

Mahatma Gandhi's Thoughts on Women Empowerment and Present Scenario

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Abstract

In today's world, women empowerment is one of the major concerns and topic of discussion. Many countries have been able to overcome this issue to some extent. But in India, the subject is still persistent and relevant because women continue to struggle in our predominantly patriarchal society. Women are considered the weaker gender and incapable of taking decision on their own. They are expected to follow and live as a dependent on their male counterpart. Mahatma Gandhi the 'Father of the Nation' was a strong votary of women empowerment in India. 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. Need for the hour is not only to educate women so that they attain their rights but to harness the thought process and understanding of males towards females not as a weak gender but of equal cadre. Issues against women like child marriages, rape, domestic violence, sex-selective abortion, honour killing, trafficking, sexual harassment, dowry, etc are still prevailing in spite of already established laws against them. Indian women venture out to make careers for themselves but this freedom has made them more susceptible to crime because laws have become inadequate in controlling the situation. The solution lies in making the society more empathetic and liberal towards issues related to gender. Under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, we Indians won our freedom, it is veritable that once again by adopting his views and ways we could break the shackles of gender biases.

Introduction

By empowerment, we mean ‘...the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights...’ (en.oxforddictionaries.com). 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 (Panda, 2017). 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 was an advocate of women's liberalization and empowerment and was a staunch supporter of gender equality. As a social and political reformer, Mahatma Gandhi played an eminent role in eradicating age-old social evils pertaining to women. As a social agitator, he wanted to streamline society and make India competent in the world scenario but his dream may not fruitify if even after seven decades fifty percent of women population remained suppressed. At present, Indian women's contribution to the Indian GDP is just 17 percent which is less than half of the global average contribution which is 37 percent (Khetarpal, 2017).

Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Women

Mahatma Gandhi played a vital role in bringing revolutionary changes in the status of women in the first half of the twentieth century. He believed in the liberalization and all-round development of humanity which was not possible without the emancipation of Indian women who were and still are the most suppressed and oppressed section of the society from various aspects of social life (Garai, 2015). Gandhi always stressed on women upliftment because they constituted the section responsible for future citizens of India. It was ‘Putlibai’, the mother of Mahatma Gandhi that subconsciously created the image of women as ‘Ardhangani’ or the better half and ‘Sadadharmini’ or the helpmate, for Gandhi. As per Gandhi, women are superior to men on the grounds of morality and spirituality (Mondal). Gandhi had immense faith that women have a bigger role to play in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country. Gandhi had a great conviction in women's innate competence for non-violence (SAIN, 2016). Therefore from the very beginning of Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi strongly urged Indian women to join the independence movement.

Hence the involvement of women in the non-corporation movement was enormous and they played a noticeable role in propagating 'Khadi' (Mondal).

Gandhi on Social Issues against Women

- **Widow Remarriage:** Mahatma Gandhi was against any sort of social barriers, customs or laws which were against individual freedom and were imposed forcefully by the society or law. As per Mahatma Gandhi, a widow who has children should avoid altering marriage vows but if she wishes then she should be free to do so (Garai, 2015). However, for Gandhi, this must apply equally to men (Kripalani, 1970, p. 393). Mahatma Gandhi was firm in his views regarding child widow. If a widow is a child, that child should be duly married as he thoroughly rejects first marriage in case of a child widow (Garai, 2015). Mahatma Gandhi said *"...We cry out for cow protection in the name of religion, but we refuse protection to the human cow in the shape of the girl widow. We would resent force in religion. But in the name of 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).
- **Child Marriage:** Mahatma Gandhi was totally against the malicious practice of child marriage. He considered such marriages 'ab initio' null and void and as such* no marriage at all. Mahatma 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). As per Gandhi, child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as well as moral evil (Anuradha, 2016).
- **Purdah System:** Mahatma Gandhi discarded the purdah system. He regarded 'Pardhah' or 'Purdah' as an irrelevant barrier that interferes unnecessarily while performing different tasks by women. As per the Mahatma, chastity comes from purity of mind and body and can only be monitored through self-control and not by veil (Garai, 2015). He said, *"Chastity is not a hot-house growth. It can not be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of*

withstanding every unsought temptation” (Bose). Gandhi in practice ignored the ‘Purdah’ system and always insisted on his being taken to the sanctum sanctorum of the family, the ladies' quarters in both cases i.e. Hindus and Muslims (Kripalani, 1970, p. 394).

- **Women Education and coeducation:** Mahatma Gandhi viewed women illiteracy as no better than a curse and strongly vouched for its promotion among women. (Garai, 2015). Women's mental capacity is equal to men and therefore she has equal right to have an education (Anuradha, 2016). But Mahatma Gandhi's view on women education is based on family ideals. He believed that man is superlative in the extra-mural activities and that woman is supreme in intra-mural activities. Therefore, education provided to both men and women should be according to their pre-ordained stations in life (Nandela).
- **Dowry System:** Mahatma Gandhi was against the dowry system and considered it as an outcome of the caste system. As per Mahatma Gandhi, the abolition of the caste system will lead to the eradication of the dowry system (Nandela). 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 celebrations on the birth of a male child but silent sorrow on the birth of a female child (Kripalani, 1970). Mahatma Gandhi's opinion was that if a man asks for dowry he should be excommunicated from society and parents of girls should not be dazzled by English degrees and should also not hesitate to enter matrimony outside caste and provinces to find a true match for their daughter (Nandela).
- **Divorce:** Mahatma Gandhi condemned heavy expenditure done in the marriage ceremony. He wanted simple marriages. Gandhi regarded that divorce is not the only alternative solution when a marriage relationship is in a state of suspension. Mahatma Gandhi regarded that marriage is a state of discipline. This state of discipline can be sustained through moral upholding and repentance. So to keep a marriage relation unscathed, moral restraint should be observed so that the unanticipated situation of divorce can be averted (Garai, 2015, p. 106).
- **Sex, Birth Control and Sterilization:** According to Mahatma Gandhi both men and women should observe self-control and have sex only for progeny (Kapadia). In spite of opposition from women's movement, Mahatma Gandhi opposed birth control

contraceptives. It does not mean that he was not having a sympathetic view towards women suffering from frequent childbearing but because he was their protector and wanted to direct them towards a higher way of life. His plain belief was that generative organs should only be used for procreation and any other use is abuse. It is a duty of both man and woman to be self-controlled which is the surest option for birth control (Kaur). 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 (Nandela).

Role of Women as per Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi believed that women are the craftsperson responsible for creating future citizens of India. Gandhi said “...*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...*” (Garai, 2015). Gandhi's main weapon for Indian independence was non-violence and it was his belief in the innate capacity of non-violence, that made him successfully involve Indian women in the struggle for Satyagraha. He hoped that this active participation in Indian independence would not only enhance the internal moral strength of women but also help them to throw out age-old prejudices customary in the society at that time. Mahatma Gandhi's leadership helped women to build-up and maintain their self-esteem and dignity (Garai, 2015). As per Gandhi, women, being conservative are better in discriminating between good and bad and cherish the good (Mondal). Women have infinite strength and only need to recognize and channelize it. Women play a key role in the family and are capable of moulding the values and traits of their children for the betterment of society. Household work should be equally divided between boys and girls and both

should get vocational training so they could earn their living whenever required. Women should enlarge their horizon to see the whole society as a family and take out some time for society to prove their worth as they have been a class suppressed from centuries(Mondal). Women have to come out and realize their full status and play their part equal to men. As per Gandhi, women's tremendous capacity for self-sacrifice could play an important role in promoting communal harmony, eradicating untouchability and disseminating Basic Education (Mondal). Mahatma Gandhi urged dedicated women to approach men and women of different communities and launch a widespread campaign against social evils like Child Marriage, Dowry, Sati, Purdah and Prostitution (Mondal). Mahatma Gandhi wanted Indians to imbibe and practice, moral and ethical characteristics in every sphere of life be it political, social, political, economic, biological, etc. Toward the issue of women empowerment, Mahatma Gandhi followed the same strategy (Garai, 2015).

Present Scenario of Women in India

The position enjoyed by women in the Rig Vedic period deteriorated in later Vedic India(Sandeep, 2018). Since then, women were not allowed to remarry, get education and could not inherit parental property. To worsen the scenario; dowry system, child marriage and 'Sati Pratha' were also inculcated in the society. Many reformers, before and after independence, came forward to eradicate these derogatory customs against women. After independence, laws were made to abolish and prevent practices targeted at suppressing women. At present, due to the efforts of reformers and government policies and regulations, the condition has improved but still, results are far behind the expectations. As per Pranav Dua's article, the condition of women in independent India is more respectable as compared to the situation held by women prior to independence. According to him the development in science and technology, spread of education, social-political movements, modernization, etc changed the approach of people towards women. Some issues like child marriages, Sati Pratha, exploitation of widows, Devdasi System, Purdah System have almost disappeared thereby boosting the morale and self-confidence of women(Pranav Dua). This may be true to an extent but the status of women economically is quite far from the true essence of women empowerment. We are still miles behind in achieving equality and justice as mentioned in the Preamble of the Constitution. Only six percent of start-ups are run by women (Kumar, 2017).

The sex ratio of India is highly disproportionate in which the female population is less than men. As per census 2011, sex ratio is 940 women per 1000 men though it is better than census 2001 where females were 933 per 1000 men (census2011.co.in). Mahatma Gandhi's view on women education becomes more important in the light of fact that the literacy rate of India for women is 65.46 percent whereas men literacy rate is 82.14 percent (www.census2011.co.in). India's school education system is underperforming in terms of quality when compared to its neighbours Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh (Bansal, 2016). Sexual crimes, unjust wage parity, outdoor working ethics and social discrimination are some reasons barricading women from participating in economic development (Kumar, 2017).

An Overview of Efforts for Women Empowerment in Post-Independence India

To have a strong base for family, society and nation; women empowerment is indispensable. Though government policies for women empowerment at national, state and local level exist in many sectors like health, education, economic opportunity, laws for gender-based violence, political participation, right to work, right to poverty, etc but a wide gap exists between actual and expected results (Panda, 2017). Article-14, Article-15 and Article 42 of the Constitution of India grant equality of sex and provide special errand to strengthen women(Panda, 2017). Several constitutional and legal rights have been made post-1947 to safeguard women. Prominent among them are: The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, Maternity Benefit Act,1961, Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act,1971, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Indecent Representation of Women(Prevention) Act,1986, National Commission for Women Act, 1990, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, etc (Dubey, 2016). Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act (1994), Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (1956), Mines Act (1952), etc (edugeneral.org, 2017).

Besides the above, various government women empowerment schemes were launched for the betterment of women. Some are: Working Women Hostel Scheme 1972, Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) 1986, UJJAWALA(A Comprehensive

Scheme for Prevention of Trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation) 2014, 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' Scheme 2015, One Stop Centre Scheme 2015, Women Helpline Scheme 2015, 'Mahila E-Haat' 2016, 'SWADHAR Greh' (A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances) 2018, 'Mahila Shakti Kendras' (MSK) 2017, Mahila Police Volunteers 2019, etc. (<http://www.wcd.nic.in>).

Conclusion

Thanks to our patriarchal ideology, women still are considered more suitable for domestic work than as contributor for nation's development; socially as well as economically. This can be easily verified by the presence of a low number of women entrepreneurs in India. Mahatma Gandhi believed in economic independence for women. But still, the present situation is far behind the vision seen by our father of the nation. New problems are proliferating with every stage of women empowerment. Earlier, issues like child marriage, child widow, Sati Pratha, Purdah System were dominating and after independence, in the post-modern era, these issues have become minuscule. Now new issues have mushroomed after women started moving out from their home. Lot of criminal activities like rape, eve-teasing, molestation, acid attack, Honour Killing, sexual exploitation at work, etc have started taking place against women which are again creating obstacles in achieving the elusive dream of women empowerment. The crux of the situation is that Indian families want modernization but for their respective families and selfishly of their own daughters but when the question comes for daughters of other families in society, mentality is still redundant. Indian families still need to consider society as a whole. Women empowerment should not only be for their family members alone but for all the women in the society. Many members of society not only restrict their own daughters but also do unlawful acts in the name of moral policing. Governments do make laws against all type of crimes against women but the real need of the hour is to transform the mentality of the masses. For Gandhi women are the nurturers responsible for preparing potential citizens of India, the onus for imparting and inculcating gender equality in the society lies on them. They should teach their children, from childhood, to respect and honour the dignity of not only their family folk but women at large then only real revolution will come and the dream of women empowerment would be realized.

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