Gandhi and Women Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand 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. He strongly believed that a society can develop rapidly if taken all sections of the people together into its fold, rich and poor, high society people and low caste people and both men and women. Gandhi’s political ideologies are strongly based on humanitarian values which were a reflection of his spiritual self. For him, politics could not be divorced from social factors. To Gandhi, social emancipation was as critical as political emancipation. Throughout his life, he struggled very hard for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. Women under his age took a milestone to step towards reestablishing their identity in the society. Gandhi’s inspiring ideologies boosted their morals and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under Gandhi’s leadership they entered into the national mainstream, taking parts in the national movements. In Gandhi’s words, “to all women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to women.”

The views expressed by the Mahatma and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely with the current times because the times have irreversibly changed but the honesty of the Mahatma, the love and respect he had for women, can never be doubted. He is truly the best friend of the women of the world.

GANDHI’S PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

There was a marked difference of Gandhi’s perception of women from that of other reformers. The stance taken by other social reformers and leaders, prior to Gandhi created a helpers image of the Indian women. With the emergence of Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained currency. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. According to Gandhi, “Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity.” In his speeches and writings, Gandhi said that in many matters, especially those of tolerance, patience and sacrifice, the Indian women are superior to the male.

Pinkumani Barman Gandhi invoked the instances of ancient role models who were epitomes of Indian womenhood like “draupadi?, savithri?, shita? And Damayanti? To show that Indian women could never be feeble. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and an equal right to freedom. As practical thinkers, Gandhi tried to understand the problems and sufferings of women. He had attempted to find some practical solutions of their problems. Gandhi, while he stayed at home, tried to help his wife, kasturaba, in her daily household duties. In western countries also, these days? Men are encouraged to be with their wives during the delivery and the men are supposed to pitch in with diaper changing, feeding etc. Gandhi practiced this very modern concept 90 years ago in his own family.

ROLE OF WOMEN AS ENVISAGED BY GANDHI

Regarding the role of women, Gandhi once said, “Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen”. He opined and felt that, “only when the women is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered.” It does not mean that women shouldn’t cook, but only that household responsibilities be shared among men, women and children.

In a letter written to raj kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 21 October 1936, Gandhi writes, “if you women would only realize your dignity and privilege and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity. I was once a slave-holder myself but kasturba proved an unwilling slave and thus opened my eyes to my mission. Her task was finished.4 now I am in search of women who would realize her mission. Are you that women, will you be one?” In this way, Gandhi was able to devote himself to such a mission
Gandhi laid more emphasis on the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country. Under his guidance and leadership women came out from their houses and joined India’s struggle for independence. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned Gandhi felt that female folk could be engaged in the cottage and small scale industries of the village such as spinning, broom, basket and rope making and oil processing so that the rural women can supplement to the family income. Hence empowerment of women has to the ultimate goal to improve the quality of the society and development of the economy.

GANDHI’S VOICE AGAINST THE SOCIAL EVILS

In the view of Gandhi, although he had great respect for the traditions of the country, he also realizes that certain customs and traditions of the Indian society were anti-ethical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. To quote Gandhi, “it is good to swim in the water of tradition; but to sink in them is suicide”. Therefore he was completely against many social customs, traditions, norms and values and social evils like child-marriage, widowhood, the dowry system, the pardah system and prostitution, the witch-hunting etc which are threats to the development of the society.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: THE GANDHIAN MODEL

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. Simply development of education of the women would not automatically empower them. The case in point is Kerala. The state has hundred percent literacy but the women folk are not even today free from exploitation.5 This is because of the fact that the traditional keralite society is yet to be reformed to provided equal rights to the women in the fact terms.

CONCLUSION

It can be said without an idea of doubt that that mahatma Gandhi experimented in all these three fields a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of women and the improvement of the status women in the country. But practically we can see completely an opposite picture of the empowerment of women. It is a great regret for us that even today employment of women is still restricted. They are not allowed to enter into certain jobs, beyond doctors, nurses, teachers and clerical jobs. In the family, the women become the victim of domestic violence and in the society they are also exploited by the hunting etc. again two thirds of the world’s illiterate females.

REFERENCES