



## Gandhiji and Women Empowerment

Dr. (Smt.) B.V.L.A. MANGA, Reader in Political Science, Dr. R. Ramakrishna, Senior Lecturer in Economics, Maharajah's (Autonomous) College, VIZIANAGARAM - 535 002.

**Abstract:** *Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Democracy has meaning and reality only where people at large sensitized to their rights, duties and obligations and encouraged to exercise them. Mahatma Gandhi said that woman is more fitted than man to make exploration and take bolder steps in decision making or what ever field they are entrusted with. He opines that there is no occasion for women to consider themselves, subordinate or inferior to men. In fact a woman is a personification of self sacrifice but unfortunately it is unacknowledged and undervalued. This article examines the importance and relevance of Gandhiji's views on issues directly or indirectly influences the status of women. Empowerment of women is an ideal scenario is best understand as a life changing experience of woman irrespective of her socio-economic cultural - health (differently-abled) conditions, where she is considered in exercising her own choices towards various issues without fear or favour; where she is the mistress of her choices, her freedom of expression, movement, employment, reproduction freedom over her own body relationship etc., without endangering or giving cause for finding fault with her on account of this personal choice; with access to all services as a human person etc. However the fact remains that this is a restrictive reality.*

*At this juncture this paper focuses on Gandhi's work which awakens women, and made them shed their deep rooted sense of inferiority and raise them to the dignity and self-esteem. In fine to achieve the twin goals of gender equality and woman empowerment, even today Gandhian literature will continue to be a prescription for many years to come. At this critical and crucial juncture in Indian History, it is befitting to recall Mahatma's observation that progress of the country is impossible without the empowerment of one half of the population.*

**Key words:** *women, ambivalent, newspapers and magazines*

### Introduction

In India, the position of women has always been a rather ambivalent one in our culture. On the one side, she has been raised to the status of divinity, and on the other side, she has been exploited as somebody lower in status to men in every walk of life. To quote few examples:

1. Sania Mirza world number one in women's 'Double Tennis'.

2. Four women in Delhi and 92 across India raped every day.

3. Indian women shine at the 'Republic day Parade'.

4. Indian girls on an average are shorter than their 'Sub Saharan counter parts'.

The above headlines from prominent newspapers and magazines paint a rather contrasting picture of the



status of women in India. On one hand, female achievers in various fields have carved a niche for themselves and proved beyond doubt that they are no less able than their male counterparts. On the other, the picture still looks gloomy with sexual harassment, and gender discrimination still far from becoming things of the past. Women, in fact contribute more than half of the wealth of nations and yet they are denied economic and even legal rights and privileges that such a contribution often entitles men to. So what is the true status of women empowerment in India of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? As is often the case, the real picture is in grey shades, neither glittering bright nor dark and melancholic.

#### **Obstacles to women empowerment :**

- ❖ Concept of women, being a weaker sex has been hammered in to her 'self'. It is this sense of weakness in her mind, which makes her suffer at every step, at the altar of family and society.
- ❖ The process of rejecting a female child starts in many cases before birth with female foeticide. If by some strange miracle the female baby survives, she is tolerated but never allowed to develop at the expense of her brothers. The attitude of rejection has an immense impact on the female psyche and growth of their personality. The harsh truth is that the needs of the girl are always secondary to that of the boy child in the eyes of their own parents.
- ❖ 56 percent of adolescent girls in India are anemic (versus 30 percent of boys).

- ❖ More than 60 percent of girls dropout of school by the time they complete their elementary education.
- ❖ Child marriage is still common place, with 1 in 2 girls confessing to being married off before the legal age of 18.
- ❖ Despite the statutory ban on pre-natal sex determination and consequently sex selective abortion, it still remains a booming Rs.1000 crore industry. The adverse results of this inhuman practices resulted in abysmal low of 940 females per 1000 males.
- ❖ The workforce in India is far from gender equality with 34 percent of Indian women with tertiary education (Vs 78 percent of men) and 25 percent of women overall (Vs 80 percent of men) being employed in some form.
- ❖ Sexual harassment always looms like a hanging sword over her - be it at the work place or during the commute to and from home.
- ❖ Representation of women in the highest echelons of governance is still disturbingly low.
- ❖ The biggest obstacles to women empowerment are people themselves and their narrow minded attitudes.

Democracy has meaning and reality only where people at large are sensitized to their rights, duties and obligations and encouraged to exercise them. Women today are at the vanguard of several ground breaking changes across different spectrums of human development and activity. This is a right time for women to choose the path to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. The surest path is empowerment. At this



junction, it can be said that women have just began this journey ..... a journey for better survival or more freedom. The path is difficult to pave way..... but journey has certainly begun and is sure to achieve. Empowerment is not an event but it is a continuous process. Empowerment is a redistribution of power and control of resources in favour of women through positive intervention. It enhances self esteem, self confidence, develops in them ability to think critically, provide knowledge information and skill for economic independence.

At this crucial and critical juncture in Indian history, it is fitting to recall the Mahatma's observation that progress of the country is impossible without the empowerment of one half of the population. Hence it would be appropriate to quote the views of Gandhiji on women. He was champion of women empowerment and the first social reformer to give more importance to women.

A woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. In a plan of life based on non-violence, woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man has to shape his....Men have not realized this truth in its fullness in their behaviour towards women. They have considered themselves to be lords and masters of women instead of considering them as their friends and co-workers. Women are in the position somewhat of the slave of old who did not know that he could or ever had to be free.... Women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. It is up to Congressmen to see that they enable them to realize their full status and play their part as equals of men.

This revolution is easy, if the mind is made up. Let Congressmen begin with their own homes. Wives should not be dolls and objects of indulgence, but should be treated as honoured comrades in common service.

*Constructive Programme, pp. 17-18*

Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in every minute detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him.... By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop half way because of the conditions of our women. Much of our work done does not yield appropriate results; our lot is like that of the penny-wise and pound-foolish trader who does not employ enough capital in his business.

*Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 425*

And why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? We hear nothing of women's anxiety about men's chastity. Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self-effort.

*Young India, 25 November, 1926*

... I consider the occupation of *Devadasis* to be immoral. They ought not to be found in that occupation. I see you have got your women's club or association. It is your first duty to look after these unfortunate sisters. If you



band yourself together and carry on an agitation in this matter, you can compel the men and women... into doing their duty in this regard.

*The Hindu, 19 October, 1927*

Any young man who makes dowry a condition of marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.... A strong public opinion should be created in condemnation of the degrading practice of dowry and young men who soil their fingers with such ill-gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. Parents of girls should... not hesitate to travel outside their little castes and provinces to secure true, gallant young men for their daughters.

*Young India, 21 June, 1928*

I am uncompromising in the matter of women's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by men. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality.

*Young India, 17 October, 1929.*

The (dowry) system has to go. Marriage must cease to be a matter of arrangement made by the parents for money. The system is intimately connected with caste.... The girls or boys or their parents will have to break the bonds of caste if the evil is to be eradicated. All this means education of a character that will revolutionize the mentality of the youth of the nation.

*Harijan, 23 May, 1936.*

I believe in the proper education of women..., woman will not make her contribution to the world by mimicking or running race with man. She can run the race, but she will not rise to the great

heights she is capable of by mimicking man. She has to be complement of man.

*Harijan, 27 February, 1937.*

In my opinion the slavery of the kitchen is a remnant of barbarism mainly. It is high time that our womankind was freed from this incubus. Domestic work ought not to take the whole of a woman's time.

*Harijan, 18 February, 1939.*

When a 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 come to her mind in order to defend her honour. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and, if need be, die in the effort....

*Harijan.1 March, 1942.*

Thus Gandhiji views on women in the context of social, economic and political issues have still relevance. He worked not only for the political emancipation of the nation but also to the emancipation of women which made women shed their deep rooted sense of inferiority and rise to dignity and self esteem. He always advocated a complete reform which he called 'sarvodaya' meant of comprehensive progress. Many a leader and reformer has espoused the cause of woman in this country but none held women in such high esteem as did the Father of the Nation.

To reemphasize once again, women's empowerment cannot take place. Unless women come together and decide to self empower themselves. A movement has to be build which awakens the individual self in each and every woman for creative and generative



action. In this regard progressive and resourceful women in the society need to come forward to help their less privileged sisters in as many ways as possible. This shall help to sow the seed for real women empowerment in India.

#### **SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-rape-92-women-every-day-4delhi-statisatics/1/380956.html>.
2. 'India of My Dreams' – A compilation of Gandhian writings by RK Prabhu, Navajeevan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 2001.
3. 'Gandhi and Women's empowerment' by Jaya Jaitly.
4. 'Gandhi and women' by Rajkumari Amruth Kaur, an associate and follower of Gandhi.
5. 'The story of my experiments with Truth' by M.K. Gandhi.