

Relevance Of Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas On Women Empowerment

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Abstract: Although, not a systematic thinker, Mahatma Gandhi along with his active leadership in India's freedom movement sought to liberate the people of India from the prevailing social evils where women were subordinated and their right as human beings were being violated. He campaigned for the empowerment of women by eradicating certain social evils prevalent in the Indian societies like child marriage, dowry, sati etc. The paper is an attempt to highlight Gandhiji's reformative ideas and its relevance in the present times.

Keywords: Dowry, empowerment, evils, Gandhi, purdah, social, women,

1 INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi or the Father of the Nation or Babu was born at Porbandar in Kathiawar of Gujarat. His father Karamchand Gandhi was a Dewan at the court of the ruler of Kathiawar and mother Putalibai Gandhi was a religious lady who inspired Gandhi deeply. As a child Gandhi was very shy and used to spend most of his time in his books. After achieving his degree of Law in England in 1891 he came back to India to set up his practice as a lawyer. But after sometimes he left for South Africa to join a job with a firm, and there he witnessed the ongoing racial discrimination against the non-whites. He organised the Indians living in South Africa and made them conscious of their sufferings. Gandhi returned to India at the eve of the First World War and he decided to extend his full support to the British government in the hope of getting full justice from the British Government. During the period 1915 – 1948 Gandhi worked for the sake of freedom of the country from the British Rule. In 1920 Gandhi started the Non-cooperation movement against the British government but later on he suspended the movement in the wake of the violence in the Chaura Chauri incidents in Uttar Pradesh. After the Chaura Chauri incidents Gandhi decided to work for the social and economic upliftment of the untouchables and women. Gandhi also led movements like Civil Disobedience movement in 1930-31 and Quit India movement in 1942. Gandhi was not a systematic thinker nor did he try to present in a systematic manner. But he preached certain principles which were quite consistent. Scholars have sought to analyse and present his views systematically. Some of the important ideas of Mahatma Gandhi are his views on Religion and Politics, Non-violence, Satyagraha, Swadeshi, Swaraj, his views on State, Nationalism, Spiritual democracy, Decentralization of Authority, Property and Trusteeship, Varna System, Bread Labour, Police and Military and Women empowerment. In addition to his full involvement in the movement for Indian Nationalism, Gandhi also proved himself to be a pioneer of social and political reformer who tried to eradicate the social evils prevalent in India through ages. "Gandhi's political ideologies, strongly anchored in humanitarian values, were a reflection of his spiritual self."^[1] Gandhi established a close relationship

between social and political problems. For him social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. He was a crusade for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden sections of the society and strongly condemned Untouchability, Caste and Varna system and the position and status of women in the Indian society.

2 GANDHI ON STATUS OF WOMEN:

Gandhi as a social reformer sought to reform the patriarchal nature of the Indian society which tried to confine women to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. *He has made remarkable contributions for the enhancement of the status of women in India and inspired the women of his period that boosted their morale and helped them to rediscover their self esteem.*^[2] Gandhi could not reconcile himself to the idea that women had a low place in our society and were inferior to men in intelligence or wisdom. According to him both men and women are of equal rank and supplementary to each other and the existence of one was could not be justified without the other. He further believed that the way men influence the public life, the domestic life falls under the influence of women and therefore women should have as much autonomy in her own circle of influence as man has in his own. As Gandhi said,

"Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him."^[3]

Gandhi also suggested that women should cease to think that they were the creatures to satisfy the lust of man. He called upon women to realise themselves as independent human beings and decorate themselves with high qualities so that whole humanity was benefited. Gandhi said, *"Man is born of woman, he is flesh of her and bone of her bone. Come to your own and deliver your message again."*^[4] Gandhi wished that women should realise that they were not slaves and playthings of men, their whims and fancies but should try to come up to the standard of men and should copy what was best in them. In Young India, Gandhi wrote,

"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 inferiorities which they would find it difficult in after life to discard."^[5]

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3 GANDHI'S CONCEPT ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

"Women's empowerment is the process in which women elaborate and recreate what it is that they can be, do and accomplish in a circumstance that they previously were denied."^[6]

Gandhi had been a radical person so much as the emancipation and empowerment of women was concerned. In Gandhian view, women empowerment means the provision of equal status, freedom and opportunity to women to develop them. *"The goal of empowerment Gandhi believes depends on the threefold revaluation: Firstly, to change in their lives; secondly, to create a change in their lives; and thirdly, to change the social structure."*^[7] According to Gandhi, the three key factors for promoting women empowerment are; education, employment and change in the social structure which are equally important and mutually related. Gandhi was of the opinion that women have been suppressed under customs and law set by men and women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. He was against the exploitation of women in the name of customs and tradition and therefore he called upon women to realise themselves as fellow human beings who are complements to men. He had immense faith in the inner strength of women and held that women are naturally endowed with qualities of love, non-violence, forgiveness and a remarkable capacity for sacrifice. His concern for upliftment women gets reflected through his strong voice against foeticide, infanticide, sexual harassment of women, domestic violence against women, discrimination and denial of education to girl child, social evils like dowry system, child marriage, widowhood etc. and almost all the issues and problems relating to the women in the present time. Gandhi stated that granting political and legal rights to women would be the starting point of enabling the society to transform itself by ending all exploitation, a process in which the women would be the prime movers. Thus Gandhi said,

"Let them become the members of legislatures in India, but the foremost duty of women is to save themselves from the intentional unintentional tyranny of men and make India glorious and strong."^[8]

Gandhi also urged the women to acknowledge their inner moral for their emancipation from the domination of men and be participant in the National Movement. Under the influence of the Mahatma, Women were seen in the forefront of the Civil Disobedience and the Salt Satyagraha Movements. Similarly Gandhi also believed that economic freedom should be provided to women for empowering them. According to him men and women had different spheres of work and for emancipating themselves women could take to economic activities to supplement the income of their families like spinning yarn and weaving clothes for selling. He believed that women would be able to fulfill their needs with the money they earn and the more they earn would bring them self sufficiency. In addition to political and economic emancipation, Social emancipation of the country was also of great importance for empowering the womenfolk of the country and for this Gandhi envisaged a critical role of the women to drive away the evil forces of the society like communalism, caste system and

untouchability, child marriages, purdah, sati pratha etc..

"Gandhi gave powerful support to the cause of women's emancipation and vehemently criticized various social evils afflicting women."^[9]

According to Gandhi only through political, economic and social emancipation development of women of the deprived section of the society would be possible. Gandhi's concept of development was 'Sarvodaya through Antyodaya' which means welfare of all through the weakest section of the society. For him, Sarvodaya means collective or universal welfare for all sections of the society and also simple living with high thinking and respect for all types of jobs. In the economic aspect 'Sarvodaya' stands for decentralization of authority and that means of production as well as distribution shall be controlled and managed by the society. In a Sarvodaya society, there will be cooperative system of production both in the industry as well as agriculture. There will also be a village autonomy in a Sarvodaya society. Thus in the Gandhian philosophy development of all would be possible only when both men and women share equal opportunities and status in the society. Development would not be possible when a section of the society remains under the domination of the other.

4 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON WOMEN EDUCATION:

According to Gandhi education of women is an important factor which would lead to their empowerment and ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. Men and women are compliment to each other and that

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

Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom and hence, educating the women would uphold their natural rights.

"The Mahatma's views on education are based on family ideals because he assumes that man is supreme in the extra-mural activities and that women are supreme in intra-mural activities."^[10]

Hence education imparted to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life.

5 GANDHI ON WOMEN AND THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE:

For Gandhi, marriage should not be meant only for fulfilment of sexual desire but should be considered as means to get progeny. It should also be meant for nobler and pious an institution. In 1926 Gandhi wrote, *"For me married state is as much a state of discipline as any other. Life is duty, a probation. Married life is intended to promote mutual good, both here and hereafter. It is meant also to serve humanity."* For Gandhi, marriage should be considered as a sacred institution and that it was natural in life and should not be considered derogatory in any sense. Gandhi advised young men not to marry till the age of 25 or 30 years and suggested for marriages arranged by parents.

(i) Child Marriage:

Mahatma Gandhi wanted to radically reform system of marriages and social evil like child marriage prevailing in the Indian society during his aegis. He was a supporter of inter-caste marriages and non-communal marriages. Gandhi himself being a victim of child marriage repented throughout his life for getting married at the very early age. According to him early marriage was disadvantageous as it resulted in the poor health of the couple and excess child production. Child marriages was one of the causes of many child widows in India and also a factor responsible for social, physical and morale degradation of the women.

(ii) Widowhood and Widow Remarriage:

Gandhi was very much sympathetic about the helpless conditions of the Indian widows of his period and his views about widow remarriages set a good example of a profound social reformer. He felt that ban on widow remarriage through social and religious barriers was another social evil prevailing in the Indian society which needs to be driven away and condemned without any hesitation. *“Widowhood imposed by religion or custom was an unbearable yoke and defiled home by secret vice and degraded the religion.”*^[11] He had expressed different ideas on widow remarriage based on the widowhood of women; child widowhood and adult widowhood. According to Mahatma Gandhi, if a girl is widowed before the age of 15 yrs, they should be married off by their parents and it should not be called as remarriage because they were not really married in the true sense. In the case of young widows, they should be set free to decide whether they wish to live alone and remain a widow or to marry again. *“In the case of adult widows, especially those with children; he would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love rather than to remarry.”*^[12] But in case she wants to remarry, she should have the right to do so and the society should accept it and must not look down such marriage.

6 GANDHI ON ERADICATION OF SOCIAL EVILS FOR ENHANCEMENT OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN:

Gandhi had a great respect for the cultural traditions of the country but at the same time he was also critical of certain customary practices that hindered the development of women of the nation. According to Gandhi, *“It is good to swim in the waters of tradition; but to sink in them is suicide.”*^[13] Therefore in addition to child marriages and widowhood he was very critical of other social evils like dowry system, purdah, sati pratha, prostitution and devadasi, witch-hunting etc. prevalent in the Indian society where women remain the primary victims. He was of the opinion that women empowerment and enhancement of their position and status would be possible only after eradicating the prevailing social evils.

(i) Purdah:

Purdah system prevailed in the Indian society to assure the female chastity right from the ancient times. Gandhi did not accept the tradition of purdah as Indian tradition and was pained to see the humiliated condition of women by the custom of purdah. He advised men to trust their womenfolk and not to impose purdah upon the women for maintaining chastity. *“It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to the society.”*^[14] Gandhi had a pertinent question on the tradition of purdah; *“Why do our women not enjoy the same freedom that men do? Why should they not able to walk out and have fresh air.”*^[15] According to him as long as women are caged and confined in their houses and court yard, humanity will remain diminished. *“He therefore suggested that it was every Indian’s duty to tear down the purdah with one’s mighty.”*^[16]

(ii) Dowry System:

Gandhi strongly opposed the practice of dowry system during marriages and condemned it as a cruel custom that degraded the position and status of women. According to him the existence of the tradition of dowry degrades the institution of marriage into ‘marriage by purchase’ and degrades girls into commodities to be sold and bought and even to be bargained. He further opined that marriage with dowry discredits the education of women and dishonoured womanhood. *“He came down on the dowry system very strongly and wanted the dowry demanding husband to be ex-communicated.”*^[17] Gandhi was in favour of creating a strong public opinion that condemns the practice of the dowry system and also wanted the women to wait till the ideal suitor comes to marry the girls without exchange of dowry.

(iii) Sati Pratha:

Sati Pratha is also one of the famous social evils prevailing in the Indian society where a woman either by her own will or in the name of custom mounts the funeral pyre of the deceased husband and is burnt alive along with the dead body of the husband. Gandhi considered this practice as barbarous where a live woman gets burnt alive. He wanted the women instead of mounting the funeral pyre can prove their sati hood by sacrificing and dedicating herself to the service of her husband’s family and the country.

(iv) Prostitution and Devadasi:

Gandhi strongly posted against prostitution as he was very much disturbed by the plight of women in the brothels and the miserable conditions of the children in brothels and the way they were treated. He also considered men as equally responsible for perpetuating this evil. Mahatma Gandhi said, *“Whether they known as Devadasi or by other name the problem is same. It is a matter of bitter shame and sorrow of deep humiliation that a number of women have to sell their chastity for man’s lust.”*^[18] He was of

the view that protecting women's honour and dignity was as holy as protecting cows. He wished that after India's independence the system of temple women and brothels should be abolished and the women indulged in such practices would be rehabilitated.

7 RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN VIEWS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Gandhi had visualized women's role as active agents of transformation in the society since they constituted half of the nation's strength in terms of population and could influence on the future citizens of the country. He envisaged an important role of women to fight against inequality of sexes, racism, classicism, and oppression of women and discrimination of girls in educational institutions, female infanticide etc.

"Contemporary feminist analysis on empowerment of women includes not only of sexism but also of racism, classism and imperialism as determining factors in shaping women's status in the private and public realm."^[19] *"This development seems consonant with Satyagraha which for Gandhi was inclusive quest to find creative solutions for all forms of oppression."*^[20]

But, the ideals and aspirations of Gandhi is yet to be realized where the active role of women is very much important. India has completed 70 years of independence and has

"progressively advanced towards a secular democratic republic, the mass of women who constituted the moral strength of freedom movement under Gandhiji, receded into background in a mood of relaxation and lapse."^[21]

If Gandhi would have lived for some more years, the energy of women that played an important role in the National Freedom movement would have been used for the nation building purpose of the country and also would have energized them into their own problems of uplift and welfare schemes in a more collective and concentrated way. After independence, India continued the process of enacting necessary legal measures to raise the status of Indian women and as such the Constitution of India grants equality of sexes. **Article 14** ensures equality before law.

Article 16(I) guarantees equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under state. The enactment of **Hindu Law** guarantees the right to divorce and remarriage to Hindu women. The **Inheritance Act** provides equal share to women in property and establishment of the principle of monogamy which are important innovations introduced in the Indian social structure affecting women's status and role.

The **Termination of Pregnancy, Maternity Benefit Act, The Dowry Prohibition Act** and so on are some the measures of relief for all women irrespective of caste, creed or religion.

The **Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act**, 1983 provides crucial amendments concerning women in the **Indian Penal Code**. Establishment of **Women's Cell** and the creation of a **Ministry for Women's Affairs** are positive steps in the direction of improving the position of women. Besides the establishment of **National Committee on Status of Women** and **National Commission of Women**, proliferation of **Mahila**

Mandals establishment of **Fast Track Courts** for trial of rape and murder of women are provisions for the enhancement status women in different aspects. Despite such provisions, an opposite picture of empowerment of women is seen in the country. The mobility of women is still restricted in many societies and even restricted from working outside homes. Women continue to be the victims of domestic violence, dowry, prostitution and witch-hunting etc.

"During 1993 there were 20,537 dowry deaths according to the Home Ministry where U.P is leading in 1993 with 1,952 dowry deaths."^[22] *"The NCRB data says so- crimes against women have recorded a whopping 83% increase from 2007 to 2016."*^[23]

The trend of crime against women is rising rapidly than ever expected and women in India are less safe today than they were ten years ago. Thus the ideas and thoughts envisaged by Gandhi to build a just society with equality of sexes with absence of casteism, racism, and social evils remain unfulfilled.

8 CONCLUSION:

India is at 21st century and it is the call of the time to realize that discrimination, crime against women and gender bias would always lead to violation of the human rights of women and become barrier for women empowerment. Hence it is high time to follow and remember the golden words of Mahatma Gandhi. If his principle of non-violence is followed by all nations, the discrimination against women will get reduced and where there is no discrimination, there won't be any need to empower women. And this would automatically lead to the creation of a just society based on equality and justice.

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