

GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF WOMANHOOD: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. Fr. Thomas Joseph Parathara

Assistant Professor

PG Department of History & Research Centre

Assumption College, Chanaganacherry

Email : thomastparathara@yahoo.com, Ph: 9447355840

Abstract: In the present scenario the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of everybody. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Our Nation, played an important role to uphold the dignity of womanhood, in society. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. Men and women are equal and they are together responsible for finding solutions for social problems. He firmly believed that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women. He was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and throughout his life he stood to improve the status of women in his country. He wanted women to become sisters of mercy by serving the poor and unfortunate. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order as they are the first nursery of human beings and more important than men for the society to develop and grow in right direction. The present study intends to discuss Gandhiji's thought on womanhood.

Keywords: Womanhood, gender, equality, empowerment.



ABSTRACT

In the present scenario the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of everybody. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Our Nation, played an important role to uphold the dignity of womanhood, in society. For Gandhi, women were not mere toys or dolls in the hands of men neither their competitors. Men and women are equal and they are together responsible for finding solutions for social problems. He firmly believed that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women. He was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and throughout his life he stood to improve the status of women in his country. He wanted women to become sisters of mercy by serving the poor and unfortunate. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order as they are the first nursery of human beings and more important than men for the society to develop and grow in right direction. The present study intends to discuss Gandhiji's thought on womanhood.

Keywords: Womanhood, gender, equality, empowerment.

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has played an important role in the emancipation of women. He was an advocate of the equality of men and women in the educational, civic and worked for the removal of many customs. He was a champion of their liberty and equality.

“If I was born a woman, I would raise in rebellion against any pretension on the part of man that woman is born to be his play thing. I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her heart. I could not steal into my wife’s heart until I decided to treat her differently than I used to do. And so I restored to her all her rights by dispossessing myself of all my so called rights as her husband”¹.

Gandhi’s attitude towards women can be best understood in the context of his general philosophy of life. Addressing the annual gathering of the Bombay Bhagini Samaj, held on February 20, 1918, he said; “Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he”². Gandhiji attributed the Hindu Sastras bias for male offspring to historical reasons and expressed his view in clear words: “I make no distinction between son and daughter. Such distinction in my opinion is invidious and wrong. The birth of a son or a daughter should be welcomed alike. They complement each other. Each one of them, according to him, needs the active help of other”³.

Gandhiji’s Perception of Womanhood

Mahatma Gandhi was unambiguous in his recognition of the fact that women clearly had a positive role in the reconstruction of a society. He declared himself uncompromising in the matter of women’s rights because in order to bring about social justice, the recognition of the equality of women was imperative. He believed

-
1. Krishna Kripalini, *All Men are Brother; Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in His own words*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahamadabad,1960, p.208.
 2. MK Gandhi, *women and Social Injustice*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahamadabad,1942, p.68.
 3. Pratibha Jain, *Gandhian Ideas, Social Movements and Creativity*, p.142.

that many of his contemporary movements stopped half way because of the condition of our women and much of the work did not yield appropriate results because women power had not been used. In this understanding of women's power, Gandhiji was far in advance of his time.

Gandhi had the unique thought and understanding that a woman is also a person in her own right. In a plan of life, he maintained that a woman has the right to "shape her own destiny" as a man has. Gandhi recognized very early that "to the impartial outsider, the legal and customary status of women is bad enough throughout and demands radical alteration. Following up his belief in the personhood of women in her own right, Gandhi held that fundamentally man and woman are one, characteristically declaring that "the soul in both is the same"⁴.

Gandhi called women as the noble sex. His ideal of womanhood was Sita but his message to Indian women was to rise above wifedom and become "sisters". He wanted women to become "Sisters of mercy" by serving the poor and unfortunate. Women were asked to relate the movement for their own emancipation with that of all the oppressed people and to make common cause with them. Thus, by directly linking women's aspirations with national aspirations, he gave the movement a wider perspective, and a greater legitimacy.

Despite insisting on stereotype of women as running the household while men dominate the affairs of the outside world, in practice Gandhi encouraged a breaking away from these stereotypes. This is most evident in his belief in the superiority of non violent sathyagraha as a weapon of struggle. He learnt this from his wife and it is a form of resistance more often practiced by women. So far, this kind of resistance used to be considered "unmanly". Gandhi realised that the identification of "manliness" with violence was likely to lead humanity to destruction. Men needed to emulate women's quiet strength and their resistance of injustice without resorting to violence.

4 Anil Datta Mishra, Fundamentals of Gandhism, p.42.

Gandhi's first encounter with women – power took place in Africa. There he realized how women could become the leaders of Satyagraha. It does not require the learning that books give but only the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. It was in this connection that Gandhi made a few very important, though controversial observation regarding the nature and role of women. According to Gandhi a woman was endowed with certain distinct qualities and temperaments on the strength of which she can undertake certain special functions.

Gandhi against gender -based discrimination

Gandhi was totally against gender discrimination. Gandhi, by proclaiming perfect equality of men and women, rejected the shastras and smritis that were prejudiced against women and claimed to follow the positive elements of the great Vedic tradition in which women were treated as equals. According to Gandhi, "of all the evils that man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex"⁵.

Woman, according to Gandhi hold is the personification of self sacrifice, but unfortunately today she does not realize what a tremendous advantage she has over man. As Tolstoy used to say, they are laboring under the hypnotic influence of man. If they would realize the strength of non - violence they would not consent to be called the weak sex. When woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think in terms of himsa or ahimsa. Her primary duty is self- protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that comes to her mind, in order to protect herself using her nails and teeth the weapons God has given. She must use them with all her strength and if it needs be, die in the effort. The man or woman who has shed all fear of death will be able not only to protect himself or herself but also others also through laying down his or her life.

Nevertheless there is no doubt that at some point there is bifurcation. Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital

5 MP Mathai, Mahatma Gandhi's World View, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi,2000,p.173.

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, required qualities which man need not possess. She is passive, he is active: 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 function. Without her care the race must become extinct. There are no women blacksmiths and carpenters. But men and women work on the fields, the heaviest work being done by the males. The women keep and manage the homes. They supplement the meager resources of the family, but man remains the bread winner.

“Whilst I would always advocate the repeal of all legal disqualifications, I should have the enlightened women of India to deal with the root cause. Woman is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and her advent to public life should therefore result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property. Let them be known to posterity. Let us learn from them that it is better for the few to have no ancestral property at all. The privilege of the awakened women should be to spot and eradicate age-long evils. To call women 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 superior⁶.

Gandhiji’s veneration for his mother coloured his whole life and was the starting point of a gigantic struggle he launched later on for the emancipation of women. In his early life, he took it for granted that his young wife was his possession or enjoyment. His autobiography tells us that even after the young husband phase was over, he expected her to obey him, he considered it is his right to control her and to be served by her. Only as experience taught him, did he 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

6. Krishna Kripalini, *All Men are Brother; Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in His own words*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahamadabad,1960, p.209.

take a share in public work and men to take a share in domestic work. According to Gandhi the division of the spheres of work being recognized, the general qualities and culture required are practically the same for both the sexes.

Gandhi considered women to be the incarnation of ahimsa. He wrote in the Harijan:

“I have suggested in these coloumns that woman is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this quality in the largest measure? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she was or can be the object of man’s lust. And she will occupy her proud position on the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader”⁷.

Going to temple, Gandhi grants, is most important for strengthening one’s faith. The women who understand that the Lord Darshan is a means to self-realization will also know that even temples must speak to us a freedom, for without freedom it is impossible to protect religion. Had the women been aware that it was the primary duty of the people to free themselves from the tyranny of this man, they would have filled with courage their husband and sons, made them shade off their cowardice and defend their self - respect. But in the present age, women keep aloof from the things which are really for the nation’s welfare and hence, we get little help from them.

In Gandhiji’s opinion women should labour under no legal disabilities not suffered by man. He should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality. As women begin to realize their strength, as they must in proportion to the education they receive, they will naturally resent the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected. Gandhiji desired the utmost freedom of our women. Gandhiji is confident that, if women realize their inner strength, there need not be any subservience to man or any other power on earth. They have consented to be called the weaker sex, they have considered themselves unable to stand without man’s

7 MP Mathai, Mahatma Gandhi’s World View, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi,2000,p.175.

protection, they have acknowledged that they cannot compete with man intellectually, they have been flattered by man's tributes to their physical beauty and power of attraction and have there by lowered their own status and standard. Gandhiji naturally points to the way of ahimsa as the way of freedom from their shackles as for the permanent removal of the world's ills.

The function of woman is not allow themselves to be prostituted by men in exchange for their support, but to be the queens of the household. And not only married woman, "any girl with proper guidance, can transmute her sex appeal much or little into a powerful inspirational force for good and evil, with the results limited only by the height of her ideals, the character of her personalty, the degree of her beauty and her ability to make contact with the proper type of men". The greatest example in history of the possibilities of talent in this force, and a convincing argument for the vital necessity of chastity in unmarried girls is that furnished by Joan Arc, who earned the title of "Deliverer of France". Women can become the leaders in Sathygraha which does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. Gandhi urged Kasturba to rejoice in his opportunity that God has granted him, an opportunity to go through such an ordeal like fasting for the sake of dharma. Gandhiji saw woman as the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering and felt that her advent in public life should therefore result in purifying it, in retaining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property.

Gandhiji passionately stood for the freedom of women. He detests child marriages. Gandhi shudders to see a child widow, and shivers with rage when a husband just widowed contracts with brutal indifference another marriage. He deplored 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. Notwithstanding all this grief and rage, Gandhiji realizes the difficulties of the problem. Women must have votes and an equal legal status. But the problem does not end there. It only commences at the point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation. Gandhi constantly warned women against depending on patronage. He envisioned women entering

public life as selfless, devoted social workers. As he began to see more and more clearly that many congressmen inclined towards self-seeking and power – grabbing, he saw in women the potential force that would selflessly undertake the task of social reconstruction that was to be the hallmark of swaraj.

The role of educated, middle class women in public life was to be an extension of her domestic role of selfless service. It was given to women to teach the art of peace to the worrying world thirsting for that nectar. The capacity for silent suffering which Gandhi idealized was in fact one of the key symptoms of her subordination. But Gandhi made some of the symptoms of subordination a glorious cult of eternal womanhood. To Gandhi the domestic slavery of women is the symbol of our barbarism. It is high time that our women – kind was free from this incubus. Domestic work ought not take the whole of woman's time. Gandhi combined in himself the best of both the masculine and feminine qualities he sought to amalgamate in the men and women of India in order to make them whole and integrated beings. Gandhi envisaged a major and dominant role for women in building the non-violent society of his dreams.

Conclusion

Gandhiji believed that men and women are equal and they are together responsible for finding solutions for social problems. He never hesitates to give women any kind of difficult and hard jobs. He believed that they were ready to face any challenge. Women got equal opportunities and responsibilities in socio – economic and educational institutions designed by Gandhiji. They were able to take more responsibilities and show willpower to take any constructive thinking. Thus women are able to take part in the socio, political, economic rebuilding of modern India at par with men.

Gandhiji's views on women were rather unconventional. He held that men and women, though equal, were complementary to each other and neither was complete without the other. His contribution towards the empowerment of women is invaluable and incomparable. The self confidence that the Indian women have and

the better position that she enjoys today is significant to a large extent due to Gandhiji's efforts. He helped women in finding a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new consciousness etc. He vies that women are most suited to fight with new weapons of non violence and truth.

IJSER

References:

1. Datta, D.M. The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi
2. Fischer, Louis. The Life of Mahatma Gandhi
3. Gandhi, M.K. Village Swaraj, Navajivan Publishing house, Ahamedabad
4. Gandhi, M.K. Women and Social Justice, Navajivan publishing house, Ahamedabad,1954.
5. Joshi Pushpa, Gandhi on women, Navajivan Publishing house, Ahamedabad,1988.
6. Krishna, Kripalani. All men are Brothers; Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, Navajivan Publishing house, Ahamedabad,1960.
7. Malavika Karlekar, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1995.
8. Mathai M P. Mahatma Gandhi's World- View, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi,2000.
9. Patel MS. The Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, Navajivan Trust, Ahamedabad,1953.
10. Raghuramaraia R. Debating Gandhi, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2006

IJSER