

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN: 2348 – 0343

Feminism in the vision of Mahatma Gandhi

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi worked not only for the political liberation of the nation, but for liberation of all the suppressed and oppressed sections of society. Among these all one of the important issue is 'awakening of women'. He thinks that women are gifted with equal mental capacities and therefore they have equal rights. However due to the force of custom, ignorant men are enjoining superiority over women. This is why he said, "Women must not suffer any legal disability which is not suffered by men. Both are perfectly equal" Another important thing that is marriage according to Gandhi is not only a means of the union of a women and a men but for him marriage must also be a means for realizing a spiritual life. He said, "The ideal that marriage aims at is that of spiritual union through the physical, the human love that it incarnates is intended to serve as a stepping stone to divine or universal love." Therefore in married life the husband and wife must cultivate a sense of companionship and a pattern for co-operative living. According to him men and women have the same soul and therefore they are equal. No one is superior or inferior to other. Thus in this paper I shall discuss Gandhiji's thoughts on feminism.

Key words: political liberation, awakening, companionship, co-operative living.

Introduction

In our traditional society it is one belief that women should remain confined to their husbands or other male family members. Existence of discrepancy among men women we can see even in post Vedic, medieval and British periods. Sometime in society we can perceive that the women are regarded as the root cause of all evil and responsible for downfall of man. Even in modern time if we look at the villages we can see that the status of women is still inferior in relation to their male counterpart. Still in the society dowry, wife beating and divorce, verbal harassment is present which are very harmful for the women development. But if we see towards the Vedic world then we can realize that in Vedic period women enjoyed more rights and better status. In Vedic times men and women were equal in all walks of life, including the religious and the intellectual. But gradually the scenario has been changed. Although in different times different social reformers have tried to remove several hardship of woman and to provide them some opportunities (mainly education) but very few woman benefited from those opportunities. In such an environment Mahatma Gandhi has given a new perspective regarding the status and the development of women in the society. So in this paper I made an attempt to discuss Feminism in the vision of Mahatma Gandhi.

His opposition to the violence against women:

Gandhi believes that lack of education and information is the root cause of all evils against women. He thinks that education is equally required for women as it is for men. It is through education only by which women would be able to understand their natural right. According to him low level of education among women has deprived them of socio-political power. When they will get proper education then only they will have proper knowledge, and then they will be able to understand their inequality in the society and the way out of it.

According to Gandhiji Dowry system in the society is very bad for the young girls. Sometimes it results to the female infanticide. Because man and woman sometimes think that if they give birth to a girl child then in future they will fall in a problem that is at the time of marriage they have to give dowry to the bridegroom. But mainly 'custom of dowry' is directly injurious for the young girls. He calls "this custom pernicious as it lowered the status of women; destroyed their sense of equality with men and defiled the institution of marriage"¹ To remove this 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."² According to him women should come out from all types of bindings. If they come out from all types of bindings then, along with women our society will also develop. And he believes that it is not possible to protect chastity only by keeping them inside the wall. According to him, "chastity is not a hot house growth and cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of purdah"³ so one has to develop it from within. Because he knows that abolition of this 'purdah' (veil) would lead to education for women and it would help women in gaining strength.

Another important evil in our society is child marriage. We all know that Gandhiji was against child marriage. According to him in the society child widows are the consequence of this child marriage. Child marriage to him is an immoral and inhuman act. Regarding child marriage Gandhiji said, "The custom of child marriage is both a moral as well as a physical evil. For it undermines our morals and induces physical degeneration. By countenancing such customs, we recede from God, as well as swaraj."⁴ Thus Gandhiji argues that women will not be able to make any progress unless this child marriage system is removed from the society, as it is the cause of the deprivation of educational opportunities.

In our society some people think that if women get economic independence then immorality will increase among them. Gandhiji is not in favor of such kinds of thinking. He thinks that "morality should not depend upon the helplessness of a man or woman. It should be rooted in the purity of hearts."⁵ So it is require to giving them economic independence for the development of whole mankind. He points out that wife should not work as slave of her husband but she should work as an intimate companion and friend of her husband. She is the co-shearer of husband.

Upliftment of women

We know that one of the important theories of Mahatma Gandhi is 'Sorvodaya'. His philosophy of 'Sorvodaya' means uplift of all. It also means 'good of all', 'service to all' and 'welfare of all' etc. So here it is clear that his vision is not development of a particular individual or a group but the development of all. His main purpose of 'Sorvodaya' is to create a moral atmosphere in the society. Therefore it is very clear from his concept of 'Sorvodaya' that he wants to uplift women also along with the men.

Gandhiji perceived that in Indian society women are suffering from different types of social evils like child marriage, ignorance, illiteracy, lack of education etc. So he thinks that if we want to get a developed India then our first step is to develop to the women. This is why He said, “Our first attempt should be directed towards awakening in the minds of as many women as possible, a consciousness of their present condition.”⁶

Gandhiji tries to establish a society where peace and happiness will reign supreme and he thinks that this would be possible only when men and women will realize their status and duties in the society. In the society both men’s and women’s work are equally important. Gandhiji beliefs that, “Man, by nature, is physically strong, and therefore he puts in hard labour to support and protect the family. Women, by nature, are loving, and therefore, they are equipped by nature to play the role of a mother and the caretaker of the home. Both these duties are equally important and necessary; this must be realized by both men and women.”⁷ So we have to give equal respect to both men and women.

Conclusion

In the conclusion I must say that in India feminism got a new way in the hand of Mahatma Gandhi. He wants complete regeneration of women. According to him women are equal with men; they are gifted with equal mental capacities. So we should give equal respect to the women as we give to the men.

Gandhiji is the first man who speaks about the latest qualities of spiritual favour and moral capabilities of women. He views that women are most suited to fight with new weapons of non-violence and truth. This is why he incorporates women in his ‘satyagraha movement’ and in freedom struggle.

If we look at the modern society we perceive that women are working in different offices, educational institutions, and in different private sectors without any fear or hesitation or social restriction. Now-a-days many women are getting good education, many of them are working as top most officers, they are now utilizing their intellectual power and we have to accept it that one of the important reasons of these is the positive thinking of Mahatma Gandhi about women.

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