

Impact of Mahatma Gandhi's Political Philosophy on Women

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Abstract - Mahatma Gandhi as a social and political reformer played an important role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the women of the country through ages. Mahatma Gandhi's ideology was very respectful to women and supportive to their uplift. He had made significant contributions for the enhancement of the status of women in India. Throughout his life campaigned for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden. It is essential to look at women's status prevalent in the 20th Century to understand in depth, the role that Mahatma Gandhi played in improving the position of women in society. Mahatma Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social campaign that led to a major re-orientation of the common notion of women in the Indian society. In 19th and 20th our country was in such a wretched situation like social evils like Child Marriage and Dowry System were rampant. Only handful women on that time could avail of education and attend schools. According to Mahatma Gandhi, education for women was the need of the time that would ensure their moral development and make them capable of occupying the same platform as that of men. Mahatma Gandhi was of the opinion that until and unless women, on the basis of education and knowledge do not find their proper place in social and economic fields, they could not achieve self-respect for themselves. Nor they could become self-dependent in any of the walks of life. In his lifetime Gandhi inspired people to take concrete and practical initiatives regarding women education which will bring them out of these old conservative customs and rules, which were responsible for their mental and social slavery. Women under his ages took a milestone to step towards re-establishing their identity in the society. Mahatma Gandhi's inspiring ideologies boosted their morals and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awakening among the women, but under his leadership they entered into the National mainstream, taking parts in the National movements. Participation of women in public and political gave them a new prestige and status. According to him "To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is men's injustice to women." Women participated in large numbers in mass movements led by Mahatma Gandhi and this made a big breakthrough in Indian women's lives. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy influenced millions of women on the time of freedom struggle and if we say about the present scenario the views expressed by the Mahatma and the actions undertaken by him may not go entirely because the times have irreversibly changed but the

honesty of the Mahatma Gandhi, the love and respect he had for the women, can never be doubted. He is truly the best guide and friend of the women of the world. The present study aims at attaining of status by women as inspired or guided by Mahatma Gandhi and socio-political change as the result of justified place of women promoted by Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy.

Keyword - *avail, upliftment, self-reliant, conservative, customs, philosophy, nationalism,*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Vedic time women perceived high status and participated actively in the political discussions. They were allowed to perform religious ceremony with their husband and even preached the same but with course of time women lost their status in the society and they were confined in the four walls. In the early 19th century few elite women leader formed women organizations, but there was lack of spirit of nationalism. Later on due to the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, the spirit of nationalism arose among them all irrespective of class or status. These women came out on the national front for the cause of freedom. The sudden and massive entry of women into Salt Satyagraha in 1930, opened up for common women further opportunities, which they were getting in the Vedic time. Mahatma Gandhi, known as the Father of Nation, is the key source for inspiration and guidance in making of Independent India. The movements under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi brought women into mainstream. Scholars working, on the status of Indian women opine those many changes which have occurred in the traditional conception of role and status of women through new opportunities for socio-economic pattern and political rights, during the 1930s and 1940s. The Indian National Congress had become a mass based organization under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. There was a widespread commitment to equality of women. Mahatma Gandhi did encourage the participation of women in the National Movement. Mahatma Gandhi included several women among his lieutenants who followed Mahatma Gandhi as the supreme commander.

II. METHODOLOGY

Methodology depends mainly on the aim of the nature of the problem coupled with the availability of the type of the data i.e. secondary in order to achieve the main objective. The

study has been carried out with the help of recently developed research technique, method and furthermore different types of data from different sources published in magazines, journals and books has been collected.

A. Objectives

The present study has been conducted in the light of following objectives:

- To examine the role played by Mahatma Gandhi to inspire the women
- To study the enhanced power of women due influence of Gandhian philosophy
- To highlight that Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy is of effect in this changing scenario

The main thrust of the study is the "Impact of Mahatma Gandhi's Political Philosophy on Women". It has been considered imperative to provide study of the Gandhian influence on women and their participation in freedom movement as well as their emancipation even in today's world.

B. Mahatma Gandhi's Inspiration to Women

A letter written to Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on 20-10-1936, Gandhi wrote: 'If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves ill the slave and the slave holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity. My special function from childhood, you might say, has been to make women realize her dignity.'

Mahatma Gandhi was fully aware of the exploitation of women in and outside their homes, but he also thought that a person cannot be exploited without his or her will or participation. Mahatma Gandhi admitted that he learnt the technique of non-violent passive resistance from women, especially from his wife and mother. He observed and studied women in his own home and came to perceive women as equal partners in the home and society, not merely as wives and mothers. However, for Mahatma Gandhi equality of the sexes does not mean equality of occupations, as well women's occupations are more conducive to peace than war.

Mahatma Gandhi believed that economic freedom would play a vital role in the empowerment of women. He consistently inspired and motivated women for spinning yarn and weaving cloth. Once, addressing women at Nadiad, in 1919, Mahatma Gandhi suggested that rather than spending so much time in temples, women should spin for few hours everyday. Mahatma Gandhi felt consisted in serving the motherland. He believed that the success of the swadeshi movement was possible only if women spun yarn and weave cloth in large numbers. Spinning yarn would not only enable the women to

be economically independent, but would also add to the resources of middle class, sometimes even the sole source of subsistence for lower class families. Once addressing women, he said that refuse to be the slaves of your own whims and fancies, and the slaves of men. Refuse to decorate yourselves, and do not go in for scents and lavender waters, if you (women) want to give out the proper scent, it must come out of your heart, and then you will captivate not man but humanity.

Though Mahatma Gandhi never challenged the traditional set up, he inspired women to carve out their own destinies within. Women learnt from Mahatma Gandhi that one can be strong even if seemingly weak to protest against injustice. They realized that they do not have to accept the norms of male dominated politics. They evolved their own perspectives and formulated their own methods. Mahatma Gandhi could see woman as connected with service and not with power.

C. Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy on Women

Women for Mahatma Gandhi were embodiments of virtues like faith, sacrifice, humility, tolerance and knowledge. 'Women are the incarnation of Ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. He admired women's qualities of self-suffering and spirituality, as can be seen by his words that to me the female sex is not the weaker sex. It is the nobler of the two. According to Mahatma Gandhi to call women the weaker sex is a libel. It is man's injustice to women. The capability of enduring suffering can be witnessed only in the women. With the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi, a new conception of women gradually gained prevalence. For Mahatma Gandhi, women were not mere toys in the hands of men, neither their competitors. Men and women are essentially endowed with the same spirit and therefore have similar problems. Men and women both are the complement of each other. The wife is not the husband's slave but she is the companion of man and his help-mate and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows. She is as free as the husband to choose her own path. She has the right to participate in the very minutest details in the activities of man. Gandhi is the champion of the rights of women as equal partner of men. Mahatma Gandhi cited the instances of ancient role models who were embodiments of Indian womanhood like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi to show that Indian women could never be feeble.

In detail, the first Non Co-operation Movement of 1921, Mahatma Gandhi Consciously involved women in an attempt to link their struggle with struggle for national independence, but the programme for women was devised in a way that they could remain at home and still contribute to the movement. As a part of Non Co-operation, Congressmen were asked to boycott government educational institutions, law courts and

legislatures, and to defy the government and its unjust laws in a peaceful manner, but the constructive programme of Swadeshi pivoted around boycott of British goods, and the spinning and weaving of Khadi. The restoration of spinning to its central place in India's peaceful campaign for deliverance from the imperial yoke gives her women a special status. He sees women as a potential resource for the success of his moments both political and social and advocates their increased participation.

However Mahatma Gandhi's socio-political philosophy, as far as he addresses to the question of gender equality is progressive but constructed on patriarchal values. According to Mahatma Gandhi, a woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. Mahatma Gandhi strongly believed that the happiness of mankind will be realized only when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the companion of the other. In fact, one cannot live without the other's active help. As souls man and woman are equal. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized upon the economic independence of everyone – both men, as well as women. Since nature has created sexes as complements of each other, their functions are also defined as are their forms. Mahatma Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. Taking a critical and rational approach, Mahatma Gandhi said that 'it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicide.'

Mahatma Gandhi remarked that the wages payable to women for an hour's spinning should be the same as are paid to men and we know that equal wages for equal work is an important aspect of feminist thought. He remarked, the times have changed when man was regarded as woman's master. That we do not admit this is a different matter. God has made man and woman one complete whole. One must not lord over the other. Woman thought Mahatma Gandhi is the personification of strength, endurance and self-sacrifice but she does not realize what tremendous strength she possesses. Once a woman realizes this, she can exhibit to the world the infinite strength that is latent in her. The beauty of a woman does not consist in the beauty of her clothes and jewellery, but in the purity of her heart. It was this immense faith in Mahatma Gandhi laid emphasis on the dignity of household work i.e. both men and women need to be educated equally in homework because the home belongs to both. Mahatma Gandhi strongly felt that men must participate in the house work and reduce the drudgery of women's homework. Therefore Mahatma Gandhi even a century before could perceive the hardships that woman would face performing the dual responsibility i.e. of a home maker and of a professional woman contributing towards the economic subsistence of the family. Until and unless men

come forward and show their participation, willingly and happily, in performing domestic tasks as well as rearing and bringing up of children, Mahatma Gandhi's ideal of woman as a home maker may act as a protective shield for her. Mahatma Gandhi had suggested that woman has a right to decide for herself. She may remain single and fulfill her wishes of being a progressive working woman.

There is something in Mahatma Gandhi's ideas that is essentially radical. He did not see women as helpless objects of reform. Neither did he think of bringing change only in some spheres of life such as marriage or education. His vision of change was comprehensive. He connected the moral with the political, the social and the economic, presenting an eclectic view of life.

D. Women Active Role before Independence

Mahatma Gandhi call to women and large scale participation of women in the freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of other nationalist leaders as well. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded and in its 1889 Bombay session, ten women participated. Equality between men and women was accepted as one of the objectives in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of the Indian National Congress in 1931. Many women who fought for the country's freedom also became active on the issues of women's rights. The period of early 20th century saw the emergence of many women's organizations. The Women's India Association (WIA) was founded in 1917 by Margaret Cousins, an Irish and an Indian nationalist, the National Council of Indian Women (NCIW) in 1926 and All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. In the 1920s and 1930s women participated actively in the Civil Disobedience movement. Thousands of women were jailed during their participation in Salt march when Mahatma Gandhi urged people to break the salt law by making salt themselves. Thus women participation in the national movement helped in breaking several of the old barriers of tradition and custom.

Mahatma Gandhi's call to women to involve themselves in the freedom struggle had far-reaching results in changing their outlook. On the call of Mahatma Gandhi they boldly took parts in the National Movements. Many women in their individual lives shed their age-old prejudices against the caste system. They had no hesitation in leaving the boundaries of their protected homes and going to the jail. They even broke their glass bangles. Women's participation in the freedom struggle feminized nationalism and helped them to liberate from age-old traditions.

E. Women Active Role in Politics after Independence

The political background of women participants show that they are far away from the equal status along with men. Women do not come forward to participate in the public

affairs independently. Due to the efforts of reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, now Indian women have become active participants in every Indian election. They have served in both houses of Parliament and in the State Legislatures, as well as rural politics. Along with this Mahatma Gandhi foresees that India's future depends on women participation in rural politics, because more than 80% people live in villages in India. So after the introduction of Panchayati Raj, leadership among women is becoming more common in the rural areas, which surely will lead to realize the dream of Mahatma Gandhi, i.e. Ram-Rajya, in other words Panchayati Raj.

F. Political Status of Women

The question of political status of women is a matter of concern for all who advocate social justice and more for them who speak strongly for total development. Women are good managers this has been accepted by many scholars. For an effective role of women in political system the most important factor is equal opportunity for women. This has been accepted by political sociologist that the political status of women can be defined on the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the shaping and sharing of power and in the value given by society to this role of women. Leadership of Mahatma Gandhi acted as major forces in the achievement of equal status for women. Undoubtedly Mahatma Gandhi wanted to build a society based on cardinal virtues of justice, peace and equality. He stood as a great political and social reformer and felt that India has to be strengthened from its very roots. Mahatma Gandhi's vision was to bring equality in the society. He dreamt to give equal representation to women in politics at national level. The 73rd Amendment in the Constitution is therefore made to fulfill the above aimed or objects, as it being the call of the hour as measures are taken by the government about above said. After 73rd Amendment large numbers of women are coming in the rural politics but at the national level it is still distant dream.

III. ANALYSIS

Women have always been obviously working as a vital factor of societal unity and development in all societies. In 20th century in India it was left to Mahatma Gandhi to give direction, strength and inspiration to a vast all-embracing national movement which was to draw into its vortex women in large numbers. By identifying himself with the masses, with the disinherited and the forgotten millions, he stirred the depths of our national conscience as no leader has done before or ever since. With remarkable foresight and with the experience he gained in South Africa he assessed the strength inherent in women. He realized that the only way to rise their sense of patriotism and awaken in them national consciousness and social responsibility. Mahatma Gandhi had tremendous faith in women's inherent capacity for non-violence. His experience of women participation in politics

from his days in South Africa till the end of his life bears evidence to the fact that they never failed his expectations.

Women organized public meetings, sold khadi and wore khadi cloth as uniform, started picketing shops of liquor and foreign goods, they broke Salt Law by preparing contraband salt, they picketed liquor and burned foreign cloth, braved lathis and bullets and went to jail. The other women who did not go to the jail devoted themselves developing alternative life style and socio economic structures based on the Gandhian philosophy of sustainable development. They came forward to face all sorts of atrocities, including inhuman treatment by police officers and imprisonment. They came forward to give all that they had like their wealth and strength, their jewellery and belongings, their skills and labour etc.

However, under the leadership of the great patriot Sarojini Naidu, Congress President in 1925 and leader of All India Women Conference, a section of elite women not only built support for their cause of women's equality but also formed an alliance with the nationalist movement for the ouster of the British by linking freedom for women with freedom for India.

A. Plans and Policies for Women in the Changing Scenario

India being the most popular country in the world, its 80% people lives in rural and are dependent on agriculture. In the field of agriculture women has to play a substantial contribution. They do the sowing, harvesting, processing and many other courses directly connected with agriculture. Their involvement in the informal sector is also great. The work done by them is not remunerative. As such, women in the society have substantial contribution in the economic field or sphere without any remuneration in their personal account. In addition women have primary responsibility of children and household chores depending on the socio-culture climate. The women have variation in their roles assigned to them by the society. Social, cultural and attitudinal factors affect the status of women in society at every stage. In such cases only attitudinal change can help in bringing the desired results. Along with this in the changing scenario government policies and plans are contributing in great extent to strengthen women position in the society. During the United Nations Decade for Women 1976-1985, government adopted policies to enhance the role of women in development and after a decade progress has been achieved in the field of health and schooling. Whereas the government of India in the sixth five year plan made a turning point in the sphere of women, a separate chapter on women and development was included in the plan documents.

For the development of women a threefold strategy on education, employment and health was made. First time it was

clearly spelt out that economic independence would accelerate improvement in the status of women and suggested the setting up of cells at the district level for increasing women's participation through self-employment. It also stressed that research and survey were to be instrument assessing women's participation. It referred as usual to the need of increasing enrollment of girls at the elementary level, promotion of functional literacy and encouraging the promotion of education for women in backward area. In health; family welfare, maternal and child welfare services work to be improved. An extend attention paid to women's nutrition. The employment was to be made through greater skill training. Support service plans were also made for labour welfare like basic amenities at the work place, better living conditions, maternity benefits and education. In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-1990) efforts were made to review the achievement of six five year plans of women. It stressed on confidence building and awareness of their rights, so that women realize their own potential for development. It also emphasis the integrated development project for women covering health, education, nutrition, creation of employment, application of technology and science. Eighth Five Year Plan reviewed the progress of earlier plans relating to women. It launched the benefit derived by women from the Integrated Rural Development Programme, Trysem and Jawahar Rojgar Yojana for the development of women and child in urban area. Women's participation in the industrial sector especially small scale, Khadi and in village industry increased considerably. National Commission for Women was notified on 1st January, 1992. The subsequent commission with certain modifications came into being thereafter. The greatest success of the nation commissions for women has been in spreading awareness regarding women by touring in various states of a country. They have sensitized heads of state governments and other political leaders and also heard women 'en mass on many occasions. This has spread the message that there is an autonomous body that cares for women. Simultaneously, due care in this regard was also emphasized in the ensuing five years plans. The Eighth Five Year Plan identifies a major thrust area in the strategy for women's development, the formation and strengthening of grass-root level. In addition to above various poverty alleviation programmes of rural development sector 40% benefits have been reserved for the poor women as in the Eighth Five Year Plan a strategy of employment and income generation for main streaming women into national developments has been adopted. The National Commission for Women Act 1991 was set up a statutory body to act as an advocate of women's interest. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2000) has important objectives for women's development. For the first time, it states categorically that for empowering women as the agents of social change and development, a national policy for empowerment of women would be formulated. Need for the

reservation for the seats for women in Parliament and State Legislature was proposed.

B. Gandhi's Dream into Reality

Independence brought women Constitutional guarantees of justice, liberty, equally and dignity for the individual's rights and directive principles of the Constitution. In 1952 women were first allowed to stand in election, but representation in Lok Sabha never rose above 8%. Indira Gandhi had been the archetype for women who were trying to obtain a place in the power structure in Post Independent India. 33.3 % quota in Lok Sabha is yet to be attained. Scholars working on the status of Indian women opine that many changes have occurred in the traditional conception of role and status of women through new opportunities for education and employment, emergence of new socio-economic pattern and privileges or equal legal and political rights. Women are competing with men on an equal footing and have entered into occupations which were considered as the domain of men. The Directive Principles of State Policy in Part IV of the Constitution incorporate the policy goals of welfare state. Some Articles deal with women indirectly while a few others concern women directly and have a special bearing on their status. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1930, Hindu Marriage Act 1955, The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956, Hindu succession Act 1956, Hindu Marriage Act 1955, Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, The Child Marriage Restraint Amendment Act 1976, The Commission of Sati Prevention Act 1587 and some other regulations or amendments relating to women were also passed to give them the place of dignity, equality, opportunity and protection.

C. Perspective

It can be said without an idea of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi experimented in all a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of women and the improvement of the status of women in the country. No doubt, women are inspired or inspiring and coming into power but still they have to walk a long distance to be fully empowered without any discrimination. In reality still we can see an opposite picture of the empowerment of women. It is a great regret for us that even today employment of women is still restricted in some areas. They are not allowed to enter into certain jobs, beyond doctors, nurses, teachers and clerical jobs. In the family the women become the victim of domestic violence and in the society they are also exploited by the social evils like dowry system, prostitution etc. Women are already suffering the malnutrition, which inevitably will be their children's fate as well. If women are supported and empowered all of society benefits but even today in this 21st century Mahatma Gandhi's vision seems remains unfulfilled in reality. There is a lot of need to work to strengthen the women to meet the dream of Mahatma Gandhi.

IV. CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi's analysis of social evils, his consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his immense faith in women's moral strength made an impact on women's struggle for rights and equality as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. Women participated in large numbers in 'mass' movements led by him and this made a big breakthrough in Indian women's lives. In 1885 the Indian National Congress was founded and in its 1889 Bombay session, ten women participated. Mahatma Gandhi call to women and large scale participation of women in the freedom movement brought about changes in the perception of other nationalist leaders as well But there is another aspect also as Jawaharlal Nehru who was influenced by the liberal views on women's question in the west was in agreement with Mahatma Gandhi that without economic freedom other aspects of women's equality would not be realized.

In general now in this 21st century, in spite of legal and constitutional guarantees, women are still lagged behind almost all sectors. To come out of the problems of women status and strength development strategy to empower women is felt essential at broad base as Mahatma Gandhi desired. Development strategy of empowerment should mainly be concerned with employment and asset generation coupled with skill oriented education and vocational training. A preconceived development strategy studded with emphasis on employment, education, health, nutrition, sanitation etc. Critical elements that contribute to the quality of human life, more so in the rural sector, may prove to be effective in the long run to raise the status of women but in men dominated societies with social and political institutions biased in favor of gender discrimination, may not prove to be effective enough to take them out of the downward gravitational pull. To empower women we want the Public Distribution System to be strengthened and the women's reservation bill providing 33 percent reservation in Lok Sabha to be passed. Here are some examples of women's representation in Panchayats and Nagarpalikas which has proved that they can even deliver the good jobs, such types of examples are required on the part of women representation each and everywhere throughout the country.

No doubt, today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns but still it is a daydream. Mahatma Gandhi had shown the way for the empowerment of women and the development of the status of women and we have to walk on the guided path to achieve or fulfill the dream of Mahatma Gandhi in true sense.

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