



Research Paper

Gandhian Vision for Women and it's Constitutional Legacy

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Gandhi presented a new way of progress and named it Sarvodaya, i.e. development of all, irrespective of class, caste, creed and gender. For him, Sarvodaya is the way towards a harmonious society. In his harmonious society there would be no superiority or inferiority of status of either men or women. Both would be equal to each other. Gandhi tried to arouse women to the realization of her true position in society. In a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur he wrote, "My special function from childhood has been to make woman to realize her dignity".¹ The first part of this paper relocates Gandhian vision about women and in the second part an attempt is being made to highlight the impact of his vision on the Indian Constitution.

Gandhian vision about women is based on two fundamental concepts of equality between the sexes and differentiation of their social roles. He believed that men should not consider themselves as lords or masters of women but as friends and co-workers. To quote him, "Man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one, in the crime of degrading humanity".² He maintained the view that men and women are complimentary to each other. One is incomplete without the other. To a married couple he advised:

You are being united in marriage as friends and equals. If the husband is called Swamin, the wife is Swamini – each master of the other, each helpmate of the other, each cooperating with the other in the performance of the life's task and duties.³

Thus Gandhi believed in the equality of the sexes. In a speech given on 20 February, 1918 on the theme of 'Regeneration of Women' he stated, "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities".⁴ He based his ideal of gender equality upon the classical Hindu metaphysical doctrine that the individual soul either of a man or woman (Atma) is identical with the universal soul (Brahman).⁵ So every individual soul (Atma), either of man or woman, has an equal right to achieve the ultimate goal of life, which he named, self realization.

Although Gandhi believed in the equality of the sexes; he at the same time also felt that there are important physical and emotional differences between men and women. The crucial biological differences, the fact that the women bear children and nurse them, requires a different social role. According to him, "Both are fundamentally one but occupy different vocations in life. He is the bread winner. She is the keeper and distributor of the bread".⁶ He explained the special role of women, "It is a woman's right to rule home... Woman looks after the feeding of child. She shapes his future. She is responsible for building his character. She is her children's educator and hence mother of the Nation".⁷ Thus in views of Gandhi men and women, though equal in status, are quite different from each other due to physical and emotional differences.

Gandhi stressed the need of education among women but he recommended separate methods of education for boys and girls. With regards to the type of education girls should receive, Gandhi felt that the education curriculum should be adapted to the special needs of girls in order to prepare them to be mothers and homemakers. He emphasized that the women education should prepare them for the real challenges of their daily lives. He held the view that it was not possible to develop the personality of men and women to their maximum unless the scheme of education was framed keeping in view the cardinal truth that the activities of men and women were different; while the men are to be prepared for the outward activities, the women have to be trained for the home life.⁸

Though Gandhi did not advocate that women in general should work outside the home to earn a livelihood, but at the same time he did not like that the household chores should take away entire time of women. In an article published in Harijan he called it domestic slavery and wanted to free the womankind from this incubus.⁹ He supported a large role for women in public life. He spread the message of Charkha and Khadi through woman. He believed that by doing this productive work she can be self sufficient.

Gandhi accorded a high value to ahimsa or non-violence. Non violence means infinite love, which means infinite capacity for suffering. As woman is enriched with the quality of suffering so Gandhi considered woman as an embodiment of ahimsa. In a speech published in Young India he wrote, "If non-violence is the law of our

being, the future is with women".¹⁰ Gandhis non - violent resistance was peculiarly suited to women because it did not depend on physical strength. Under Gandhi's able leadership women had taken active part in freedom struggle. Not only those who had the benefit of English education, but even the most orthodox Hindus sent their women from their age long seclusion in the home out into the open to wrest political power from the British. From 1920 to 1940 Gandhi gradually came to advocate a greatly expanded role for women in public affairs. His exhortation to women in 1921 to participate in the first great Satyagraha campaign envisioned a primary supportive role in which women would boycott the purchase of foreign cloth and dedicate themselves to spinning.¹¹ A similar exhortation in 1930 envisioned broader participation in which women should take on the activity of picketing liquor shops and sellers of foreign cloth.¹² Indian women showed themselves at their best in the Salt Satyagraha campaign started by Gandhi breaking the salt law on 6th April 1930. At first Gandhi was reluctant to permit women to join the salt campaign. But after receiving a letter from Mrs. Margret Cousins, on behalf of the women's Indian association which showed the reaction of women to Gandhi's decision, he changed his view and welcomed women to Salt Satyagraha. By 1939, he was not only convinced that women participation was desirable but they should take the lead in Satyagraha movement in India. In an article in Harijan he said, "I would love to find that my future army contained a vast preponderance of women over men. If the fight came, I should then face it with greater confidence than if men predominate. I would dread the latter's violence. Women would be my guarantee against such an outbreak".¹³

In his writings and speeches Gandhi strongly condemned the social evils like Purdah, Child marriage, etc. which have brought about the downfall of women in the country. He was against the evil of Purdah. To quote him, "Purdah was one of the social evils of the society that impeded the march toward Swaraj. Purdah not only denied the freedom of the women but also free gifts of God like light and fresh air".¹⁴ He denounced Purdah as a barbarous custom 'which does incalculable harm to the Country'. He rejected the arguments that it protects the virtue of women in the following words, "Chastity is not a hot house growth. It cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the Purdah. It must grow from within and to be worth anything".¹⁵

The age at which the girls are ordinarily married gives a clue of the position of the women in society. An early age of marriage would suggest that the girls, play no or little role in espousal; that the girls can be given in marriage for pecuniary considerations by the elders; that the bride price can be in vogue; that the connubial relations do not extend beyond the caste; that the female education is neglected; that the females are subjected to the hazards of early and frequent pregnancies etc. He considered child marriage as a moral as well as physical evil.

He was in favor of Sarda marriage act, which was under the process of formulation then, he said, "I am strongly in favor of raising the age of consent not merely to 14 but even to 16".¹⁶ He was in fact in favor of fixing 20 as a minimum age for marriage of the girls. Advising the young man not to marry any girl who was below 16, he wrote, "If I could do so, I would lay down 20 as a minimum. Twenty years is early enough even in India".¹⁷

Not only was Gandhi opposed to the child marriage but he also believed that no young person of whatever age should be coerced into marriage against his or her will. He was of the opinion that all girls may not wish to marry and their right to calling outside of marriage should be respected by their parents and society. In a speech to college women he said, "Every Indian girl did not born to marry, I can show many girls who are dedicating themselves to service, instead of serving one man".¹⁸

Gandhi was in favour of remarriage of child widows. He treated an unmarried girl and a child widow at par. He wanted that all the child widows should remarry. About adult widows, he felt that the decision to remarry should rest with the widows. He believed that widowed women should have the same right to remarry as men with no social opprobrium. However, those widows and widowers who make a conscious, voluntary decision to renounce their right to remarry should continue to be honored by Hindu society. In an article named 'Helpless Widows' he said, "Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon in Hinduism; enforced widowhood is a curse".¹⁹

While Gandhi was travelling in Bengal in the year 1928, a gentleman handed him a letter in which he draw the leader's attention to the wide prevalence of prostitution in the region. This evil was on the increase during the later British period in India. Gandhi was against this evil. In a letter to Mahadev Desai he advised prostitutes to leave their profession and led a respectful life in society. He said, "If such women give up their vile occupation and turnover a new leaf, respectable men would certainly marry them. Once a prostitute, always a prostitute is not a sound proposition".²⁰

Constitutional Legacy

Gandhi states that equal legal and political rights of women were only to be a starting point to enable the society to transform itself by ending all exploitation, a process in which the women would be the prime movers. He was conscious about the rights of women. He said, "I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man".²¹ He was instrumental for arousing political consciousness in the poor, illiterate women and making them take part in the freedom movement. Thus Indian women's political participation started with the freedom movement. Political participation may be defined

as voluntary participation in political affairs through membership, voting and partaking in the activities of the political parties, legislative bodies or politically motivated movements. Similarly Indian Constitution provides the framework for women to participate actively in politics.

The Constitution of India guarantees adult franchise. Article 326 of the Constitution provides that the elections to the house of people and to the legislative assembly of every state shall be on the basis of adult suffrage. Gandhi also supported the issue of women suffrage when it was first raised in 1921. He said, "Women must have votes and an equal legal status".²²

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution proclaims the general right of all person to equality before law. In a speech given on 20 February, 1918 Gandhi stated, "Woman has the same right of freedom and liberty as man".²³ He strongly emphasized on the equality of man and woman.

Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits the state from discriminating against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. For Gandhi also there was no basic difference between man and woman. To quote him, "Woman is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities".²⁴

Article 16 of the Constitution guaranteed the equality of opportunity for all Citizens in the matters of public employment. But for Gandhi there was no equality of occupations between man and woman. Nature demanded the vocation of man and woman to be different from each other. There is a definite division of labor between man and woman, the former is the bread winner while the latter the caretaker and the distributor of bread. He further stated that women could supplement the income of her families with the activities like spinning etc. He did not take note about her income disparately. Article 39 (d) Suggests to secure equal pay for equal works for both man and woman.

Article 21 (A) was added to the Constitution by the Eighty sixth Constitutional Amendment Act 2002. It proclaims that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 Years. Gandhi was also, an ardent supporter of compulsory education for girls as well as boys. In his Basic National Education Scheme, his proposed free and compulsory education for children of both sexes from ages 7 to 14. But he recommended separate methods of education for the boys and the girls. In a speech given in 1918 he suggested that woman's educational programmers should be planned with the different vocational of the sexes in mind, but access to different branches of knowledge should not be restricted to either sex.²⁵

Gandhi advocated fundamental changes in Hindu inheritance laws to give man and woman equal property rights. In his discussion on it he said, "I should treat the daughter and sons on a footing of perfect equal".²⁶ The legal status of equality has been established through several acts. In 1956 the Hindu succession Act give woman rights to inherit money and property.

Conclusion

In Gandhian way of progress named Sarvodaya, there would be no difference between men and women. Both would be equal to each other. His ideal of gender equality is based on the classical Hindu metaphysical doctrine that the individual soul either of a man or a woman (Atma) is identical with the universal soul (Brahman). Thus every individual soul has an equal right to achieve the ultimate goal of life, which he named, self realization. But from societal point of view Gandhi at the same time also felt that there are important physical and emotional differences between men and women. Both are fundamentally one but occupy different vocations in life. He advocates that men should work outside and women should work at home. As their vocations are different so he recommended separate methods of education for boys and girls. Though Gandhi did not advocate that woman should work outside the house, but from 1920 to 1940 he gradually came to advocate a greatly expanded role for women in public affairs under his able leadership women participated enthusiastically in all his political movement- Non cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India movement, as its method of non-violence suits to women. His writings and speeches suggest that he strongly condemned the social evils of purdah, child marriage, prostitution etc.

Gandhi was in favour of equal legal and political rights of women. He was instrumental for arousing political consciousness in the poor, illiterate women. Indian constitution also provides the frame work for active participation of women in politics. Indian constitution guarantees adult Franchise. Gandhi was also in four of equal voting rights for women as he supported this issue when it was first raised in 1921. Article 15 of the constitution prohibits the state from discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. For Gandhi also, there was no discrimination between men and women. Indian constitution proclaims for free and compulsory education to the children between the age of 6 to 14. Similarly Gandhi proposed free and compulsory education for children of both sexes from ages 7 to 14. But he recommended separate methods of education for boys and girls. Gandhi advocated fundamental changes in Hindu inheritance laws to give man and women equal property rights. In 1956 the Hindu Succession Act gives women right to inherit money and property.

Though Gandhi has no role in the making of Indian constitution but impact of his ideals on Constitution cannot be ignored. Article 40, 43, 46, 47 and 48 of the Constitution are labeled as Gandhian principles as their aim is to develop the society of Gandhian Ideas. The Gandhian ideology stood as guidance not only to the makers of Indian

Constitution but to the World also. For the same reason UNESCO requested Gandhi to send his opinion to include his ideas in the project of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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