

Women Empowerment and Gandhi : A Historical Study

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Abstract

Half of mankind is women kind. This half, in every age and every land, has coexisted with men in a relationship which has varied between complete Submission and complete equality. Work participation is an important indicator of one's status in the society .Women do perform various types of work. Their household work remains mostly invisible and unrecognized. Gender inequalities exist in all sectors. Inequalities are reflected in distribution of women workers in different sectors, in job hierarchies and in wages and earnings between men and women. Indian women and their position in society is of vital importance. Through the ages, they have been reeling under the blatant atrocities of men. But this was not the condition in pre historic times. During the freedom movement, the struggle for women's rights and equality was seen as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Mahatma Gandhi played the most vital role in involving large numbers of women in the nationalist movement. Present paper Analyses about the Gandhain ideas on women empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, Women, Downtrodden, Ahimsa, Empowerment

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's sympathy is always with the downtrodden. It is not surprising when he raises his voice against the injustices done to women in the name of tradition, law and religion. He believes that legislation has been mostly the handwork of man and he has not always been fair and discriminate in performing that self-appointed work. Gandhiji finds in woman the embodiment of love or inner strength or soul force. Women to him represent suffering and self-sacrifice personified. He strives to transmute her self-sacrificing suffering into Shakti. Further, he says about woman that she is an embodiment of an infinite strength which is latent in her, in all its wonder and glory. Now, woman has secured an equal opportunity for herself with man and fully developed her powers of mutual aid and combination. Gandhiji regards her as equal of man.

Mahatma Gandhi regards man and woman fundamentally one when he makes the following observation : "Ultimately woman will have to determine with authority what she needs. My own opinion is that just as fundamentally man and woman are one, their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help."

Since man has dominated woman from ages, so she has developed an inferiority complex. She has been influenced by man's prejudiced teaching that she is inferior to him. But seers among men have given her equal status. There are certain divided responsibilities given to men and women. It is true that they are fundamentally one but it is equally true that in form the two differ vitally. Consequently the vocations of the two must not be the same.

The obligations of motherland, which a large number of women will like to have, require qualities which man need not have. "She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up the infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct."

In the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi, it is not befitting both for man and woman that she should be asked to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end. In trying to ride the horse that man rides, she brings herself and him down. The sin will be on man's head for tempting or compelling his companion to desert her special calling.

There is as much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there is in defending it against attack from without. In the moral sphere Mahatma Gandhi always gives woman a higher place and his faith in womenfolk never falters. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. He calls her the incarnation of Ahinsa which means infinite love. Let woman transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. It is up to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world and to quench the thirst by that nectar.

She can really become the leader in Satyagraha, which does not require the learning that books give, but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. Gandhiji wanted them to participate along with man in Satyagraha, the non-violent fight for the integral part of that movement. He associated women in every activity that he undertook. He employed some of them in his secretarial work. He did not hesitate to send them to face difficult situations. This was witnessed in South Africa and more powerfully again when he asked some of them to live with the villagers, unattended by men, in riot affected Noakhali. He has full confidence and trust in their capacity to defend themselves and their honour and if need be to lay down their lives for its protection. So in the sphere of non-violence the contribution of women is much greater than man's.

Gandhiji deplores the idea of calling woman a weaker sex. Physically she may be weak but morally she is strong. "To call woman the weaker sex is a wrong. 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 powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be."

He is against the Purdah system. It cripples not only the free movement of women but interferes with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to society. He does not agree to the point of view that Purdah is helpful in preserving chastity. But according to him, "Chastity is not a hot-house growth. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the Purdah. Men to be men must be able to trust their womenfolk as the latter are compelled to trust them. Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed. Morality is rooted in the purity of our hearts."

Gandhiji pays special attention to the emancipation of women in India by bringing them into the Freedom Movement. He tries to remove various social and economic hurdles which stand in the way of their prosperity. The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing these blemishes which are represented in our Shastras as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women. The women themselves will have to take us this task. He says, "In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt we will have to produce women pure, firm and self-controlled as, Damayanti and Draupadi."

Mahatma Gandhi would not like the tendency in women to imitate men. "She can run the race," remarks Gandhiji, "but she will not rise to the great heights she is capable of, by mimicking man." In continuation he says, "Woman knows and fulfils her duty, realises her dignified status. She is the queen not the slave, of the household, over which she presides."

Gandhiji was for the abolition of all economic and legal hurdles from which women in India suffer. "Man", says the Mahatma, "has always desired power and ownership of property which gives that power." Mahatma Gandhi wishes that the daughters and sons should be treated on a footing of perfect equality. Gandhiji believes that the grace of woman lies in her character and her modesty. He does not want her to be a plaything for men. He is against costly clothes, jewellery and make-up. "Surely it is easy enough to realise that so long as there are millions of men and women in the country starving for want of food because of want of work, the sisters have no warrant for possessing costly jewels for adorning their bodies or often for the mere satisfaction of possessing them."

Once addressing a women's meeting he remarks : "Refuse to be the slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slaves of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, and do not go in for scents and lavender waters. If you (women) want to give out the proper scent it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man, but humanity. It is your birth right."

Conclusion

If really women all over the world will take to heart the wonderful words of encouragement as stated above and dedicate themselves to follow them in thought, word and deed, "the kingdom of Heaven" or "the Ramarajya" of Gandhi's conception could certainly revolutionise life on this planet of ours. Gandhijee devoted his whole life for the betterment of women. He inspired them to participate in the national freedom struggle. Gandhian ideas regarding women are still relevant and it is only through following the ideas of Gandhijee that we could empower women in real sense.

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