



Gandhian Views on Women Empowerment and the current trends

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century. Religion, customs and laws from time immemorial had relegated women to the backyards of human civilization. Women in Pre Independence India focused on issues that directly or indirectly impacted the status of women are equality of Sexes, Marriage and Dowry system, Widow Remarriage, Divorce, Education and Co-education, Birth Control etc. In Gandhi's views, women can never be considered to be the weaker sex. In fact, women for Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like knowledge, humility, tolerance, sacrifice and faith. There is inequality and vulnerability of women in all spheres of life. They need to be empowered in all walks of life. The position of "women" in India is more practical and rational than earlier. In India women comprise 48 percent of its total population and with the advent of 21st century and its development in various scientific and technological era, the status of women is also changing at a fast pace but we cannot ignore the very existence of a world where woman are discriminated and oppressed because of various gender divide issues. Women should realize that they have constitutional rights to economic security and independency, Self decision regarding education, public speaking, awareness and exercise of rights, political participation and many more factors ensure the vision of women empowerment for the 21st century.

Keywords: Revolutionary, Immemorial, Embodiments, constitutional rights, Empowerment.

Introduction

The status of women in India has been subject to many great revolutions over the past few centuries. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most vital concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of real world. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Religion, customs and laws from times immemorial had demoted women to the backyards of human civilization.

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the spheres. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, sought to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century. As far as his perception of



women as medium of social change was concerned, Gandhi felt that women could provide the mainsprings of revolutionary thought and action of vision for the 21st century.

This paper in section 1. Examines the relevance of Gandhi's views on the status of women in India and Hindrances of Women and Need for Women Empowerment. In section 2 the paper deals with Challenges issues of Women Empowerment, Government Schemes and Constitutional Provisions for Women Empowerment. It concludes by access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.

Mahatma Gandhi Views on Women

In the last century, Mahatma Gandhi was mainly responsible for involving women in India in the national struggle for independence; however, Mahatma Gandhi made a contribution in liberating women in India. A great number of women in India, rural and urban, literate and illiterate, from all sections of society, joined the freedom struggle. This gave women in India a recognition of equality with men and brought them to the forefront of thought and action. An overwhelming number of women politicians distinguished themselves in the national struggle for independence and helped them to deliver from age-old traditions

Gandhi visualized a fundamental role for women as instruments of social change because they constituted the primary influence on the future citizens of the country and half the nation's strength in terms of population. Mahatma Gandhi had expressed his views that concerned the Indian Society in general with respect to women.

MARRIAGE

Marriage is a oath and a state of discipline .The Mahatma believed that men and women had equal status in marriage. The loss of discipline is a moral breach and divorce is not a solution. Moral breach can be corrected by moral repentance.

Child Marriage

Child marriage to him was an immoral in human act which made innocent girls objects of man's prurience; ruined the health of many a child mother and changed tender age girls into widows. Moreover it causes physical, mental and emotional cruelty as girls are rushed into adulthood and. results in denial of educational opportunities and deprivation of joys of girlhood.

The Dowry System

Gandhi believed that the dowry system is a product of the caste system. The abolition of caste will lead to the abolition of dowry. To curb the venomous dowry system he advised every parent to educate their girls and suggested that young men who soil their fingers with such ill should be excommunicated from society.

Widow Remarriage.

Gandhi was deeply concerned about the condition of child widows who were denied the rights to re- marry and also suffered other social and legal. In the case of adult widows, especially those with children; he would have liked them to remain true to their marriage vows and to their first love, rather than to remarry.He advised every family to treat widow with utmost respect and to give her facilities to expand her knowledge.

Sati Custom



Gandhi found the roots of the sati custom in the egoism of men. He believed that sati hood is the acne of purity. As purity cannot be attained or realized by dying but can be attained only through constant striving of spirit from day to day.

Women's Education

Gandhi believed that lack of education and information was the roots cause of all the evils against women. In his plan for promoting communal harmony, eradicating untouchability and popularizing his revolutionary scheme of Basic Education, Gandhi held that women could play a central role as they had creative powers and a tremendous capacity for self-sacrifice if they were educated.

Property

He felt that married women are co-sharer in their husband's power. He also emphasized on character and education as the real property that parents can transmit equally to their children.

Economic Independence

He was not against economic independence of women. He recommended work like spinning which will not disturb the home as he regarded their duties at home. He recommended equal payment to women.

Women as Equal To Men

He believed that women have equal mental capacities; have the right to participate in the minutest details of the activities of men; and have same right to freedom and liberty as men.

Women as Individuals

He believed that women of India had strength, ability, character and determination to stand on her own and work shoulder to shoulder with men in every walk of life.

Women in Political Era

There was a breath-taking abruptness about the entry of women into political life due to his influence. He mobilized women politically through his speeches, writings and personal example. Due to him women participation in freedom movement the presence of women in public sphere gained acceptability in India.

Awareness of Rights

As women got educated and participated in public arena they became aware of their own position and rights. As a result many associations for women came up.

Women as Superior To Men

Gandhi considered women not only equal to men but in many ways superior to men. To him bravery lay in dying and not killing. He defined bravery in the highest sense of suffering and sacrifice. Hence to him the courage of self sacrificing women was superior to men of brute force.

Present position of women in India:

Today modern woman is so ingenious and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman. Women in Indian are coming up in all spheres of life. They are joining the universities and colleges in large numbers. They are entering into all kinds of professions like engineering, medicine, politics, teaching, etc. There is still a large section of women who are uneducated, and married off before the age of 18. Statistics say that close to 245 million Indian women lack the basic capability to read and write, which is a large number. Only 13.9% women are employed in the urban sector, and 29% in the domestic and agriculture sector,

A 1997 report claimed that at least 5,000 women die each year because of dowry deaths, 47% of India's women aged 20-24 were married before the legal age of 18, with 56% in rural areas. The report also showed that 40% of the world's child marriages occur in india.the national



crime records bureau reported in 1998 that the growth rate of crimes against women would be higher than the population growth rate by 2010. As per the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts, all local elected bodies reserve one-third of their seats for women. Although the percentage of women in various levels of political activity has risen considerably, women are still under-represented in governance and decision making positions.

The path towards total gender empowerment is full of potholes. Over the years women have made great strides in many areas with notable progress in reducing some gender gaps. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the socialized prejudices against her, and the men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country's way forward.

Government Schemes for Women

Empowerment

At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows;

1. **STEP (Support to training cum Employment for women)** – To increase the self-reliance and autonomy of women by enhancing their productivity & enabling them to take up income generation activity.
2. **National Rural Health Mission** – Educating women on health care. It has resulted in the decline in fertility rates, Maternal mortality rates (MMR), Infant mortality rates (IMR).
3. **Swayamsidha scheme** – To ensure total development of women.

4. **Swadhar scheme** – Basic necessities to marginalized women & girls.

5. **SHG (Self Help Groups)** – For economic development in women by giving micro finances.

6. **SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan)** – For girl child education. It led to increase in the Gender Parity Index (GPI).

7. **The National literacy Mission or Saakshar Bharat – Literacy of women.** Literacy is the critical instrument of women's empowerment.

8. **NMEW (National Mission for Empowerment of Women)** – To ensure economic & social empowerment of women.

9. **Kishori Shakti Yojana** – Empowerment of adolescent girls.

10. **Mahila Samridhi Yojana** – For women empowerment.

11. **Maternity Benefit Scheme** – Payment of Rs.500/- to pregnant women for the first two births only if the woman belongs to BPL (Below Poverty Line) category.

12. **Rastriya Mahila Kosh** – To provide micro loans for women.

13. **Scheme for working women hostel** – To promote availability of safe & conveniently located accommodation for working women.

14. **Development of women & children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)**– Creation of groups of women for income generating activities on self sustaining basis.

15. **SABLA** – Empowerment of adolescent girls.

Government Acts:-

1. Section 14 of the Hindu Succession Act 1956 – Property of a female Hindu to be her absolute property.



Women get equal share in the ancestral property.

2. Dowry prohibition Act, 1961.
3. Contract Labor Act, 1970 & Factories Act, 1948 – Women can't be employed in the night between 9pm to 6am. – Women cannot be required to work for more than 9hrs.
4. Protection of women from domestic violence Act, 2005.
5. Equal remuneration Act, 1976.
6. Maternity Benefits Act, 1961.
7. Child marriage (prohibition) Act, 1929.
8. Hindu marriage Act, 1955 – This act was passed to stop polygamy and bigamy

Constitutional Provisions for Empowering Women in India

1. Article 14 – Equality before law – Provides equal legal protection for women.
2. Article 15(3) – Special provisions for women.
3. Article 16 – Equal opportunities for all citizens in public employment irrespective of caste, sex, religion.
4. Article 23 – Prohibits traffic in human beings & forced labour.
5. Article 39 – The citizen, men & women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
6. Article 40 – 1/3 rd of seats in panchayats shall be reserved for women.
7. Article 42 – State shall make provisions for just and humane working conditions & maternity relief.
8. Article 44 – Uniform civil code for the citizens throughout the territory of India to safeguard women from laws of religion.

Suggestions

1. The foremost priority should be given to the education of women, Hence,

education for women has to be paid special attention.

2. Awareness programmes need to be organized for women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
3. Providing health & economic security.
4. Skill development programs.
5. Women should be allowed to work and should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in the society.
6. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

Conclusion

The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. "When women move forward the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves". It is essential as their thought and their value systems lead the development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation. The best way of empowerment is perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal but as Gandhi's views of Indian women to uplift their status; he said them to rid of suppressive customs; and wanted them to play important role in social, political and economic life of India. This makes the vision of 21st century to be successful in making positive change in the lives of Indian women.



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