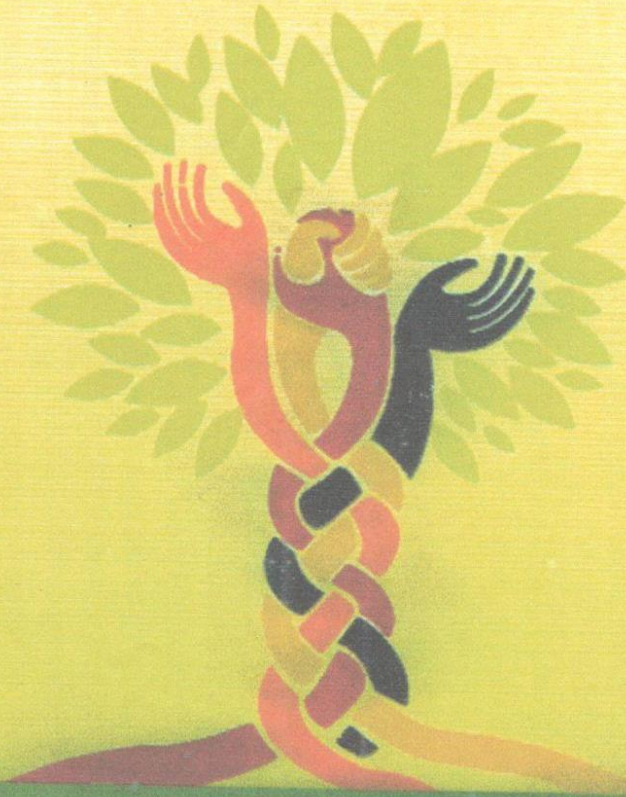


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सामाजिक, नैतिक एवं शैक्षणिक उत्थान



संरक्षक

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Gandhi and Social Reforms With Special Reference to Women

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Indian society has never been egalitarian. In fact during Gandhian period and just before that period Indian society suffered from traditionalism, feudalism, patriarchy, casteism, untouchability and communalism. A number of social reformers and nationalists raised their voices against these evils and foremost among them were Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar. Indian society and especially women and dalits owe these men their present status of equality. These men along with many others before and after them tried to make Indian society and polity more tolerant, egalitarian and democratic.

Introduction

During pre- Gandhian times gender inequality and gender violence were all pervasive. Women were regarded as the root cause of all evil and responsible for downfall of men. Women had a decidedly inferior status and were totally dependent on men. Women were confined to the family and remained under legal and customary subjection of their husbands or other male family members. Customs and practices like female infanticide, child marriage, purdah (veil), dowry, polygamy, sati, repeated pregnancies, permanent and pathetic widowhood, illiteracy, wife beating and verbal abuse made life of common women very hard. Although some social reformers, missionaries and government had made efforts to remove some of the hardships of women and to provide them some opportunities like education but very few women benefited from these. In such an atmosphere Gandhi gave a totally new perspective regarding gender equality and non violence. He not only opposed the harmful practices and encouraged

regeneration of women but gave the ideal that women are not just equal and different but superior to men.

Opposition to Harmful Practices

Gandhi opposed practices which were injurious to women and girls even if such practices had the sanction of Dharma Shastras, law and tradition.

(1) Female infanticide: He was against the practice of female infanticide. He discovered that the birth of a girl was generally unwelcome as she was to be married off and had to live and work in her marital home. Another reason was the custom of dowry which made the girl child liability for her parents (Gupta, 1999: 106). Gandhi was clearly of the view that people should rejoice at the birth of boy as well as girl as the world needs both. People should make no distinction between a son and a daughter and both should be welcomed alike (Bakshi, 1986: 168). He also opposed the custom of dowry which was one of the reasons behind female infanticide.

(2) Female illiteracy: Gandhi believed that lack of education and information was the roots cause of all the evils against women (Shodak, 2003: 221-223). He believed that education is therefore necessary for women as it is for men (Gandhi, 1958:13). He believed that education is essential for enabling women to assert their natural right, to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion. He thought that low level of literacy among women had deprived them of socio- politico power and also the power of knowledge. He stood for proper education for women as he believed that after receiving education they become sensitive to the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected (Jain, 2000:54).

(3) Child marriage: Gandhi objected to child marriages, for they were devoid of the element of consent on the part of the concerned boy as well as the girl (Shodak, 2003: 219- 220). He believed that both the boy and the girl should be developed physically and mentally at the time of marriage and that they should have a voice in the choice of their life partner. He looked at the practice of child

marriage as a moral and physical evil. Child marriage to him was an immoral inhuman act which made innocent girls objects of man's lust; ruined the health of many a child mother and converted tender age girls into widows (Gupta, 1999: 82-88). He also believed that the practice of child marriage came in the way of the progress of women. They were married off and expected to bear and rear children at an age in which they themselves should be in schools. He said women cannot make any progress so long as there are child marriages, as it results in denial of educational opportunities and deprivation of joys of girlhood. Moreover it causes physical, mental and emotional cruelty as girls are rushed into adulthood prematurely and made subservient to their husbands. He advocated mobilization of strong public opinion and supported agitations by the local people against such happenings. He fully supported the child marriage restraint bill.

(4) **Dowry:** Gandhi believed that the custom of dowry turned young girls into mere chattels to be bought and sold. He called this custom pernicious as it lowered the status of women; destroyed their sense of equality with men and defiled the institution of marriage (Bakshi, 1986: 146-147). To curb the venomous dowry system he advised every parent to educate their daughters so that they refuse to marry a young man who wanted a price for marrying and would remain spinster than to be party to the degrading terms. He suggested that a strong public opinion needs to be formulated against dowry and such young men who soil their fingers with such ill gotten gold should be excommunicated from society. He advocated change in education and also stressed the need of taking recourse to radical measure like organizing youth movements and offering satyagraha against those perpetuating the custom (Bakshi, 1986: 175).

(5) **Purdah (Veil):** Gandhi regarded purdah as inhuman and immoral, for it impeded the march towards swaraj (self rule) by restricting women (Gupta, 1999: 106). It denied women freedom as well as free gift of God like light and fresh air. It also crippled the free movement of women; interfered with their advancement and their

capacity for doing useful work for the society. It weakened instead of strengthening morality for it did not help in preserving chastity as chastity is not a hot-house growth and cannot be superimposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of purdah. It must grow from within and must be capable of withstanding every temptation. Men must be able to trust womenfolk as the later are compelled to trust them. He believed that the veil generates the feeling of insecurity in women and results in deterioration of their health (Gandhi, 1958: 22). He appealed to public in general and women in particular to tear down purdah (Jain, 2000: 57). He was sure that abolition of purdah would lead to mass education for both men and women and would help women in gaining strength and becoming an active participant in the struggle for swaraj (Agrawal, 2000: 12).

(6) **Pathetic widowhood:** 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 disabilities. He advised the parents to see that the child widows are duly re-married. Regarding adult widows, he felt that the decision to re-marry should rest with the widow, but he was against the wrong done to the widows. He protested against the prevalent belief that a widow crossing one's path is a bad omen. He considered it to be his good fortune to see a widow in the early hours of the day. He regarded her blessing to be a great boon (Bose, 1971: 66). He regarded enforced widowhood as an unbearable yoke that defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion (Choudhary, 1989: 22). He advised every family to treat widow with utmost respect and to give her facilities to expand her knowledge (Jain, 2000: 56). The ultimate remedy suggested by Gandhi was to consider the widow and the widower on par so far as re-marriage was concerned.

(7) **Sati:** Gandhi found the roots of the sati custom in the blind egoism of men. He argued that if wife must prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband, then the husband must also prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife (Gandhi, 1958: 30). To

prove her sati hood or loyalty she must not mount the funeral pyre of her dead husband but prove it through utilization of every opportunity to add to her stock of knowledge and increase her capacity for cultivating renunciation and self discipline. To him sati was a futile exercise as instead of restoring the dead husband to life, it takes away one more life. He believed that sati hood is the acme of purity. As purity cannot be attained or realized by dying but can be attained only through constant striving, constant immolation of spirit from day to day (Gupta, 1999: 101).

(8) Polygamy and subjugation of wives: To Gandhi wife was not the slave of the husband but his comrade, better half, colleague and friend. The wife is a co-sharer of husband with equal rights and duties. Their obligation towards each other and towards the world must therefore be same and reciprocal. He believed that a wife is not bound to be an accomplice in her husband's crimes and when she holds anything to be wrong she must dare to do the right. If a husband is unjust to his wife, she has the right to live separately. Married life, he believed, is intended to promote mutual good here and hereafter. It is meant to serve humanity (Choudhary, 1989:220). When one partner breaks the law of discipline, the right accrues to the other of breaking the bond. The wife or the husband may separate to serve the end for which they had united.

(9) Molestation: He wanted girls to learn the art of protecting themselves against indecent behaviour of unchivalrous youth. If a woman is assaulted she should not stop to think in terms of ahimsa (non violence) as her primary duty is self protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that comes to her mind in order to defend herself with all her strength and if need be die in the effort.

(10) Prostitution: He regarded prostitution as a social disease or moral leprosy, promoted by men who lack morality. He felt it to be a matter of bitter shame, sorrow and humiliation that a number of women have to sell their chastity for men's lust (Gupta, 1999: 90). He denounced prostitution as well as cabaret but realized that men

were responsible for driving women into flesh trade. He advised women to give up this profession and take up living by spinning khadi (Pruthi, 1998: 58). He believed that such women can be rehabilitated by getting social acceptance by involvement in a noble cause and by extending opportunities of education and employment.

Support to Empowerment of Women

Gandhi did not stop at opposing the practices which were harmful to women but also forcefully advocated in favour of various rights of women.

(1) Education: He believed that education was needed to awaken in the minds of women a consciousness of their present condition. He believed that education will enable women to assert their natural right and to exercise them wisely and to work for their expansion. However he also believed the since home life is entirely the sphere of women, they ought to have knowledge regarding domestic affairs and upbringing of children. Hence courses of instruction should be based on an appreciation of basic roles of men and women.

(2) Property: Gandhi realised that property laws in British India were against women. However he felt that married women are co-sharer in their husband's power and privileges in spite of the law being against them. He also emphasized on character and education as the real property that parents can transmit equally to their children.

(3) Economic independence: He was not against economic independence of women. Some people feared that economic independence of women may lead to spread of immorality among them and disrupt domestic life. To that his answer was that morality should not depend upon the helplessness of a man or woman. It should be rooted in the purity of hearts (Bakshi, 1953:62). He recommended work like spinning which will not disturb the home as he regarded their duties at home to be as important as men's duty to earn. He recommended equal payment to women.

(4) **Franchise:** He wanted women to have voting right and equal status as men (Dadhich, 2003:107).

(5) **No legal bar:** He did not want women to be restricted from any activity and went on to say that there may be no legal bar against a woman hunting or wielding a lance.

(6) **Equal treatment to daughter:** He believed that as both men and women are necessary for the world, the parents should treat their sons and daughters as equal and rejoice at the birth of both.

(7) **Wives as equal to husband:** He wanted every husband to treat his wife as an 'ardhangini' and 'sahdharmini' (Gupta, 1999:104). The wife is a comrade with same freedom which the husband sees for himself. She should have the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of men.

(8) **Women as equal to men:** He believed that men and women are equal as the same atma (soul) dwells in the women's body. Since soul is sexless men and women are perfectly equal in the eyes of God (Gupta, 1999:104). He recommended equal remuneration* for women (Bakshi, 1986:175). 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.

(9) **Women as individuals:** He asked women to cease to consider themselves the object of men's lust. They should stop adoring themselves to please their husbands and others (Agrawal, 2000: 12). He believed it will save women from subordination of men and wives would be saved from beating by their husbands (Jain, 1955:14). He thought jewellery to be a source of subordination as well as intimidation (Gupta, 1991:101). 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. He had full faith in their sincerity and was sure that they would not lag behind in producing perfect performance (Bose, 1971:58).

(10) **Women in economic sphere:** He believed that the loss of

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pinning wheel brought about India's slavery and its voluntary revival will lead to freedom. In his view women were best suited to take up spinning and the propagation of khadi and a dress which Gandhi, 1953:10). To him for middle class it should supplement the income and for very poor women it could be the means of livelihood. He believed that it would mean a few coppers in hand where none existed before (Jain, 1989). Besides it will bring about metamorphosis in the lives of women (Bakshi, 1986:140).

(11) **Women in political arena:** He called upon women to join Indian National

Congress and participate in the freedom struggle. There was a breath-taking abruptness about the entry of women into political life due to his influence. One moment they were not there, the next they were in the fore front of the scene (Kumarappa, 1957:20). Women participated in political meetings and protest marches; bore lathi charge; courted arrest and even got shot (Forbes, 1996). They could do so because Gandhi choose a particular form of struggle which suited women. Women did not feel limited or unequal to men (Gandhi, 1953:26). 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.

(12) **Women in constructive programme:** Women were at the forefront of constructive programme. They organised themselves; manufactured contraband salt; sold it from house to house; picketed wine, ganja, opium, toddy and foreign goods shop; spun and wore khadi; participated in, prabhat pheries, demonstrations, prayers, meetings, marches; worked for Hindu-Muslim unity; and removal of untouchability. They also provided support to families when men were away.

(13) **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.

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(14) 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 (Gandhi, 1947:9). 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. He declared that to call women weaker sex was libel and a gross injustice to women. He believed that strength means moral power hence women are immeasurably superior to men.

CRITICISM

Critics may argue that Gandhi did not regard men and women as identical (Bose, 1977:60). He did not want women to neglect their families or leave the traditional role of nurturer. He wanted women to attend to the bringing up of their children; give peace to the husband when he return home tired; minister to him; soothe him if he is angry and do any work they can staying at home (Jain, 1985:150). He also believed that women's education should be based on their role as nurturers and that woman are co sharer in their husband's privileges. All the above will lead critics to argue that he in fact reinforced gender role that traditional Indian society prescribes for women. Some critics like Arundhati Roy also criticize Gandhi's treatment of girls as a thing with whom he used to experiment.

CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that Gandhi was neither a feminist nor anti feminist. He was a great soul who was saddened by the deplorable condition of Indian women and wanted to uplift their status; rid them of suppressive customs; and wanted them to play important role in social, political and economic life of India. He advocated and worked for gender equality and end of gender violence from the above angle and was successful in making positive change in the lives of many women.

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