Status of Women Empowerment and Mahatma Gandhi

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History  
Received: 02 July 2017  
Accepted: 09 July 2017  
Published Online: 29 July 2017

ABSTRACT

This article examined an both men and women are of equal rank, but they are not identical. They are peerless pair, being supplementary to one another, each helping the other so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived. The concept of self is the most important factor affecting the behaviour of women. Self-realization of the potential of women was severely restricted in the pre-independence period due to various socio-cultural conditions and conditioning.

INTRODUCTION

There was an urgent need to make special efforts to enable women to become self-reliant, by positive and active interventions in the direction of confidence building in the cognitive, psychological, economic and political areas. A woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate to the very minutest details in the activities of man and she has an equal right to freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as a man is in his.

This ought to be a natural condition of things and not as a result only of learning to read and write. Just by the sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying his superiority over women, which they do not deserve and ought not to leave. Men have to be teachers to their wives, and that not merely to make them literate, gradually; it should be possible to introduce women to the subject of politics and social reform. The men in such a case will have to change their attitude towards their wives.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN PRE INDEPENDENCE INDIA

To understand in depth the role that Gandhi played in improving the status of women in society, it is essential to look at women’s status, prevalent at that time. Women Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario, social evils like child marriage and dowry system were rampant. Indian women have an average life span of only twenty seven years. Death of women in labor was a common phenol woman. The percentage of women with basic education was as low as two percent. The patriarchal nature of the society confined women to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. The purdah system was in full vogue in Northern Indian. Unless accompanied by their male guardians, the women were not permitted to venture out on their own. Only a handful few could avail of education and attend school. It was in such a dismal milieu that Gandhi took the responsibility of

shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society.

GANDHI’S VOICE AGAINST THE SOCIAL EVILS

According to the mahatma, social reforms were essential for the restructuring of the societal values that had so far dominated the perception of Indian women. Although, he had great reverence for the traditions of the country, he also realized that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were antithetical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. To quote Gandhi, “it is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide”.

The custom of child marriage became a target of his criticisms. In his opinion, child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as much a moral evil. The system of dowry could not pass unnoticed from his critical eyes.

He was also against dowry marriages as ‘heartless’. He opined that girls should never marry men who demand dowry, at the cost of their self respect and dignity. As Gandhi believed that the basis of marriage is mutual love and respect, he urged people to solemnize inter communal marriages between the Harijans and caste Hindus. Gandhi was extremely perturbed by the plight of the wondos, particularly child widows.

BELIEVE IN PRACTICAL LIFE

He put forth an earnest appeal to the young generation of the country to marry the widows. He was also quite hopeful about the immense potentials of the widows in furthering national issues. The system of purdah also came under Gandhi’s attacks and he questioned the very foundation of this practice. For him, the purdah system was no less than a “vicious, brutal and barbarous” practice. The predicaments of the devadasis, a part of the lower, untouchable segment of the society, had an indelible effect on the sensitive mind of the mahatma the pathetic conditions of the child prostitutes disturbed him immensely. He left no stone unturned for
rehabilitating this segment of the society. As for him guarding the honor of women was no less than protecting cows. According to Gandhi, one of the first tasks that need to be accomplished as soon as the country won freedom was to abolish the system of devadasis or temple women and brothels.

**ROLE OF WOMEN AS ENVISAGED BY GANDHI**

According to Gandhi, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhi had faith in the capability of women to carry on a non violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India’s struggle for freedom women held public meetings, organized picketing of shops selling foreign alcohol and articles, sold khadi and actively participated in national movements. They bravely faced the baton of the police and even went behind the bars. Gandhi’s urge to women to join India’s struggle for independence was instrumental in transforming the outlook of women. swaraj uprooted age old taboos and restrictive customs. Through their participation in Indian struggle for freedom, women of India broke down the shackles of oppression that had relegated them to a secondary position from time immemorial.

As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned, Gandhi felt that men and women had different spheres of work. In his opinion, women could take to economic activities to supplement the income of her families like spinning, which he believed to be a good option available to the women. in the social realm, Gandhi envisaged a critical role for women in doing away with the forces of communalism, caste system and untouchability.4 so it easy to say that mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women’s liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his country his faith in their immense capabilities found expression in his decisions to bestow leadership to them in various nationalistic endeavors.

**TO BUILD A WHOLLY NEW SOCIETY**

While adopting a high moral and after conservative position Gandhi could the next moment seemingly abandon if for a more fruitful and dynamic postulation that brings him to the forefront of extreme liberalism. Typically, Gandhi was able to step out of his traditional attitudes through the medium of education. When asked to write a primer for school children by kakasaheb kalelkar, Gandhi did it in the form of a mother teaching her child in which she explains to her son that housework was good for both mind and body has helped in character building. “Men and women need to be educated equally in housework because the home belongs to both”, he wrote; this was part of his efforts to build a wholly new society, without which he believed it was not possible to make an appreciable difference to improve the lot of mankind with the cultural discourse of society as it was, and he never shied from providing direct and practical methodologies to achieve his goals.5 From feminist ideas in a text book to spinning the charkha for swaraj he always came up with constrictive proposal to bring women out of their traditional mental fettters and into a better more dignified life.

**BELIEVE IN SATYAGRAHA**

Modern technology, consumerism and lack of effective instruments have allowed, women no real progress even while allowing greater mobility and visibility to women from the middle and elite classes. Visibility alone is not empowerment in the real sense. Mahatma Gandhi believed that satyagraha was the most powerful weapon in a nonviolent struggle. Satyagraha involves defiance. It involves the willful, peaceful, breaking of lowns that are unjust. It means picketing, protesting, squatting, obstructing, challenging and publicly resisting wrongs. Since women were the most nonviolence and ardent lovers of peace, it could be sharpened and extended as a weapon in women’s struggles for justice and equality. To him the ultimate ahimsa and satyagraha was when women, in vast numbers, rose up to put an end to the destructive aspect of male dominance in society. Had the momentum of freedom struggle not been slowed down, such mobilization could have attracted many more women into public life.6 Political activity geared towards the transformation of society into the holistic, integrated entity as Gandhi had visualized has not yet crystallized. Satyagraha is now just a word, a mere symbol, that serves no purpose for the academic or the elite, or even the middle class feminist whose dialectic emerges from a theoretical background far removed from Gandhi poor women who act because they have no use for words to explain themselves. Among those women who today have made satyagraha for a better world are the meira peibi of manipur who stand in clusters on the roadside outside their village with flaming torches to protest against men who indulge in drugs and alcohol which are jointly running the youth of north-eastern India. These women also raise their voices against the excesses the security forces and form a protective shield around their village against them. They do not quote Gandhi nor term their struggle as satyagraha but their steadfast and peaceful picketing has all the elements of struggles in the manner, Gandhi himself would have wished.

**WOMEN WHO BECAME PART OF THE POWER STRUCTURE**

Somewhere along the way, however the issues close to Gandhi’s heart have been largely left by the wayside by women who became part of the power structure as well as by the emancipated women’s groups. Organizations involved in trade union work, social reform and development issues have in part or in whole addressed the issue of prohibition, but neither have women as a group in parliament nor through institution structures raised this demand loudly and effectively.7 Prohibition is not accepted when it is presented as a moral issue alone and therefore the argument has to include developmental priorities, revenue collection, and budgetary allocations to social welfare, health and other sectors which rural women are unable to do.

**ROLE OF ORGANIZATION**

Many institutions and organization representing women’s rights have a high visibility in the cosmopolitan arena and have effectively expressed their concerns. Not only has that, their members decisively moved far ahead of Gandhi’s vision of fearless women. Alert, active and bold, they engage in constant discussion and introspection for genuine equality. While all women’s agendas prescribe peace and nonviolence, the feminization of the military and police and, the expanding membership of women in militant groups that do not abjure the use of arms are all a sad away from what Gandhi viewed to be a women’s special role. While middle class women were visibly active side by with Mahatma Gandhi, wearing khadi, going to jail, organizing resistance on the British some creative and selfless way, the socially conscious middle class women of today has largely shunned direct political activity, preferring to seek more secure ground in funded social work through
voluntary organization. A growing number of emancipated, educated, young women are being diverted by market oriented consumerism in the name of modernity and liberation.

CONCLUSION

India is far ahead in policies and legislation favouring women. It adopted universal franchise before many other nations. Yet men in the political structure refuse to acknowledge the relationships between social justice and gender justice while women outside the political system are unable to effectively implement and integrate these two most powerful national and international agendas. The increasing criminalization of politics and the use of vast sums of unaccounted money and ugly muscle power by caste and criminal gangs present an entire hostile environment for women who wish to pursue a political vocation. With both caste and gender groups perpetuating traditional and modern division technologies the mission of Gandhi and the dreams of women are yet to be fulfilled.

REFERENCES

[3] Ibid., pp-75.
[5] Ibid., pp-78.
[7] Ibid., pp-82.
[8] Ibid., pp-83.