



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-IV, Issue-I, July 2015, Page No. 105-109

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Gandhi on Women Emancipation

Subhas Garai

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Rishi Bankim Chandra College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The present century, the age of humanism is the high time to provide an equal privilege and dignity to all the suppressed and oppressed sections of the society. Therefore Women emancipation and upliftment has been becoming a burning issue day by day in the present century. Unlike many noble souls who focused on this issue, Gandhi is one of them. Gandhi had distinct views regarding different issues related to women. In this article we shall try to analyze Gandhi's views regarding different women issues in the present society. Gandhi focused on different women issues like marriage, divorce, widow remarriage, pardah system, dowry system, women education, political involvement of women etc. So we shall try to find the way out that Gandhi prescribed regarding different women issues existing in the society.

Key Words: *Women, Marriage, Divorce, Education, Dowry System, Pardah System, Widow Remarriage.*

Introduction: In accordance with the social changes and developments the necessity of women empowerment and gender issue has been becoming a burning issue day by day. Removing social disparities between men and women and bringing about equal status of women along with men at every spheres of life like economic, political, social, educational and professional and even to religious spheres also has become a burning necessity in the present century which is an age of humanism. For the full growth and the protection of humanity and the human society as a whole equal upliftment of the women is a necessary condition. Different social and religious reformers at every age and society put their attention to this issue and provided their valuable contribution in different issues regarding women upliftment and empowerment. Different religious and social norms tried to bind with shackles the feet of women from the ancient ages. But history tells us that different women like Gargi, Arundhuty, Opola, Maitreyee, Drapodi, Damoyonti, could succeeded to put themselves as bright examples to break up the chain of the ignorance of society and played a vital role to prove the necessity of social reformation and the upliftment of women. Although it is true to some living religions to provide an exalted position and high status to women in every spheres of life in the society, still some aspects of some existing religions are causes of concern and degradation of the position of women in the society.

Gandhi on women: Like many other noble souls who wrote and worked with the principle of gender equality in the society, Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nation, played a vital role to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century. Gandhi opined that for the all round development of the whole humanity, the emancipation or the liberation of the women who are the most suppressed and oppressed section of the society in the various aspects of social life, should be brought. Thus Gandhi put his noble focus on the all round

development and emancipation of women in the society and this became one of his noble life-goals. Gandhi said that the women's minds should be awakened so that they can realize their own dignity and self-esteem and can shed off their deep rooted sense of inferiority. To quote Gandhi's own words as "when women whom we call abala (weak) becomes sabala (strong), all those who are helpless will become powerful." As a result Gandhian views attracted a large number of women, irrespective of rural, urban, educated, uneducated, Indian or foreign. Gandhi focused on different issues related to the emancipation of women like equality of sexes, marriage, Pardah, dowry system, widow remarriage, divorce, women education and co-education, birth control etc. Gandhi in clear voice opined that women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. But women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of men.

Gandhi on marriage and divorce: Gandhi had clear cut voice with regard to different feministic issues. According to Gandhi "*marriage is a sacrament. It is a natural thing in life.*" (*Harijan*, 22nd March, 1942) *Thinking of the state of affairs in our country, very few Indians need to marry at the present time. The purpose of marriage is to get progeny but all progeny that is born now is the issue of passion, mean and faithless. Gandhi advised young men not to marry till 25 or 30. He preferred arranged marriages but the young man needs to be consulted by the parents if he is more than 25. (A Handbook of Sarvodaya, Part-2, p55, compiled by Subhash Mehta).*

Gandhi regarded that divorce is not the only alternative solution when a marriage relationship is in a state of suspension. Gandhi regarded that marriage is a state of discipline. This state of discipline can be maintained through moral restraint and repentance. So to keep a marriage relation intact moral restraint should be observed so that the unexpected situation of divorce can be avoided. In Gandhi's words "*marriage confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other. However, divorce is not the only alternative. Marriage is a state of discipline. When one partner breaks discipline, the other can break the bond. The breach here is moral and not physical. It precludes divorce. Hinduism regards each as absolute equal of the other. Hinduism leaves the individual absolutely free for the sake of self-realization, for which and which alone he or she is born*" (*Young India*, 21st October, 1926).

Widow Remarriage: Gandhi was against the laws, barriers, customs imposed by society to a widow. He emphasized on free will of women in this regard. He said that adult widow with children, should not alter the marriage vows taken at the time of their first marriage. But he also added that if anybody wishes can enter to a second relationship. In case of child widow Gandhi had strict views. He wanted child widow to be duly married. He was of the opinion that the first marriage in case of child widow was not a marriage at all in the real sense of the term. Gandhi put a good example by allowing his own son Hiralal to remarry a widow after his wife's death on 1918. Gandhi realized that widow remarriage is necessary to keep the society intact and to save the people from being deviated from the main stream of the society. Gandhi had seen that his son Hiralal became addicted to alcohol and women after his wife's death. So to prevent such a deviation widow remarriage becomes necessary. Gandhi expressed his views regarding widow remarriage in *Young India* as follows...

"Widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable yoke and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion. In order to save Hinduism, enforced widowhood must be ridden. Child widows must be duly and well married and not remarried. They were never really married." (*Young India*, 5th August, 1926)

Dowry System: Gandhi regarded dowry system as a social curse and thus such a system must be abolished. To the bride side it seems like nightmare. Still in our society birth of a girl child is not regarded joyfully as the birth of boy. Gandhi opined that the dowry system is a product of the caste

system. So he wanted abolition of the caste system from the society. Gandhi wanted the dowry demanding husband to be excommunicated totally. Gandhi advocated inter caste marriage and wanted women to wait to have found a perfect match who would be a gallant young man. Gandhi expressed his views regarding this social curse in Young India as follows...

“The dowry system is a product of the caste system. The abolition of caste will lead to the abolition of dowry (Harijan, 23rd May, 1936). Demanding dowry is akin to discrediting womanhood. Young men who demand dowry should be excommunicated. Parents of girls should cease to be dazzled by English degrees and should not hesitate to travel outside their little castes and provinces to secure true, gallant young men for their daughters” (Young India, 21st June, 1928).

Moreover Gandhi wanted to simplify the marriage ceremonies so that it may not become a burden to the bride family. Many marriages were celebrated in Gandhi’s Ashram through Ashram prayer in a very simple manner. Gandhi used to provide the newly married couple some valuable moral advises and a copy of Bhagavad Gita.

Pardah System: Gandhi was against the pardah system. He regarded it as a social and religious barrier and interferes to perform different works by women. Gandhi said that women chastity is a matter of purity in body and mind and can be protected through self control and not by veil (pardah). His view regarding pardah is as follows...

“Chastity cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the Pardah. It must grow from within and it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation (Young India, 3rd February, 1927). Why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? Female or male purity cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self effort” (Young India, 25th November, 1926).

Women Education: Gandhi was in favor of promoting women education or literacy. He thought illiteracy of women as a curse of the human society. The vast number of illiterate women in society is due to the ancient norms, customs, laws, that are imposed upon women by the patriarchal society. As Gandhi quoted in Harijan...;

“As for illiteracy among the women, its cause is not mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men. A more potent cause is the status of inferiority with which an immemorial tradition has, unjustly branded her. Man has converted her into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasure, instead of regarding her as his helpmate and ‘better half’! The result is a semi paralysis of our society. Woman has rightly been the mother of the race. We owe it to her and to ourselves to undo the great wrong that we have done her.” (Harijan, 18-2-1939)

But Gandhian view of women education is based on biological discrimination of men and women and on family ideals. Because he assumed that men are fit to perform outward activities and women for household ones. But men and women are supplementary to each other. Thus while formulating the principles of education and course of instruction these primary principles should be kept in mind. As Gandhi quoted.....

“Man and woman are of equal rank but they are not identical. They are a peerless pair being supplementary to one another; each help the other, so that without one the existence of the other cannot be conceived, and therefore it follows as a necessary corollary from these facts that anything that will impair the status of either of them will involve the equal ruin of them both. In framing any scheme of women’s education this cardinal truth must be constantly kept in mind. Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair and therefore it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand home life is entirely the sphere of woman and therefore in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge. Not that knowledge should be divided into water tight compartments, or that some

branches of knowledge should be closed to anyone; but unless courses of instruction are based on a discriminating appreciation of these basic principles, the fullest life of man and woman cannot be developed.”(Speeches and writings of Mahatma Gandhi, pp, 425-426; 20-2-1918)

Political Involvement of Women: Gandhi wanted to inject moral and ethical elements in every aspects of life that may be political, social, economical, biological anything. To the issues of women empowerment Gandhi followed the same strategy. Gandhi could find out that Satyagraha, salt agitation spinning are the ways for women to join the political movement to attain Swaraj. Gandhi saw that these are the easily accessible and non-violent ways to be practiced by women to involve themselves for the freedom struggle of India. Satyagraha is the most powerful and non-violent and moral weapon and strategy to ensure women empowerment Gandhi was one of few successful person to involve women to the Satyagraha struggle directed for Indian independence. Gandhi could see that women are the ardent followers of Satyagraha and had deep level faith on women’s inherent capacity for non-violence. Women’s active participation in political movement in South Africa and the success attained there enriched Gandhi’s faith about women’s inner strength or soul force. The notable activities performed by the South African women directly or indirectly are preparing and selling Khadi, holding public meetings, picketing soaps of foreign liquor and foreign goods, suffering imprisonments and even donating their own wealth and belongings. This direct and indirect participation of women in political movements not only enhanced the internal moral strength of women but also helped them to throw out the age-old prejudices prevailing in the society at that time. Moreover the active participation of women in political movements and Indian freedom struggle feminized the nationalistic movement. So we can say that Gandhi’s leadership for women led them to maintain their self-esteem and dignity.

Conclusion: In the 21st century, although social milieu has been changed and developed, still the status of women in our society is inferior to that of men comparatively. Women are expected to be dependent upon men and do as directed. Women are regarded as either property or instruments for playing or entertainment or as the kitchen bee. But it is the time to protect women for the sake of the whole human society. It is the time to change our mentality and to feel that it is our moral, social, constitutional, responsibility to ensure women’s progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities.

Bibliography

1. ‘Gandhi and Women’ by Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur, an associate and follower of Gandhi.
2. ‘Gandhi and Empowerment of Women’ by KD Gangrade, Vice Chairman, Gandhi Smiriti and Darshan Samiti, Rajghat, New Delhi.
3. ‘Gandhi and Women’s Empowerment’ by Jaya Jaitly.
4. ‘India of My Dreams’ – A compilation of Gandhian writings by RK Prabhu, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. Eighth Reprint, May 2001. (Chapters 54 to 57).
5. ‘A Handbook of Sarvodaya – Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayaprakash Narayan: The Triumverate of Sarvodaya’ – A compilation by Subhash Mehta (P.No.55 – Social Institutions.)
6. ‘Gandhi’s Feminist Politics, Gender Equity and Patriarchal Values’ by Kiran Saxena.
7. ‘Women the Comrade’ by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, an associate and follower of Gandhi.
8. ‘Mahatma Gandhi – His Life and Times’ by Louis Fischer.

9. 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth' by MK Gandhi.
10. 'Gandhi – A Life', by Krishna Kriplani
11. 'A Handbook of Sarvodaya – Gandhi, Vinoba and Jayaprakash Narayan: The Triumverate of Sarvodaya' – A compilation by Subhash Mehta (P.No.55 – Social Institutions.)
12. 'Gandhi on Gender Violence and Gender Equality' by Dr. Anupama Kaushik, Reader in Political Science, Basnasthali University.
13. 'Mahatma versus Gandhi' by Dinkar Joshi, Jaico Publishing House, MG Road, Mumbai – 400 001.
14. 'A Tribute to Mahatma Gandhi: His Views on Women and Social Changes' by Sita Kapadia, Director, Self Enhancement Learning Forum, Houston, Texas, United States.