

Mahatma Gandhi and Women's Development

Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been rightly named, 'Mahatma' due to his deeds towards humanity. He not only painstakingly fought for India's Freedom but also worked to make Indian society free from many evils like, illiteracy, orthodoxism, ritualism, backwardness, poor health, hygiene and sanitation and also for welfare of women.

He was pained to see the pitiable condition of women, who were denied the right to education, marriage at early age, forced to become sati after her husband's death and the purdah system which confined her in four walls of her home and crushed her dreams and desires. Mahatma Gandhi was against the inhuman and cruel practices prevalent in society regarding women like sati system, child marriage, purdah system, devdasi system, dowry system, prostitution and enforced widowhood. He truly believed in gender-equality and was very much in favour of women's upliftment. He was of the view that a nation could not become free and progress without the active participation of the other half of the society i.e. women. He had firm faith in women's abilities and capabilities and was in favour of giving social, political, economic, cultural and educational rights to women.

Keywords: Upliftment, Sarvodya, Custom, Discrimination, Painstakingly, Independence, Caretaker, Gender-Equality, Education, Spinning-Wheel, Khadi

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been rightly named, 'Mahatma' due to his deeds towards humanity. He not only painstakingly fought for India's Freedom but also worked to make Indian society free from many evils like, illiteracy, orthodoxism, ritualism, backwardness, poor health, hygiene and sanitation and also for the welfare of women.

He was very much concerned with the pitiable condition of women and he said that, "I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women. I detest child marriage, I shudder to see a child widow and shiver with rage when a husband just widowed contracts with brutal indifference another marriage. I deplore the criminal indifference of parents who keep their daughters utterly ignorant and illiterate and bring them up only for the purpose of marrying them off to some young men of means"¹. Mahatma Gandhi was against the inhuman and cruel practices prevalent in society regarding women like sati system, child marriage, purdah system, devdasi system, dowry system, prostitution and enforced widowhood. He condemned all these practices and worked in favour of giving social, political, economic, cultural and educational rights to women.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to study Mahatma Gandhi's views regarding social, political, economic, cultural and educational rights to women.

Social Upliftment

Mahatma Gandhi believed in the idea of 'sarvodya' which means upliftment of all. He was impressed and influenced by three women to whom he was indebted was his mother, who had instilled in him moral values and good character. The second one was his nurse Rambha who asked him to take Rama- nama to drive away the ghosts, which later proved his sheet-anchor. Third one was his partner in life Kasturba whom he described as, 'one of the bravest women I have ever met'². Moreover his relation with Kasturba which kept on changing with time also changed his outlook towards women. In his early life, he took it for granted that his young wife was his possession for enjoyment. And even after the young phase was over, he expected her to obey him; he considered it his right to control her and to be served by her. Only as experience taught him, did he

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find his place side by side with women, walking the same road with them, recognizing them as comrades, free as himself. When he settled down in India, he expected women to take a share in public work and men to take a share in domestic work³.

Gandhiji was against the social evils and customs associated with women. The custom of child marriage was for him both a moral as well as physical evil. It is irreligion not religion to give religious sanction to a brutal custom⁴. The consequence of child marriage enforced child widowhood of girls who do not even know what marriage is. The reform could come first by the force of enlightened public opinion among the Hindus, secondly by parents recognizing the duty of marrying their tender age daughter widows⁵. If the girls become widowed at a ripe age, it is their concern whether they would remarry or remained widow⁶.

Gandhi ji showed his disapproval against sati-system. Self-immolation on the death of husband is a sign not of enlightenment but of gross ignorance.... It cannot help to restore the dead to life on the contrary it only takes away one more from the world of living⁷. Satihood is the acme of purity. This purity cannot be attained or realized by dying but by performing duties and responsibilities towards family and society. For him system of dowry was nothing but the sale of girls⁸.

Mahatma Gandhi condemned the practice of mourning on the birth of a girl child and joy over the birth of male child. He criticized the practice in these words, "invidious discrimination against the female sex is an anachronism. I fail to see any reason for jubilation over the birth of a son and mourning over that of a daughter. Both are God's gift. They have an equal right to live, and are equally necessary to keep the world going⁹.

Gandhi ji was against the custom of purdah and desired that the women should enjoy the same freedom as men do. Chastity is not a hothouse growth. It cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation¹⁰.

He was dead against the custom of dedication of girls to temples (devdasi) and prostitution. He condemned the practice as double crime one towards humanity and other towards God as it is degradation to women folk.

Thus Mahatma Gandhi was very vocal about the wrongs done to women in the name of law, tradition and even religion. For him, "to call woman the weaker sex is a libel, it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater power of endurance, has she not greater courage¹¹?

Political Upliftment

Mahatma Gandhi believed in the capacity and capability of women and wanted them to contribute in the emancipation of India as well as their own. As he reached on conclusion that many of the

movements did not yield appropriate results because women power and the source of its strength were neglected¹². On political stage Mahatma Gandhi launched three mass movements which were based on 'Satyagraha' and 'Ahimsa'. The nature of movements being non-violent, he thought women could contribute more than men. Mahatma Gandhi started his first mass movement 'Non-cooperation' in 1920. He urged the large section of women who were not educated and confined to four walls that, "I expect great things from you, I expect the women to do their full share in the struggle¹³". The urge of Mahatma Gandhi led the women to participate in his programmes like spinning of wheel, propagation of khadi, picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. This gave them the courage for the first time to come out from the custom of purdah and made their presence felt in political scenario.

The second mass movement 'Civil-disobedience' which started in 1930 in real sense brought change in the lives of women. They whole heartedly participated in breaking of salt-laws, picketing of foreign cloth, wine shops, prabat pheris and processions. The educated women who were occupying high offices left their jobs and the larger section which was deprived of education became torch-bearer to make movement a success. With each mass movement the courage and confidence of women increased. The result of it can be seen in the third and last movement 'Quit-India' (1942). All the prominent leaders were imprisoned before the start of movement and people left with the mantra given by Mahatma Gandhi 'Do or Die'. To realize this goal women not only led the marches to unfurl the National flag but also bore the physical atrocities of the British Government. This movement also gave them chance to show their organizational skills like starting of Congress Radio, taking out processions etc.

Thus Mahatma Gandhi with his mass movements gave them the chance to realize their political rights, self-worth and dignity of being woman.

Economic Upliftment

Gandhiji was of the view that economic bondage is one of the causes of pathetic condition of women. He was in favour of giving economic independence. As he says that, "parents should seek to make their sons and daughters self-reliant, well able to earn an honest livelihood by sweat of the brow¹⁴". He was of the view that all work whether mental or physical is of equal worth. And everyone's work is important for the smooth running of society. Women being keeper of house and caregiver has the same and equal importance as any other mental or physical work. For him man and woman are one. The two live the same life, have same feelings. Each is complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help. But he also understood the fact that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is vital difference between the two. Hence the vocation of the two must also be different. The duty of motherhood, which the vast majority of women will always undertake, requires qualities which man needs not possess. She is essentially mistress of

house. He is the breadwinner; she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the caretaker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. It is degrading both for man and woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of the hearth. In trying to ride horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down. There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition. So Mahatma Gandhi considered that looking after the home and family is women's prior responsibility, but they can supplement the meager resources of the family, but man remains the bread winner. This shows he did not like women working for money or living as he himself said in the Bombay Bhagini Samaj on 20th February 1918 that, 'he do not believe in women working for a living or taking commercial enterprise'.

Mahatma Gandhi was of the view that instead of being a whole time working women, women should work in those fields which would be respectable and dignified to their status and homes. As he said that women working in mills are exposed to temptations and risks to which they ought not to be exposed. To solve this problem he suggest that they opt for spinning wheel which for the middle class, it should supplement the income of the family, and for very poor women it will be a means of livelihood. So Mahatma Gandhi knew the risks attach with working outside the protected environment so he suggested women at that time, to take the spinning of khadi.

Thus Mahatma Gandhi was in favour of giving women right in property. Though he considered the women main vocation should be of homemaker and caregiver but she should be make self-reliant so that she can face hard times.

Educational Upliftment

Gandhiji was depressed to see the pathetic condition of Indian women. The regeneration can come through education only. He was of the view that he did not know what higher education is for women. But he was for a training of girls in useful knowledge and some calling that would make them fully confident about their ability to face the world and not feel dependent upon parents or their future husbands¹⁵.

Gandhiji wanted to give basic education to boys and girls. In his opinion co-education should be followed up to eight years which can be further increased up to sixteen years. After that they should decide whether they want to continue their studies in co-education or in separate institutions¹⁶.

Thus Mahatma Gandhi fought for the social, economic, political, cultural and educational rights of women. He raised his voice against sati system, purdah, child marriage, enforced widowhood,

dedication of girls to temples etc. it is not that Indian society is today totally free from these evils. India is ranked 6th among the top 10 countries based on high rates of child marriages among women¹⁷. Dowry deaths have been increasing day by day. Crime against women is reported every two minutes¹⁸. But at the same time it is also true that due to higher rate of literacy women are achieving new heights in the field of education, politics, sports, science and technology, fashion and glamour, media, banking etc. It is the duty of society to come forward to eliminate the evils and discrimination against women so that they can also fulfill their dreams and desires in safe, secure and free atmosphere.

Conclusion

Women today are achieving new heights in education, career and other fields due to the work and efforts of many people who fought for their equal rights and one of the key person was Mahatma Gandhi. It was his firm belief and faith that women had abilities, capabilities, courage, patience and forbearance to achieve success in household work as well as social life. Due to his courage women actively participated in mass movements to free India from foreign rule and also were able to know their self-worth.

Endnotes

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