
GANDHIAN THOUGHTS ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

“Train a man and you train an individual, Train a woman and you build a nation”.

---Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi states that the position of women in the society is an index of its civilization. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Undoubtedly the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi experimented in this field a century ago and he had shown the way for the empowerment of women and the development of the status of women. Gandhi was of the opinion that until and unless women, on the basis of education and knowledge do not find their proper place in social and economic fields, they could not achieve self- respect for themselves. Nor they could become self- dependent in any of the walks of life. In his lifetime Gandhi inspired Indians to take concrete and practical initiatives regarding women education which will bring them out of these centuries' old conservative customs and rules, which were responsible for their mental and social slavery. Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self- esteem.

Keywords: Victimized, Liberation, Self-Respect, Empowerment.

Introduction: Mahatma Gandhi states that the position of women in the society is an index of its civilization. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Undoubtedly the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi experimented in this field a century ago and he had shown the way for the empowerment of women and the development of the status of women. Gandhi was of the opinion that until and unless women, on the basis of education and knowledge do not find their proper place in social and economic fields, they could not achieve self- respect for themselves. Nor they could become self- dependent in any of the walks of life. In his lifetime Gandhi inspired Indians to take concrete and practical initiatives regarding women education which will bring them out of these centuries' old conservative customs and rules, which were responsible for their mental and social slavery. Gandhi worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. One of the noteworthy results of his life-work has been the awakening of women, which made them shed their deep-rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self- esteem. “When woman, whom we all call ‘abala’, becomes ‘sabala’, all those who are helpless will become powerful”.

Women Empowerment: Empowerment means to make one powerful or to equip one with the power to face challenges of life, to overcome the difficulties, handicaps and inequalities. Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process, which would enable women to realize their full identity and powers - in all spheres of life. It would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater

autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influences their lives and freedom from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.

Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Indeed, it means making both men and women realize their changing roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an egalitarian society. It means redistribution of work roles, redistributing their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustments, understanding and trust with each other. Empowerment of women is a new ideology for carrying democratic values into the family and society.

Characteristics of Women Empowerment:

- Women empowerment is giving power to women; it is making women better off.
- Women empowerment enables a greater degree of self-confidence and sense of independence among women.
- Women empowerment is a process of acquiring power for women in order to understand her rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and others in a most effective way.
- Women empowerment gives the capacity or power to resist discrimination imposed by the male dominated society.
- Women empowerment enables women to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance.
- Women empowerment means women's control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology.
- Women empowerment challenges traditional power equations and relations.
- Women empowerment means participation of women in policy and decision making process at domestic and public levels.
- Women empowerment means exposing the oppressive power of existing gender and social relations.
- Empowerment of women enables women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life.
- Empowerment also means equal status to women.
- Women empowerment is a process of creating awareness and capacity building.

Need and Importance of Women Empowerment: Gender equality and empowerment of women is recognized globally as a key element to achieve progress in all area. The charter of United Nations signed in 1943 is the first international agreement that proclaimed gender equality as a fundamental right. Ever since there had been many convections, programmes and goals to help women conferring on them human rights which are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. In order to promote development of women and to protect their rights, the General Assembly of U.N. adopted, "Convection on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women" on 18th December 1979, which came into force on 3rd September 1981.

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 Kerala state has hundred per cent (100%) literacy but the women folk are not even today free from exploitation. This is because of the fact that the traditional Keralite society is yet to be reformed to provide equal rights to the women in de facto terms.

Social Empowerment of Women: Gandhiji said that women are the companion of men, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minute detail of the activities of life and she has a right of freedom and liberty with man. But today in India with special reference to the villages, we see that by sheer force of a viscous systems even the most ignorant and worthless man have been enjoying a superiority over women which do not deserve and ought not to have. We can however, see that the trends have changed to a great extent with more and more women coming out and competing with men in many spheres. We can see today women and all spheres of life with no exception.

Economic Independence: Gandhi visualized a humane society, free from exploitation and in justice, built by responsible men and women. Gandhi, however, maintained that the spheres of work for woman and man were different. “She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the breadwinner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term.” Gandhi was of the firm opinion that if women have to work outside the home, they should do so without disturbing it. They can take up some work, which would supplement the income of the family, and spinning, according to him, was perhaps the best work they could undertake. Spinning and weaving for women were “the first lesson in the school of industry”. The spinning wheel can be the “widow’s loving companion”, of livelihood for the poor family and a means to supplement the income of the family of Pie middle class, and for the well-to-do women, it would be a means to relate their lives to those country s poor women.

Women Education: Gandhi was in favour of promoting women education or literacy. He thought illiteracy of women as a curse of the human society. The vast number of illiterate women in society is due to the ancient norms, customs, laws, that are imposed upon women by the patriarchal society

“As for illiteracy among the women, its cause is not mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men. A more potent cause is the status of inferiority with which an immemorial tradition has, unjustly branded her. Man has converted her into a domestic drudge and an instrument of his pleasure, instead of regarding her as his helpmate and ,better half, the result is a semi paralysis of our society. Woman has rightly been the mother of the race. We owe it to her and to ourselves to undo the great wrong that we have done her”.

But Gandhian view of women education is based on biological discrimination of men and women and on family ideals. Because he assumed that men are fit to perform outward activities and women for household ones. But men and women are supplementary to each other. Thus while formulating the principles of education and course of instruction these primary principles should be kept in mind.

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 realized 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 waters 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.

He never hesitated to criticize the evils which had gripped the Indian society, and tried to mobilize public opinion against such evils. He realized that there were deep rooted customs hampering the development of women, of women’s freedom from such shackles was necessary for the emancipation of the nation. From the very beginning of his political career he worked relentlessly to improve the lot of women socially, politically and economically and restore them back their genuine rights and privileges. In his political programme, on priority basis he worked for the depressed and the deprived and women were the biggest block of this segment. As he believed in the concept of Sarvodaya, meaning comprehensive progress of both men and women, he said “womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen, only when the women is liberated from the slavery of kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered.’

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