



Gandhiji's thoughts on women empowerment

Dr. G. Sunil Kumar, Academic Consultant, Dept. of Political Science & Public Administration, Vikrama Simhapuri University, Nellore - 524001

Abstract: According to Gandhiji, women is the Ahimsa and peace incarnate. For she has the infinite capacity to suffer and it she who can give the message of peace to the warring world. Gandhiji, however felt that one should not confuse the role of women with that of men, which are different and distinct from each other. Women primary role is that of a mother and hence that of the mistress of home. She therefore cannot go for manly pursuits. Gandhiji condemned the evil customs such as the pardah, dowry system and child marriage and felt that unless each one of these evil customs was totally eradicated, India could not progress. While maintaining that marriage was natural and sacrament, he concerned divorce as the last resort.

Keywords: Gandhiji, women empowerment, women status, co-education, dowry system, sexurge.

Introduction

This paper entitled "Gandhiji's Thoughts on Women Empowerment" aims at discussing conceptual frame work of women status, ideal marriage, child marriage, dowry system, marriage and love, divorce, widow remarriage, pardah, co-education, contraception, Inter-marriage, sexurge. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional and multi layered concept, women empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources that is material, human, intellectual and financial resources and control over decision-making in the home, community, society, nation and to gain power. Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. In this process women should be empowered socially, economically, educationally and politically that can help them take self-decision regarding education, mobility, economic independency, political participation, public speaking and awareness to exercise rights. In 1918 at

an annual meeting of the Bombay Bhagini Samaj, Gandhiji deplored the situation in our country with crores of our people of both sexes living in absolute ignorance. These men and women ignorant as they are do their bit of life well and properly. Both have same education rather absence of education. But some how men has dominated women from ages post.

Conceptual frame work

Gandhiji was intensely conscious of the need for improving the status of women in the Indian society. In 1936 he said "I am firmly of opinion that India's salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of women¹" women had actually come to believe in the truth of men's interesting teaching that she is inferior to him. The seers among men, however, always recognized the equal status of women. This essential belief of Gandhiji, however did not mean that he saw no difference between men and women. Infact he found the need for keeping the vocations of the two different. Mother hood was an important



duty of the women that women should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that heart. It is a reversion to barbarity. There is much bravery in keeping one's home in good order and condition as there is indefending it against attack from without. Gandhiji regarded women as the incarnation of ahimsa which meant infinite love. Infinite love in its turn means infinite capacity for suffering.

a. Ideal Marriage

Gandhiji's view of the ideal marriage was that which aimed at spiritual union through the physical. It is worthwhile to quote from his autobiography. "the wife is not the husband's bonded-slave, but his companion and help-mate, and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows, as free as the husband to choose her own path²".

b. Child marriage

Gandhiji was for child marriages to be declared null and void from the beginning. Gandhiji would actually lay down twenty as the age for marriage. The revolutionary view of Gandhiji in this matter is illustrated by his advice to Brahmins that if they could not find a mature girl in their community, they should rather choose one who had become a widow when she was a child. And if one did not get a Brahmin widow, who had reached that age, then he should take any girl he liked. And, "I tell you that the God of the Hindus will pardon that boy who has preferred to marry out of his caste rather than ravish a girl of twelve³". In fact, in this connection one might note, Gandhiji said "Brahminism that can tolerate untouchability, virgin widow-hood, spoliation of virgins, stinks in my nostrils⁴".

c. Dowry system

Gandhiji was also irrevocably opposed to the dowry system. He thought the dowry system was inter-mixed with the problem of inter-caste marriage and it was his view that the boys and girls would have to break the bonds of caste if the evil was to be eradicated. The parents, according to him, should so educate the girls that they should refuse to marry a young man who wanted a price for marriage and should rather remain spinsters than be a party to the degrading terms.

d. Marriage and Love

In the choice for Marriage Gandhiji would lay down four conditions, out of which he would accord priority to spiritual development. Service should come next, family considerations and the interest of the social order should have the third place, and mutual attraction of love the fourth and the last place. This means that when the other three conditions are not satisfied, love alone should not be a valid reason for marriage. At the same time, Gandhiji would rule out marriage where there is no love even though all the other three conditions are fully complied with. Gandhiji considered marriage to be a natural thing in life and it was wholly wrong to consider it derogatory. It is much better to look upon marriage as necessary and to lead a life of self-restraint after marriage.

e. Divorce

On divorce Gandhiji believed that if it was unavoidable and the only alternative for moral progress, he would not hesitate to accept it. Gandhiji's definition of marriage was that it was a confirmation of the right of union between two partners to the exclusion of



all others when in their joint opinion they consider such union to be desirable, but it conferred no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other to one's wish for union.

f. Widow Remarriage

Gandhiji was a strong believer in widower marriage. It was a paradox, according to him, that Hindu society, which worried so much about cow protection, bothered so little about the young widows. In the name of the religion, widowhood was forced on three lakhs of Indian girls who could not even understand what marriage was. It led to secret vice and degraded religion. Gandhiji believed that child widows should be treated as virgins, not only to be remarried but really duly and well-married. If widow remarriage was a sin, marriage of widower also was. If widowhood was voluntary, it would have meaning and really add grace and dignity to lead, but if it was imposed, it would act like a poison. For Hinduism to be saved, the state of enforced widowhood needs to be eliminated.

g. Pardah

Gandhiji was also against pardah. Chastity, according to Gandhiji, could not be protected by the surrounding wall of the pardah. It was to grow from within. And to be worth anything, it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. He also wondered why so much of talk was there about women chastity. The women really did not have any say in the matter of men chastity.

h. Co-education

Gandhiji taught that for co-education to be successful without undesirable results, it was necessary to bring up boys and girls with in the family

freely and naturally. Then only co-education could become real. Gandhiji related in this context his experience that once he had made boys and girls sleep in the same verandah without any partition between them it brought about undesirable results.

i. Contraception

Gandhiji was vigorously opposed to contraceptives. He did not believe that India was overpopulated. He would advocate self-control instead of birth-control. Contraceptives might lead to frightful results and a situation might arise when men and women would live for sex alone, in fact, become mental and moral wrecks. The real problem about birth control is that the women in India had not developed the capacity to say 'no' to their husbands when they approached them. If they had education, if they would learn the art of resistance, the problem would solve itself.

j. Intermarriage

Gandhiji stood for inter-marriage among the castes because restrictions on inter-marriage stunned Hindu society.

k. Sex urge

Sex urge was recognized by Gandhiji as a fine and noble thing and there was nothing to be ashamed of it. It was meant only for the act of creation. Any other use of it would be sin against God and humanity.

Conclusion

Empowerment is a continuous process for realizing the ideals of equality, human liberation and freedom for all. Women empowerment, thus, implies equality of opportunity and equality between the genders, ethnic groups, social classes and age groups,



strengthening of life chances, collective participation in different spheres of life that is cultural, social, political, economic, development process, decision making etc. The need for women empowerment was felt in India long back. Mahatma Gandhiji had announced at the second round table conference that his aim was to establish a political society in India in which there would be no distinction between people of high and low classes and in which women would enjoy the same rights as men and the teeming millions of India would be ensured dignity and justice social, economic and political.

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