about the emancipation and empowerment of women. Regeneration of women was an important aspect of his constructive program, where women were accorded special consideration. He had dynamic vision on the various issues and problems relating to women, which has often been reflected in his numerous writings and speeches. He raised his voice against female foeticide, infanticide, child marriage, widowhood, sexual harassment of women, domestic violence against women, discrimination against girl child, denial of education to women, dowry system etc. i.e., almost all the touching problems and issues relating to women of the contemporary world. His experiences and experiments, his researches and hypotheses while analyzing the causes of women's degeneration led him to conclude that something is radically wrong with the people both men and women against which the society should be sensitized and changed. He made many efforts to improve the condition of women by creating public awareness. At the outset he criticized the prejudices and the biases of Indian social structure, particularly men against women.

He was very critical in his condemnation of men's ill-treatment of women and in that context he said : "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 the humanity". Gandhiji believed in the inherent caliber, capabilities as well as the talent of women, so he wanted the society, to take the fullest advantage of their hidden potentialities and not just to fit them only as homemakers. His view of equal rights of woman and his high esteem of women is observed in his statement: "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her

own sphere of activity as man is in his.” Further he explained: “To me the female sex is not the weaker sex, she is the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering humility, faith and knowledge”. However he regretted that her services and contributions towards his family and society have never been recognized. In view of this he wanted men to realize that the empowerment of women is not a threat but a way to improve families and societies.

Moreover he was very clear in his mindset that the empowerment of women is not only a moral imperative but a prerequisite for strengthening democratic tradition and fighting against injustice and oppression. And for achieving that he insisted on equal rights and opportunities to be given to women. As early as 1919, addressing a women’s gathering at Bombay he expressed his feelings: “As long as women in India doesn’t participate equally with men in the matters and the affairs of the world and in also in the matters of religious and politics, we shall not be able to achieve the all round development of India. Further Gandhiji explained the point by giving an example: “Men who suffer from paralysis of one side of the body can do no work. Similarly if women do not share in men’s tasks, the country is bound to remain in a wretched state.” All that he wanted was the peaceful co-existence of man and woman. He wanted changed attitudes, values, beliefs and behavior in favor of women at par with men.

Gandhiji strongly believed that only women should lead the organizations devoted to the cause of women empowerment. That is because he learnt from his experiences that real advancement and empowerment of women can come only through their own efforts. It is well-known that violation of women’s Human Rights is often neglected in debates, discussions and decisions relating the issue due to the absence of women in such bodies and organizations. This problem already Gandhiji had anticipated long back and therefore he always insisted on women’s role in decision-making process. Today the biggest challenge before humanity is the question of women’s progress and development.

Gandhiji, throughout his life, struggled hard for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden people and also made significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. Women under his guidance took a milestone to step towards reestablishing their identity and position in the society. Gandhiji’s inspiring ideologies boosted their morals and helped to rediscover their self-esteem [3]. Not only there was a general awakening among women, but under Gandhiji’s leadership they also entered into the National mainstream, taking parts in the National movements. In Gandhiji’s words, “To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to women.” The views of Mahatma Gandhi and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely with the current times as the times have irreversibly changed but the honesty of the Mahatma Gandhi, the love and respect he had for the women, can never be doubted.

III. GANDHIJI’S PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

A considerable difference was observed in the Gandhiji’s perception of women from that of former as well as contemporary reformers of his time. The stance taken by other social reformers as well as by some of the leaders, prior to Gandhiji created a helpless image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhiji, a new conception of women gradually gained popularity. For Gandhiji, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. Instead Gandhiji believed that, “Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity.” In his

work, speeches and writings, Gandhiji said that in many matters, especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women are superior to the male. Gandhiji, while he stayed at home, tried to help his wife, Kasturba, in her daily household activities [4], [5]. Nowadays in the western countries, men are encouraged to be with their wives during the delivery and also they are supposed to pitch in with diaper changing, feeding etc. activities. Gandhiji practiced this modern concept 90 years ago in his family.

IV. ROLE OF WOMEN AS ENVISAGED BY GANDHIJI

Regarding the role of women, Gandhiji once said, “Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen.” He opined and felt that, “Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered.” It doesn’t mean that women should not cook, but only that household responsibilities be shared among men, women and children.

In a letter written to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21st of October 1936, Gandhiji wrote, “If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave- holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave- holder myself but Kasturba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished. Now I am in search of a woman who would realize her mission. Are you that woman, will you be one?” In this way, Gandhiji devoted himself to such a mission and formulated views on all aspects of a woman’s life, political, social and domestic and even the very personal. Gandhiji laid more emphasis on the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country. Under his guidance and leadership women came out from their houses and joined India’s struggle for independence [1]. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned Gandhiji felt that female folk could be engaged in the cottage and small scale industries of the village such as spinning, broom, basket and rope making, oil processing, etc. so that the rural women can supplement and contribute to the family income. Thus the empowerment of women has to be done to improve the quality of the society and development of the economy.

V. GANDHIJI’S VOICE AGAINST THE SOCIAL EVILS

From Gandhiji’s point of view, although he had great respect for the traditions of the country, he realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were anti-ethical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. Gandhiji quoted, “It is good to swim in the waters of tradition; but to sink in them is suicide”. Thus, he was completely against many social customs, traditions, norms and values and social evils like child-marriage, widowhood, the dowry system, the pardah system and prostitution, the witch-hunting, etc. which threat the development of the society.

VI. EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: THE GANDHIAN MODEL

According to Gandhiji, the three important factors that promote women empowerment are: education, employment and change in social structure. All the three components are equally important and mutually related. Simply educating the women would not automatically empower them. For example Kerala- the state that has hundred percent (100%)

literacy but the women folk is not even today free from exploitation. This is because of the fact that the traditional society is yet to be reformed to provide equal rights to the women.

CONCLUSION

It can be said undoubtedly, that Mahatma Gandhiji experimented a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of women and the improvement of the status of women in the country. But in reality we can see completely an opposite picture of the empowerment of women. It is a great regret for us that even today employment of women is still restricted in some families. They are not allowed to enter into certain jobs, beyond doctors, nurses, teachers and clerical jobs. In the family, the women sometime also become the victim of domestic violence and in the society they are also exploited by the social evils like dowry system, prostitution, witch-hunting etc.

It is high time we have to remember and follow the golden words of wisdom of Gandhiji relating Human Rights and Empowerment of Women for it to really become meaningful. The principle of non-violence is his greatest contribution to world civilization and if this principle is strictly followed by all nations, in every society and family then there will be no discrimination against women and where there is no discrimination, there is no need of empowering women; automatically there will be a just society based on equality and justice. There lies the relevance of Gandhian ideas and thoughts.

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