

Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts on Women Empowerment

Joydeb Nayek

Assistant Professor of Political Science.

Silda Chandrasekhar College, Silda, Jhargram.

Email – joydeb.nayek213@gmail.com

Abstract:

Today women empowerment is one of the most important concerns with respect to the growth of the society. Women 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. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. From equal status with men in ancient times, through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers. One of them is Mahatma Gandhi. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the views of Mahatma Gandhi on women and foresee the relevance of his philosophy in twenty – first century India. His views on different aspects on women such as purdha system, equality of sex, dowry system, widow remarriage, divorce, women education, birth control etc. has been described. Considering the fact that Gandhi has believed in the empowerment of women a decade ago, but still its relevance is and will be necessitated in every phase of time.

Introduction:

Empowerment means to have energy over one's life and equal opportunity to participate in society. Women empowerment is the processes by which women gain power, promote sense of self worth, their ability to determine their own choices and their right to influence social change for themselves and others. Women empowerment is to evolve a system where women contribute to the development of the society and the political environment is such that they exist and flourish without exploitation, apprehension and oppression. Empowering the women of India means – equality in decision making and ability to control one's own life irrespective of one's gender. Mahatma Gandhi, as a major social and political reformer, played an important role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the women of the country through ages, Gandhi considered women as the mother of the race. Women should not be an instrument of pleasure. They should be regarded as man's helpmates. Women under his ages as a milestone to step towards re-establishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideology boosted their morals and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awaking among the women, but under Gandhi's leadership they entered into the national main stream, taking parts in the national movement. Mahatma Gandhi was an advocate of women's liberalization and empowerment and was a staunch supporter of gender equality. He believed that many of his contemporary movements stopped half-way because of the condition of 'our women' and much of the work did not yield appropriate results because women power had not been used. In this understanding of the essence of the dilemma of women, Gandhi was far in advance of his time. Very few people thought about the basic inequality and social justice that were women's lot politically, economic and socially. There was no awareness of the women's role as the equal partner of man, nor was there any recognition of the identity of the women as a

person in her own right. Gandhi always wanted women to take part in freedom struggle and therefore always motivated Kasturba his beloved wife to take lead in organizing meeting of women. Comparing his vision of women with the current status of women and the ongoing struggle for women`s empowerment will provide a measure of what has been achieved.

Equality of Sexes:

Women must not suffer any legal disability which is not suffered by men. Both are perfectly equal. Sexual equality does not translate into occupational equality in spite of the absence of a legal bar. Women instinctively recoil from a function that belongs to men. Nature has created sexes as complements of each other. Gandhi believed that men and women are equal as the same atma (soul) dwells in the women`s body. Since soul is sexless men and women are perfectly equal in the eyes of God. The question is therefore who should complement whom. It should be matter of choice both for the men and the women as husband and wife as to what vocation they should take up. It is injustice to expect the women to complement as a matter of an unwritten rule. To say that their functions are defined as are their forms is to emphasize on the sexual division of labour. The theory of sexual division of labour has been set aside by the developments since the departure of the Mahatma. Today men and women, compete and co-operate, complement and even supplant each other. The Mahatma`s view on women being a complement of men should be looked at from the point of view of his intention. The Mahatma`s intention of family and at the same time exalt women with equal status. He recommended equal remuneration for women. He believed that women have equal mental capacities; have the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of men; and have same right to freedom and liberty as men.

Purdah system:

Mahatma Gandhi discarded the purdah system as an Indian tradition He regarded `Purdah` as an irrelevant barrier that interferes unnecessarily while performing different tasks by women. Gandhi pointed out logically that when the women of ancient India held public discourses and participated in them, they certainly did not do so from behind the purdah. It is not known among the peasantry even now, although many in our society, then and now, although many in our society, then and now, upheld, and continue to uphold purdah as an ancient custom. Gandhi asserted that `we must list on the anvil of reason everything that is capable of being listed by it and reject that which does not satisfy it even though it may appear in an ancient garb.` The Indian man has been unduly obsessed with female chastity right from the ancient times. The Mahatma was different to the extent that he demanded male chastity also. That the Hindu purdah or the Muslim Purdah cannot protect chastity and that only self – control and purity of mind can do that is absolutely right.

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 was totally against the malicious practice of child marriage. According to him early marriage was disadvantageous as it resulted in the poor health of the couple and excess child production. Gandhi said, “ The reform must begin

by those who have girl widows taking courage in both their hands and seeing that the child widows in their charge are duly and well married not remarried. They were never really married.....` (Kripalani 1970) He also said , ‘we shall not solve the problem of women`s education merely by educating girls. Victims of child marriage, thousands of girls vanish from view at the early age of twelve. They change into house wives. Till this wicked custom has disappeared from among us, the husband will have to learn to be the wife`s teacher. A great many of our hopes lie in women being educated on matters mentioned above. It seems to me that unless women cease to be a mere means of pleasure or cooks to us and come to be our life companions, equal partners in the battle of life, sharers in our joys and sorrows, all our efforts are doomed to failure.`

As a social reformer Gandhi was very much sympathetic about the helpless conditions of the Indian widows of his period and his views about widow remarriages. 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. He was in favour of giving due consideration to the problem of widows. He said, ‘ We cry out for cow protection in the name of religious, but we refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl widow.` We could resent force in religion. But in the religion we force widowhood upon our girl widows who could not understand the importance of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily paying dearly` (Kripalani, 1970). He was against all social and religious barriers to widow marriage. In the name of religion we force widowhood upon our three lakhs of girl widows who could not understand the import of the marriage ceremony. To force widowhood upon little girls is a brutal crime for which we Hindus are daily paying dearly.

Dowry system:

Mahatma 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. Gandhi considered it as an outcome of the caste system. Demanding dowry is akin to discrediting womanhood. As per Gandhi the abolition of the caste system will lead to the eradication of the dowry system. Dowry for the middle and poor class was not less than a nightmare hence the birth of girls itself becomes a burden and gives a platform for gender discrimination among society as a whole. Because of this, one could find celebration on the birth of a male child but silent sorrow on the birth of a female child. Gandhi`s opinion was that if a man asks for dowry he should be excommunicated from society. 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.

Divorce:

Marriage confirms the right of union between two partners to the exclusion of all the others when in their joint opinion they consider such union to be desirable, but it confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other to one`s wish for union. Marriage is a state of discipline. When one partner breaks discipline, the other can break the bond. Gandhi regarded that divorce is not the only alternative solution when a marriage relationship is in a

state of suspension. Moral breach can be corrected by moral restraint and repentance. More importantly, he says that Hinduism offers the freedom of self- realization for both men and women. Gandhi was clearly against any kind of male chauvinism. He said, ‘‘ the wife is not the husband’s slave but his companion and his help-mate and equal partner in all joys and sorrows- as free as the husband to choose her own path.’’

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. The Gandhi’s view on education are based on family ideals because he assumes that men is supreme in the extramural activities and that women are supreme in intra-mural activities. According to Mahatma Gandhi, ‘‘If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a women you educate an entire family.’’ Our predominant patriarchal system doesn’t provide enough chances for women to have higher education even if they wish. Girls should be motivated to take up higher education.

Birth Control and Sterilization:

According to Mahatma Gandhi both men and women should observe self – control and have sex only for progeny. His plain belief was that generative organs should only be used for progeneration and any other use is abuse. It is a duty of both men and women to be self – controlled which is the surest option for birth control. It might be that the concept of self – control and purity misted up his mind and prevented him from considering other more strong methods of birth control solutions for population explosion. He believed that Brahmacharya is an infallible sovereign remedy. If Brahmacharya was to be taken as a solution to birth control, we would need to spiritualize India as a whole. Given the impossibility of the task, the Mahatma’s solution of Brahmacharya, although virtuous in every sense of the term, can only be considered as one of the remedies of birth control. While the Mahatma conceded sterilization for men, he thought that men was the aggressor, he was clearly against the use of contraceptives by women. He said that, ‘‘ I consider it inhuman to impose sterilization law on the people. But in cases of individuals with chronic diseases, it is desirable to have them sterilized if they are agreeable to it. Sterilization is a sort of contraceptive incase of women, I do not mind voluntary sterilization in case of man, since he is the aggressor’’. (Amrita Bazar Patrika, 12th January, 1935).

Participation of women in politics:

Gandhi worked in all spheres not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the oppressed and suppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life has been the awakening of women, which made them discard their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise with dignity and self-esteem. According to Gandhi, ‘‘when women, whom we all call abala becomes sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful. ‘Gandhi had tremendous faith in women’s inherent capacity for non-violence and his experience of participation by women in politics from his days in South Africa till the end of his life bears testimony to the fact that they never failed his expectations. With Gandhi inspiration, they took the struggle right into their homes and raised it to a moral level.

Women organized public meetings, sold khadi and prescribed literature, started picketing shops of liquor and foreign goods, prepared contraband salt, and came forward to face all sorts of atrocities, including inhuman treatment by police officers and imprisonment. Gandhi was one of them who encouraged women's active participation in the freedom struggle – making him as a rare promoter of women's liberation. Gandhi had seen women are devoted to service and not to power. When asked by a women to him about the political scene and the scantiness of women in it, Gandhi wrote, " As long as considerations of caste and community persist to weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be well – advised to remain detached and thereby build up their prestige". He further stated that, " women workers should enlist women as voters, should impart or have imparted to them practical education, also teach them to think independently, liberate them from the chains of caste that bind them so that a change could be brought about in them which will induce men to realize women's strength and ability for sacrifice and give her places of honour. If they will do this, they will purify the current uncertain atmosphere. Gandhi said that women have the right to participate in all the activities of life and like men have equal rights of freedom and liberty. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. Gandhi said that women " strengthen my belief in Swadeshi and satyagraha if I could inspire in men devotion as pure as I find in the women, within a year, India would be raised to a height impossible to imagine. As for swaraj it was the easiest thing in the world." Gandhi expected them to do battle from their homes, while still fulfilling their traditional roles. " If we send them to the factories, who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline." The superior qualities of women and the intrinsic difference between men and women was something Gandhi kept highlighting. Since he believed that women could bring about swaraj better, women were the very embodiment nonviolence, for him they were greater soldiers and beneficiaries of his swaraj campaigns.

Conclusion:

As per the Gandhian thought, the empowerment of women, without sharing our intellectual, financial and material resources, is not possible. According to Gandhi, 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. He thought, the empowerment of women, without sharing our intellectual, financial and material resources is not possible. It is the highest time to follow the principles and philosophy of Gandhiji relating human rights and empowerment of women for it to really become meaningful. It is the time to protect women for the sake of the whole human society. We have to change our mentality and to feel that it is our moral, social, constitutional responsibility to ensure women progress by providing them with equal right and opportunities. If Gandhi's non-violence principle is strictly followed by all human being and all nations, there will be no discrimination against women and there will be a society based on equality and justice.

References:

1. Bandyopadhyay,J., Social and Political thought of Gandhi, Allied Publishers, Calcutta.

2. Mishra, Anil Dutta, Reading Gandhi, pearson, New Delhi.
3. Fisher Louis, Mahatma Gandhi – His life and times.
4. Guha, Ramachandra, Makers of Modern India, penguin, New Delhi, 2012.
5. Mahatma Gandhi on Early Marriage, <https://www.breakthrough.tv>
6. Role of Mahatma Gandhi in women's political participation, www.mkgandhi.org
7. Gandhi on gender violence and gender equality : An overview, <https://www.mkgandhi.org>
8. Gandhi on women Empowerment, <https://www.mkgandhi.org>
9. Gandhi on women, <https://www.jstor.org/stable>
10. Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on Women Empowerment, <https://www.ijeponline.org>
11. Gandhi and his view on women Empowerment, <https://www.xajzkjdx.cn>
12. Gandhi's contribution in Women Empowerment, <https://legalservicesindia.com>
13. Mahatma Gandhi's thought's on women empowerment and present scenario, <https://www.researchgate.net>
14. Gandhi and women empowerment, <https://gandhiashramsevagram.org>
15. Women Empowerment: Relevance of Gandhi an views, <https://ignited.in>
16. Gandhi's notion towards Women empowerment, <https://inspirajournals.com>
17. Gandhi's perception on women, Gandhi on Women Empowerment, <https://mapsofindia.com>
18. Women Empowerment, www.iaspaper.net