

Women Empowerment: A Mahatma's Vision

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi was a visionary who understood the importance of women in society. He reformed several regressive aspects of Indian culture and tradition including dowry, purdah system, untouchability and child marriage. His reforms strengthened women's status in society and empowered them. Women's self-esteem rose and their dignity were upheld through Mahatma's efforts. Gandhiji's vision was to turn women from abala to sabla. Gandhiji's philosophy was inclusive growth where all sections of society rich and poor, high and low, men and women should be treated at par and given equal opportunity for growth. Gandhiji had immense faith in the inner strength of women. He believed that women naturally possessed qualities of love, non-violence, sacrifice and forgiveness. Therefore he made women part of freedom struggle. He felt that success of Satyagrah and Dandi March were linked with active participation of women. Gandhiji had learnt the method of Satyagrah from his mother and wife whom he saw quietly resisting against exploitation at home. He gave credit to his wife and mother to teach him empathy towards women. Gandhiji adopted a rational approach towards religion and never followed it blindly. He wanted modifications in religious scriptures to do away with exploitative customs. Gandhiji realised that women were intellectually, mentally and spirituality equal to male and can participate in all the activities. He felt that women should be educated to make them independent and confident. They should be trained in various skills for their financial independence and support to their families. This paper highlights the inspiring ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi and modernity of his thoughts as a social reformer which brought respect and dignity to women in society. His inspiring ideology boosted their morale and brought about women empowerment.

Keywords: Visionary; Reforms; Gandhiji's Philosophy; Inclusive Growth; Modernity; Women Empowerment.

Empowerment means strengthening of an individual's ability in such a manner that a person feels powerful enough to think, take decisions and act in an autonomous manner. It makes a person confident to overcome external barriers for accessing resources and changing traditional ideology. Empowerment of women has become a much talked about topic in modern times but this thought was propagated by our Father of Nation in the first half

of the 20th century. This shows that he was true social reformer and much ahead of his times. Mahatma Gandhi felt that women have been suppressed in the names of customs and laws for which men are responsible and in which women had no say. Rules and laws should be formed through consultation between men and women. Mahatma Gandhi was a great social reformer who attempted to eradicate social evils including retrograde customs followed by women on the behest of tradition.

In the Gandhiji's words "To call women a weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women". This paper highlights the modernity of Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts on women and their upliftment and it shows how his thoughts were ahead of his times.

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Education a Pillar of Women Empowerment

Gandhiji believed in educating both boys and girls. He was in favour of women education. According to him education gives women power to uphold their natural rights. Gandhiji felt that uneducated women should be educated by their husbands. According to him women are blessed with equal mental capacities so they should have equal rights. But he was of the opinion that women should be educated according to their own domain i.e. home. He wanted same primary education for boys and girls but different higher education for them. He felt that girls should be taught management of home, pregnancy, nursing and care of children. He wanted women to learn spinning on portable spinning wheel and earn a living. He wanted women to take up part time work so that they are economically independent and can supplement the income of the family.

Empowerment of women is a necessity in modern times. Education can bring about positive attitudinal change. Education provides knowledge, creates awareness, develops capacity to understand and comprehend. Knowledge is power. Education makes women job worthy which can lead to employment. Gandhiji's view on Higher Education is out of sync in present times. His emphasis on skills and knowledge about home care and child care is appropriate. Employment through education improves the financial condition of women as well as their families. This financial strength gives them freedom to make purchases as well as be part of decision making in the family. A woman who is educated can take care of her family in a better manner which was propagated by Gandhiji as well. She can take care of her household finances, educate her children and this will sow the seed for better tomorrow. Education should include financial literacy by providing them knowledge and skills to understand financial planning, savings, basics of banking, financial goals etc. Investments in female literacy start a virtuous cycle that leads to improved levels of income, growth and gender equality. Societies that do not invest in girls' education pay a price for it in terms of reduced income. Women comprise 48.5% of the population. Female literacy rate is 65.46% in 2011 census. World bank's Sustainable Development Goals emphasise gender equality in access to finance as users. Inclusive growth is essential for economic development. Unless all sections of society including women enjoy the fruits of economic expansion, growth itself shall be short-lived. Gandhiji's views about women education was an inclusive one.

Gandhiji's views about educating girls about pregnancies, nursing child care is extremely relevant as women's health is an important issue under Human Resource Development and a pathetic reality is that nearly 88% of pregnant women are reported to be anaemic. World Health Organisation figures also shows that lifetime risk of dying from pregnancy or child- birth related cause is one in twenty in developing countries. 20% women in the age group of 15-49 years are at the risk of unintended pregnancy. Nearly 33% of the babies are under low birth weight category. 5.5% still births are recorded at All India Level. The reasons for such high percentage of still births are usually associated with low age of mothers, poor nutritional level of women and low utilization of primary health centre. All this can be improved by imparting education and creating awareness. As explained earlier educated women understands the benefits of nutritional diet for her family so she will know its benefits for herself as well. She can take better care of herself in terms of diet and reduce the danger of anaemia.

Mahatma Condemned the Regressive Socio-cultural Traditions

Gandhiji spoke about customs & traditions which relegated women in a subordinate position for centuries. He felt that defects in Hinduism should be removed to bring about its true meaning. All the scriptures and smritis which are against fundamentals of religion and morality should be revised. Gandhiji was against all social evils involving child marriage, purdah, dowry and restrictions of widow marriage. Gandhiji wanted women to be liberated from Purdah System. He felt that chastity cannot be protected through purdah and rejected the thought that purdah saves women from men's evil eyes. He believed that self-control and purity of mind can be the correct way. Infact women's participation in Satyagrah struggle brought them out of their home. Women defied purdah system and actively participated in non-violent struggle for independence.

Gandhiji spoke equally against another social evil against women i.e. dowry. He felt it is a sin and wanted women to remain unmarried than marrying by giving dowry. He propagated inter-caste marriage. He wanted men to show gallantry by not asking for dowry. He wanted total eradication of dowry system and called it marriage by purchase. He said that if he had a girl he would want her to remain maiden then to give her to a person demanding dowry. According

to him for a marriage to be successful wives and daughter in laws cannot be purchased.

Gandhiji's thoughts against dowry is so very relevant today where twenty one dowry deaths are reported across the country every month but the conviction rate is only 34.7%. The National Crime Records Bureau states that in 2015, as many as 7,634 women died in the country due to dowry harassment.

Mahatma as a Harbinger of women's Participation in Freedom Struggle and Politics

Mahatma's vision of women empowerment included women's participation in freedom struggle and politics. He was one of the rare promoters of women's participation in freedom struggle. Gandhiji was aware about women's potential so he liberated women by extending their field of activity and involving them in the freedom struggle. The independence movement brought about a change in the attitude towards women in India. Gandhiji said "My contribution to the great problem (of women's role in society) lies in my presenting for acceptance of truth and ahimsa in every walk of life, whether for individuals or nations. I have hugged the hope that in this, woman will be unquestioned leader and having thus found her place in human evolution, will shed her inferiority complex. Women's entry into national politics through non-violent methods brought miraculous results."

Gandhiji was inspired by the tremendous success obtained by women politicians in ex-colonial countries. He had experienced women's participation in South Africa and had immense faith in women's ability to practise non-violence. He gave platform to women to come out of domesticity and be part of freedom struggle. He provided opportunity to the Indian women to break the shackles of tradition and liberate themselves. On Gandhiji's call women from different parts of India, educated and uneducated joined independence struggle which brought them at par with men and at the forefront of actions and thoughts. Women actively participated in marches, organised public meetings sold khadi, prepared banned salt, led them from the front against police atrocities and went behind bars. They donated their wealth, jewellery and contributed to the freedom struggle with full physical and mental strength. Participation of women in freedom struggle had wide reaching consequences. Old taboos and customs were swept away. Women could understand the usefulness of caste system and many of them reduced their biasness against different castes. Women became so confident that they broke glass bangles when they

came to know that the bangles were made of Czechoslovakian glass. Women learnt to be strong to speak against injustice. They carved their own space in politics and realised that they don't need to accept male dominated politics.

Gandhiji's motivation led to participation of 10 women in the Indian National Congress's Bombay session in 1889. His views brought about changes in views of other Nationalist leaders as well. Jawaharlal Nehru was one of the liberal view leaders who agreed with Gandhiji. Jawaharlal Nehru differed with Gandhiji in view that women's education is sufficient but he believed that women should be trained in all kinds of human activities. In 1931 Indian National Congress accepted equality between men and women as one of the objectives in the fundamental resolution. Women participated with great fervour in the Civil Disobedience movement in 1920s and 1930s. Participation of women in the political movement led to emergence of many women's organisation. Some of the organisation were Women's India Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by Margaret Cousins, another organisation was National Council of Indian Women was formed in 1926 and All India Women's Conference was formed in 1927. Gandhiji wanted women to provide practical education to women voters, enrol them, teach independence. Gandhiji believed that women must have votes and an equal status. He felt that women power should be able to affect political deliberations. Thus, women's participation in freedom struggle broke many cultural and traditional biases.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi was a true social reformer who worked against evils of customs and traditions of Indian society. Several customs were disadvantageous for women as they were framed by male. The wretched position of women drew attention of Gandhiji. He referred woman as human being in his discussion. He worked towards upholding of dignity of women. He was one of the main influencers of Gandhiji's thoughts and perceptions towards women. He said that he was himself a slave-holder but he proved an unwilling slave which opened his eyes to his mission of upholding women's rights. He realised that women were exploited inside as well as outside their homes but felt that no one can be exploited without his or her willingness. Gandhiji had admitted that he himself learnt the non-violent resistance from women, especially from Kasturba and his mother. Gandhiji's influence brought women out

of their home to participate in freedom movement and gave them respite from purdah system and made them independent.

Gandhiji desired to build a new society based on social justice, equality and harmony. Gandhiji brought about political and social reforms not on a superficial level but at a deeper level. His influence gave dignity to women and helped in eradication of exploitation of women. Gandhiji has set an example by bringing change from within, thereby setting example for generations to follow. His vision of women empowerment is relevant in 21st century.

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