

Women Empowerment: The Gandhian Model

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***Abstract:** Today empowerment of women can be considered as most burning issue in most of the societies of the world. Though, they constitute almost half of the population of society, they are deprived of basic rights and liberties in their every spheres of life. It is mainly due to the patriarchal oriented social customs, traditions, norms and values prevailed in society since time immemorial. In the context of India too, there were many examples of such social customs and rules in form of widowhood, the Purdah system, dowry, child marriage, witch hunting. Such kind of irrational social custom and traditions can be considered as major obstacles in the way of empowerment of women in society. It can be argued that women empowerment and total development of nation or society can never be sustained without eradication of such social wrong committed against them. In this regard, the Gandhi's doctrines relating women's rights and empowerment are highly relevant today. In view of Gandhi, although he had great respect for the traditions of the country but realized that certain custom and traditions of the Indian society was*

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anti-ethical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. He quoted that “If I was born as women, I would raise in rebellion against any pretension on the parts of man that women is born to be his plaything. Gandhi also opined that “Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen, only when woman is liberated of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered.” So Gandhi argues that only through spreading education, employment opportunities and changing in social structure can promote women empowerment in society. The present study has been made an attempt to analyse the Gandhian philosophy and its relevancy relating to empowerment of women. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data collected from autobiography, books, journals, pamphlets and newspapers.

Key Word s: *Women, Empowerment, Gandhian Philosophy.*

1. Introduction:

The empowerment of women is vital to the process of development of any nation or country as whole. According to Sen and Batliwala “Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one’s destiny and the circumstances of one’s lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (belief, values and attributes) According to Human Development in South Asia “Women empowerment is a change in the context of a women’s life which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life”. The program of action of the international conference on population and development stresses that the empowerment and autonomy of women and improvement of their political, social, economical and health status is both a highly important end in itself and necessary for sustainable human development.¹ However, it is observed that though womenfolk constitute almost half of the population of the country, they are often subjected to be oppressed and exploitation and deprived of their basic rights and liberties in life. It is mainly due to the patriarchal oriented social customs, traditions, norms and values prevailed in society since time immemorial. In the context of India, especially after Vedic period, with the advent of foreign rulers, the status of women was gradually started to decline by imposing certain

kinds of social restrictions on women in form of the Sati, the Child marriage, the *Purdah*, the *Devadasi*, the *Jauhar* and Widowhood system. Even today, such kind of irrational practices against womenfolk in society are prevailing in different forms in society. For example dowry death, witch hunting, triple *talaq*, veil system and so on. Of course, during the last part of the 19th century, some social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Swaraswati, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagarh etc. played a crucial role in terms of eradicating such kind of social evil practices against women and succeeded to the some extent. During 20th century, Gandhi as a major social and political reformer who also played a vital role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongdoings committed against the womenfolk of the country.

As he believed that society can develop rapidly if it takes all section of the people together into its fold irrespective of rich and poor, high and low and both men and women as well. In this regard, his concept of *Sarvodaya* is very much relevant which implies good of all, service to all and welfare to all. He laid more emphasis on three factors such education, employment opportunities and changing in social structure that promote the empowerment of women.

2. Objectives of the study:

The present study has made an attempt to analyse and highlight the importance of Gandhi's views and ideas relating to the empowerment of women.

3. Methodology:

To this study, analytical methodology is applied and the views or ideas expressed by Gandhi in his autobiography, books, pamphlets and other writers who wrote on Gandhian Philosophy have been analyzed and discussed in this present study. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data which are collected from books, journal, magazine and newspapers.

4. Result and Discussion:

Gandhian Approach to women empowerment:

Gandhi is universally known as the most renowned theorist, philosopher and also the practitioner of non-violence, truth, love, peace, tolerance and freedom. He was concerned with equal upliftment of poor deprived and the downtrodden section of society. Especially

his views or ideas regarding the empowerment of marginalized women section are very much relevant today. He visualized a great role for women in eradicating the social evil wrongdoings against women. During the time of independence movement, he encouraged the women to actively participate in the movement, to work concerning purity of life, removal of untouchability, propagation of *Khadi*, communal harmony and *Swadeshi*. He was of the opinion that women were the embodiment with qualities of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility faith and knowledge. These were the qualities he expected for his *Satyagraha* movement and Ahimsa.

In Gandhis's words, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel, it is man's injustice to women". For Gandhi women were not dolls or toys in the hand of men neither their competitors. According to him "Intellectually, mentally and spiritually women is equivalent to a male counterpart and he can participate in nation building process."² Gandhi also opined that "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen, only when woman is liberated of the kitchen that her true spirit may be discovered."

In view of Gandhi, for the sake of total development of the country or nation, proper development of women section is most important aspect. He encouraged both men and women to abolish those irrational social practices and restrictions which posed a great threat to the empowerment of women. Instead of that Gandhi argues that women should be provided education, employment opportunities as well as changing in social structure that can promote the empowerment women in society.³ These factors are discussed as below.

4.1. (A) Changing in social structure:

As Gandhi said changing in social structure is one of the important factors to liberate women in society. It is observed that women are more subjected to be oppressed and exploitation in society due to patriarchal oriented social custom, tradition, norms and values. At present time also we have seen that the government of India has taken adequate constitutional and legal measures to protect and provide basic rights and freedom for women, but to the some extent some social custom and traditions often posed as great obstacle in the way enjoying basic rights and freedom as enjoyed by male counterpart. It

is evident that a number of witch hunting, dowry death cases are increasing, veil system, restriction for entry into *Masjid*, *Mandir* are still practising in Assam and other parts of India. It is also to be noted that in Nagaland women are still being deprived of active participation in local administration due constitutionally vested especial power to Naga society to maintain their customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice involving decision according to Naga customary law etc. These provisions are provided by the constitution of India under article 371(A).⁴ So some civil society's organization of Nagaland especially Naga Mothers' Association has been playing a vital role against such provisions and to change of such Naga custom and law as to enjoy equal rights and to participate by women in various civil and judicial administration process.

In this regard, Gandhi's views and ideas are very much relevant today. Mahatma Gandhi said that women have been suppressed under social custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. In view of Gandhi, although he had great respect for the traditions of the country but realized that certain custom and traditions of the Indian society was anti-ethical to the spirit of development of the women of the nation. Women have equal mental abilities as that of men and equal right to freedom. He argued that there must be mutual cooperation and consultation between men and women in terms of framing social rules and conduct. He also asserted that the blemishes referred represented in the *Manusmriti* should be removed and encouraged every Indian men and women must to read *Manusmriti* to know what great damage it has done to women and Indian society.⁵ From such discussion it is understood that Gandhi was ardent supporter of women's liberation and empowerment in society which is much important aspect of overall development of nation.

4.1. (B). Education and women empowerment:

As said by Gandhi, education can be considered as most potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. Generally education enables women not only to more acquire knowledge and ideas about the outside of the world but also to get status, self reliance, courage and inner strength to face challenges, to procure job, supplement the

income of family and to attain the social status. Moreover, educated women can play an equally crucial role as men counterpart in terms of nation building.

So, Gandhiji also thought of spreading education among womenfolk to realize their inborn tendencies and capacities and to stand against all kinds of discriminations, oppression and exploitation in the way of life. He believed that education can help in transforming the socio- economic structure that directly or indirectly affects the life of womenfolk. Now-a-days the role of government and other stakeholders in case of promoting women education is very crucial. The government has also adopted plan, schemes and policies for women education and women empowerment as whole. The present ruling government has introduced of new scheme “*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*” for survival, protection and education of girl child is really praiseworthy in this regard.

4.1. (C). Employment opportunities to women:

It is observed that lack of employment opportunities and economic constraints is also very much crucial factor that responsible for backwardness of women in society. As far as the economic emancipation of women was concerned Gandhi felt that female folk could be engaged in the cottage and small scale industries of the village such as spinning, broom, basket and rope making and oil processing so that the rural women can supported to the family income. Now-a-days, the government has more encouraged through facilitating Micro Finance system to boost the economic empowerment of women in the country.

5. Conclusion:

From above discussion, it is understood that Gandhi attempted to eradicate the social wrongdoing against women in society through ages. His view and ideas relating to the empowerment of women is much relevant in present time. As Gandhi viewed, women empowerment can never be attained unless our patriarchal social structure is altered. It seen that women are constitute almost half of the population of the society, but their participation in socio-economic and political arenas are not sufficient. To develop or empower them in society, there is need to be changed of social attitude and mentality

towards women and girls, spread of education, creating of awareness about their rights and freedom, employment opportunities, positive role of media, strict vigilant of women's organizations, strict enforcement of laws and acts relating to women's plight. Last but not least, it can be argued that being an Indian Citizen it is our fundamental duties to develop scientific temper and renounce the practice of derogatory to dignity of women in society. □

Footnotes :

- 1 UNFPA (2007): "Guidelines on Women Empowerment", <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>.
- 2 Barman, P (Jan. 2013); 'Gandhi and his vision for women empowerment', *IJCAES Special issue on Basic, Applied and Social Science*, Vol. III.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The Constitution of India (As amended by the 92nd amendment act, 19920). pp-197.
- 5 Manusmriti translated by George Buhler, www.sacredtext.com.

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11. Hind Swaraj by Mahatma Gnadhi.

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