Mahatma Gandhi and the Harijan Women at the Path of Higher Education: A Study in the Golaghat District of Assam

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INTRODUCTION

Harijan, the term Harijan or ‘Children of God’ was coined by Narasing Mehta, a Gujarati poet-saint of the Bhakti tradition to refer to all devotees of Lord Krishna irrespective of caste, class or sex. Mahatma Gandhi, notably an admirer of Mehta’s work, first used the word in the context of identifying Dalits in 1933. Gandhiji devoted himself to fight against the inhuman practice of untouchables. He started a crusade to root out this evil and referred to the oppressed class as “Harijans” (Sons of God). Gandhiji worked to bring an end to caste system itself, which was responsible for the caste and other socio-economic disabilities of the “Untouchables”.

Gandhiji, the advocate of non-violence and the crusader of the human society, imagined India to be a “Ram Rajya where all are equal and responsible. This is the reason for which be continued his untiring effort to uplift the downtrodden and the lowest of the low in the society of India. He extended his activities to the remote places of India and to those areas identified as the segregated and isolated place for the Harijan. He worked for their betterment and had given his special attention to mitigate the sufferings of the women section of the downtrodden.

The emergence of Women’s Study as a new dimension of literature and social science is one of the noticeable developments of the last few decades of the last century. One of the much-discussed topics of developmental thinking is empowerment of women. Efforts are on to create awareness among women about their rights of late, many social activities, writers, and intellectuals have come out to render their valuable services for the empowerment of rural and underprivileged women because a large section of the country’s fair sex is from that class. Women’s studies try to explore and to generalize the fact that subordination and oppression of women have shaped their life experiences in different societies and in different communities. The 1970’s heralded a new era for social sciences to develop a new angle from which society can be easily observed and in all its aspects. Due to the continuous efforts of Women Organizations to empower women, changes occur in social scenario of every country.

At the beginning of the twenty first century when every field is opened to the entry of women, woman ceased to be a sedate puppet in the hands of man. She is seen established herself in the society with her individual entity and her own identity in almost every sphere of this globalize society. The women of today are entering the male-dominated areas of success such as engineering, computer science, technology, mass communication, architecture, defense, airline services, military services, journalism and many others. They are even enjoying the fixed quota of reservation in politics and able to show their multi-dimensional personality in rightful positions. However, the emerging picture shows that in this variegated human society, more opportunities are there for urban educated women with technological and need-based skills and requisite educational qualifications. But, the poor, uneducated and downtrodden women still live a life of bondage, and servitude. Women, who are still passing their days in community bindings, suffer more than the others. The identity of their community and the traditional patriarchal society work on them like unbearable social pressure that make them mute, less active, and silent. They are none other than the Harijan women living in their segregated and isolated areas who till date remain victim of male domination, social suppression and educational exploitation.

The Indian constitution provides constitutional provision to gender equality and also for development of women of all section. It has also another arrangement of law to be enacted accordingly but most of the women in general and backward women in particular are still suffering from the age-old tradition and superstitious beliefs which make them mute and sedate puppets in the hands of their menfolk and others outside their community life. India is, of course, a peculiar country in the sense that women’s search for ‘self’ and their struggle for survival have had a chequered history. It is the country which produced women of great spirit, valour and incredible abilities but it is the same country which also stands at the top so far as illiteracy, backwardness, social discrimination, subjugation, oppression and torture of women is concerned. The fact is that the largest number of women in India is still being discriminated and subjugated to male dominance in society. Their merits, efficiency, capability, talent, skill and potentialities are being unutilized and wasted on a misconception of their inferior status in
society. The Harijans, as widely known, resided at different places in the territory of Assam since the British Period. It is known that they were originally from Orissa, Bihar, Rajasthan, Punjab, Chennai, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Their forefathers entered the North-Eastern part of India to do menial jobs like scavenging and other filthy works. This community is found everywhere in the states of India and is known by different names at different regions Chura in Punjabi, Bhangi or Lal-Bhangi in Hindi, Mala in Telegu, Paraiyan in Tamil, Pulayan in Malayalam, Koraqus in Konkoni and so on. These women bear old-age suffering for their confinement to some specific area of isolation and segregation and were entrusted to manual works for low wage.

These Harijan women staying in slums or hutment colonies in different districts of Assam engage in petty activities like household helper, part time cleaner in hospitals, nursing homes, road binner worked under municipality boards or corporations for supporting their families economically, mentally and financially. These activities provide them meager financial returns along with insecurities and uncertainties. Infact, the women of the Harijan community were never in a position to change their economic, social and educational status for which they and their society were partially responsible. They are burdened thrice over being discriminated as women, marginalized as Harijan, and economically deprived due to poverty. Thus, they are facing triple burden of oppression. They find no security at home where they were ill-treated by husbands and in-laws, they have no security in streets and work places where they are vulnerable and fell prey to anti-social elements.

They are branded as untouchables as untouchability is prevalent in the Indian society. Although ‘untouchability’ was abolished under Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the practice continues to determine the socio-economic and religious standing of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It is even observed that the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes remains very much a part of India. They are even compelled to perform degrading rituals as a community in the name of caste. They are poor, deprived and socially backward. Poor means that they do not have access to enough food, health care, good housing, and all the amenities they need in their life. Their access to education and employment is also limited. Social backwardness, lack of proper knowledge and education, economic insecurity, unhygienic living standard and poor health always keep them at the mercy of the upper class. It should be said that they are segregated in all spheres of social life, places of worship, education and everything only because they are born with the brand of ‘untouchables’ or ‘Harijan’. They are commonly clustered together in segregated hamlets and are a small and vulnerable minority in any region, making resistance to age-old exploitation, oppression and violence. Despite the existence of constitutional rights, provisions, and other protective laws which are meant to address their problems, the Harijans continue to live in extreme poverty, perform menial and low-paid jobs such as scavenging and other filthy works and suffer from lack of access to basic amenities and resources.

Great personalities specially Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Raj Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Sri Ram Krishna, Jotiba Phule, and many others also played active and dynamic roles through emancipatory movements in helping the Harijan or Dalit women to raise their economic status in urban areas. But the picture of the social life of the Harijans living in the territory of Assam has presented a dismal look as they constitute a very small proportion of the total population living in the urban or semi-urban places of Assam. The present paper is an attempt to study the educational status of Harijan women in the Golaghat District of Assam.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

(a) To make a systematic study of the educational position of the Harijan women.

(b) To examine the role of higher education in the lives of Harijan women.

(c) To explore the problems behind acquiring higher education by these women folk.

(d) To check out fruitful suggestions to mitigate the problems in the path of higher education.

**METHODOLOGY**

In preparing this paper both primary and secondary data are collected. Besides, analytical method is also applied to analyse the collected data.

**FIELD OF STUDY**

The present study was confined in the Golaghat district of Assam. A field study was conducted in Harijan colony, Golaghat in order to collect both data and information. Total number of respondents was 50, out of which 14 were unmarried and 36 were married. They belonged to various age groups 20 belonged to 40 to 60 years, 30 belonged to 20 to 39 years of old. The educational qualification of the respondents were varied. Out 50, 20 were illiterate, 23 studied up to primary level, 5 studied up to class V, and only 1 respondent studied degree level. The occupational pattern of the respondents showed that 90% of the respondents were engaged in municipality work, 8% engaged in household helper and only 2% were housewife who earned their livelihood through private tution.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

(1) Bearing the stigma of Harijan they were motivated by amusement rather than education and failed to
promote their position both in familial and social life.

(2) The age-old occupation pushed them back to the original groove.

(3) Majority of them gave emphasis on earning more money by engaging in filthy work rather than getting education for a bright future.

(4) They married off their girl at an early age rather than sending them for pursuing higher education.

(5) They liked to identify themselves as mother or wives rather than individual, bearing individual identity and status.

(6) The patriarchal system of the society and community living prevent them from getting higher education.

(7) Right to education does not touch them even at the second decade of the 21st century at a time when women in India continue their effort to reach the limit of the sky.

(8) They are made psychologically weak by their parents during the formative years of their life. So they cannot think of transgressing the boundary of their society.

(9) Eat, drink and be merry is the motto of their life because they liked to follow the footsteps of their elders.

SUGGESTION

(1) The constitutional safeguards, specially for the dalits, mention in the constitution of India should be implemented by the Government of Assam in order to equalize their position with that of other.

(2) More and more motivational programs should be conducted in order to lift the psychological bearer which is inherent in the mind of every Harijan woman.

(3) The right to education should be strictly followed by the concerned official with the view to enlightened them though higher education.

(4) Attempts should be made through the fruitful scheme “Learn through Fun”.

(5) The elite section should be the path finder of this unprivileged section of the society by establishing cordial relation between them and by motivating them to go for some changes that are required to establish themselves as individuals with individual mind and identity.

It is found in the ultimate analysis that the Harijans, living in different parts of Assam, are also human being of flesh and blood, having their own instinctive demands of basic necessities of life. They should be given equal status in terms of education, employment, pleasure, living and life. They need support from the government, non government organization, philanthropists, social works, enlighten section of the society and others who can morally support them so that they may also feel ‘the sense of equality’ in the stratified society of India. Then only the dreams of Mahatma Gandhi will come into reality.

REFERENCES