

GANDHI AND HIS VIEW ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

Empowerment of women is a multi dimensional, multi layered and multi faceted initiative from the perspective of society. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. The father of nation Mahatma Gandhi experienced in this field a century ago and showed way for the woman empowerment and the development of the status of women. Gandhi was one 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 couldn't achieve self respect for themselves. In this paper we shall try to analysis Gandhi's view regarding different women issued in the present society. Gandh focused on different women issues like marriage, divorce, widow remarriage, parda system, dowry system, women education, political involvement of women etc.

Keywords: women empowerment, Gandhi's philosophy, gender discrimination, exploitation, equality, freedom struggle, women's participation.

Introduction:-

Today, after 70 years of independence, India women find that while much has been achieved by way of constitutional right and opportunities, they have still a long way to go to secure their due place in the Indian social and political structure. That, the empowerment of women through equal opportunities is a basic requirement for national advancement.

Though Indian women didn't have to go through a suffragette movement as in Britain and some other industrially advanced countries, a barrier of social prejudice they had to overcome in all activities were formidable. Indian renaissance which coincided with the rise and growth of Indian nationalism is singularly marked by the active role of a large number of women. Their relentless fight against social oppression and prejudices and the role of socio-political reformers is an epic saga in the political and social history of this country.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, as a major social and political reformer, played an important role in attempting to eradicate the social wrongs committed against the woman of the country through ages. The political, economic, educational and other ideas of Gandhi are part of a whole integrated philosophy of life. He was essentially a man of action, and it was through the adventure of living, his experiments with truth, that he came to formulate ideas that are strewn over thousands of pages of writings, speeches and correspondence. On truth and non-violence Gandhi built the entire edifice of his thought and action. Gandhi's political ideologies are strongly based on humanitarian values, which were a reflection of his spiritual self. For him, politics couldn't be divorced from social factors. He strongly believed that a society can develop rapidly if it takes all sections of the people together into fold, rich and poor, high society people and low caste people and both men and women. Gandhi throughout his life struggled very hard for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden, making significant contributions for the development of the status of women in India. Gandhi considered women as the mother of the race. Women

should not be an instrument of pleasure. They should be regarded as man's helpmates. ¹Woman under his ages as a milestone to step towards reestablishing their identity in the society. Gandhi's inspiring ideology boosted their morals and helped them to rediscover their self-esteem. Not only there was a general awaking among the woman, but under Gandhi's leadership they entered into the National main stream, taking parts in the National movements.

A modern feminist would have ambivalent feeling about Gandhi. She might deplore his opposition to contraception and his lack of enthusiasm for women in the workforce, but perhaps admire his ability to bring woman into social movements and his criticism of the treatment of widows in Hindu society. ²

Objectives:-

Traditionally the position of women was low in Indian society; through in some aspect they had given equal status to men in ancient period. But later, the situation became changed. Women had suffered terrible deprivation and humiliation in pre-independent India. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of nation, played a vital role to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of women in the 1st half of the 20th century.

Gandhian philosophy and his thought relating women's rights and empowerment are highly relevant today than what it was during his time. The objectives of the present study is to provide a understanding of his thoughts, works and writings on women and hope by studying those the new generation can change their attitude towards women.

Methodology:-

The study is based on the historical analytical method and descriptive in nature. It is based mainly on secondary data and sources from various publications, books, magazines, internet etc.

Content analysis:-

To understand in depth the role that Gandhi played in improving the position of women in society, it improving the position of women in society, it is essential to look at women status, prevalent at that time. When Gandhi emerged on to the political scenario, social evils like child marriage and dowry system were rampant. Indian woman had an average life span of only twenty seven years.

Death of woman in labor was a common phenomenon. The percentage of woman with basic education was as low as two percent. The patriarchal nature of the society confined woman to the status of an inferior sex subordinate to their male counterparts. The purdahsystem was in full vogue in northern India. Unless accompanied by their male guardians, the women everen't permitted to venture out on their own. Only a few of rich could avail of education and attend schools. It was in such a phenomenon that Gandhi took the responsibility of shouldering a social crusade that led to a major reorientation of the common notion of woman in the Indian society.

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. He firmly believed that freedom was a birthright of every nation as well as of every human being. He never failed to include women in his concept of 'human being'.

Gandhiji was fully aware of the exploitation of women in and outside their home but he also thought that a person can't be exploited without his or her will or participation. Gandhi himself admitted that he learnt the technique of non-violent passive resistance and woman, especially from his wife and mother. It was Kasturba's passive resistance against Gandhi's unreasonable actions and attitudes, both as a man and husband that compelled him to change himself from a domineering husband to an understanding one, thereby realizing the spirit of equality and acting upon the principle of mutual consideration. In his autobiography 'My

Experiments with Truth', he has discussed at length about his inner transformation from an authoritarian husband to an understanding companion. This, Gandhi admitted didn't come easily. He exercised authority on Ba not only physically but mentally as well. Shyama Sinha states that Mahtma Gandhi had almost threatened to throw – out of the house. When she admonished Bapu in firm and measured tone''³ it brought Bapu to his senses and he realized his fault. Thus Gandhi's own admission on his immense faith in women shakti(power) comes from his experience of his mother and his wife. He observed and studied woman in his own home and came to perceive woman as equal partners in the home and society, not merely as wives and mothers.³

Gandhi and Woman Empowerment

Like many other noble souls who wrote and worked with the principle of gender equality in the society, Mahtma Gandhi the father of nations played a vital role to bring about a revolutionary change in the status of woman. Gandhi said that the women minds should be awakened so that they can realize their own dignity and self esteem and can shed off their deep rooted sense of inferiority. To quote Gandhi's own words as "When woman we call *abala* (weak) becomes *sabala*(strength), all those who are helpless will become powerful." As a result Gandhian views attracted a large number of women, irrespective of rural, urban, educated, uneducated, Indian or foreign. Gandhi focused on different issues related to the emancipation of women like equality of sexes, marriage, purdah, dowry system, widow re-marriage, divorce, women education and co-education, birth control etc. however, we find that Gandhi's socio-political philosophy as far as he address to the question of gender equality, is progressive but constructed on 'patriarchal values.'

According to Gandhi, a woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capabilities. She has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. But, she is entitled to a supreme place in her own domain or sphere of activity as man is in 'his'. Woman domain is her home and man's

the outside world. Gandhi said that both boys and girls should be educated, but it is only the primary education for the two sexes that can have much in common. As far as the higher education is concerned, important differences would exist. 'as nature has made men and women different , it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equal in life, but their functions differ. It is women's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, women save and spendshe is her children educator and hence mother to the Nations .⁴

Woman according to Gandhi, is an incarnation of ahimsa which means love and infinite capacity for suffering. Gandhi had observed his mother and wife quietly resisting their exploitation at home. He admitted that he learnt the method of Satyagraha from them and he thereby put it into practice as a major strategy to rebel against exploitation by the British. When the issue of women's voting right was first raised in 1921, Gandhi supported it and even felt that the success of the satyagraha movement and the Dandi March was inextricably linked with the active participation of women. Burning of foreign cloth and picketing of liquor shops were activities which were predominantly undertaken by women. By 1939, Gandhi was thoroughly convinced that if the national movement had to be elevated to the level of a mass movement , then women have to be included as active participants. Gandhi had an immense faith in the inner strength of women. He held that woman by nature are endowed with the qualities of love , non-violence , forgiveness and remarkable capacity for sacrifice. Aman , according to Gandhi, understands the dharma of non-violence through his intellect whereas a woman the very embodiment of renunciation and compassion, has imbibed it even before her faith.

Gandhi strongly criticized the socio-cultural customs and rituals that had held women in a subordinate position for centuries. He felt that the evils of child –marriage, dowry ,purdha, the restrictions on widows and other such practices have to be eradicate. In his opinion , child marriage is a source of physical degeneration as much as a moral evil. Gandhiji viewed marriage

as a sacrament and emphasized spiritual union in marriage he insisted on monogamous marriages the system of dowry couldn't pass unvoiced from his critical eyes.

Gandhiji was extrimly perturbed by the plight of the widows, participation child widows . he realized the miseries of widowhood for woman as 'man have ordained perpectual widowhood for women and conferred on themselves to right ti fix marriage with another partner on cremation ground itself.

Gandhiji was totally opposed to gender discrimination. He has said, 'A daughter's share must be equal to that of a son. The husband's earning are joint property of husband and wife as he makes money by her assistance.'

The system of purdha also came under his attacks and he questioned the very foundation of the practice. He regared it as a social and religious barrier and interferes to perform different works by woman Gandhi said that woman chastity is a matter of purity in body and mind and can be protected through self control and not byveil.It must be as defiant as Sita's . it must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men.. men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk, even as the latter are compelled to trust them. Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed. Rama would be nowhere without Sita, free and independent enen as he was himself. But for robust independent Draupadi is perhaps a better example. Sita nwas gentleness incarnate. She was a delicate flower. Draupadi was a giant oak. She bent mighty Bhima himself to her imperious will. Bhima was terrible to everyone, but he was a lamb before Draupadi. She stood in no need of protection from any one of the Pandavas. By seekink today to interfere with the free growth of the womanhood of India we are interfering with the growth of free and independent-spirited men.⁵

Gandhi regarded dowry system as asocial curse and thus such a system must be abolished. He opined that the dowry system is a product of the caste system. so he wanted abolition of caste

system and the society . Gandhi wanted the dowry demanding husband to be excommunicated totally. He expressed his views regarding their social curse in young India.

Conscious of the potential of woman, Mahtma Gandhi made a commendable contribution in liberating woman in India from exploitation by extending their field of activity and involving them in the freedom struggle. His passive resistance especially suited the general ethos in which woman in India lived, and thus the Indian women joined the mainstream of nationalism and began pltying a significant role in the Indian struggle for independence. Mahatma Gandhi realized that by awaking national consciousness among women in India and involving them in the struggle for independence, they would come out of their traditional restricted domestic role consequently, a great number of women in India rural and urban , literate and illiterate , from all section of society joined the freedom struggle. This gave women in India a consciousness of equality with man and brought them to the forefront of thought and action.

According to Gandhi, the three important factors that promote women empowerment are: education, employment and change in social structure. All the three components are equally important and mentally related . He consistently inspired and motivated woman for spinning yarn and weaking cloth. Gandhi belived that the success of the swadeshi movement was possible only if woman spun yarn and weave cloth in large numbers . spinning yarn wouldn't only enable the woman to be economically independent, but would also add the resources of middle class, sometimes even the sole source of subsistence for lower class families

Gandhi thought that woman is the personification of strength, endurance and self –sacrifice but she doesn't realize what tremendous strength she possesses.⁶

It was this immense faith in womens moral strength that made Gandhi think that 'self –control rather than contraceptives would be the best method for population control.'

Conclusion:-

It can be said without an idea of doubt that Mahtma Gandhi experimented in these fields a century ago and shown the way for the empowerment of woman and the improvememnt of the status of woman in the country. Gandhi's critique of social evils, his consistent efforts for the liberation of women and his imomene faith in woman's moral strength made an impact on women's struggle for right and equality an integral part of the straggle for national independence. Woman participated in large numbers in 'mass movements led by him and this made a big breakthrough in Indian woman's lives. He admitted that if woman's straggle remained isolated from the general political , economic and social struggle , the womens movement wouldn't gain strength and will remain confined to the upper classes. 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 woman who fought for the country'sfreedom also became active and issues of women's rights. Thus woman's participation in the national movement helped in breaking several of the old barriers of treadition and custom. But in present time, practically we see completely an opposite picture of the empowerment of women . 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,witch hunting, prostitution etc. women are expected to be dependent upon men and do as directed.

It is the highest time to follow the principles and philosophy of gandhiji relating human rights and empowerment of women for it to really became meainingfull.m it is the time to protect women for the sake of the whole human society. We have to change our mentality and to fell that it is our moral , social, constitutional responsibility to ensure women progress by providing them with equal right and opportunities. The principle of non- violence is gandhiji's greatest contribution to world civilization and if this principle is strictly followed by all human being and all nations, there will be no discrimination agaist woman and there will be a society based on

equality and justice. Therefore, the gandhian thoughts and philosophy has greater relevance in present context.

Footnotes:-

1. Dash, B. N, Principles of Education and Education in the Emarging Indian Society, p.-269
2. Guha, Ramachandra, Makers of Modern India, p-180
3. Sigh sabita(ed) kasturiba and women empowerment, p-84
4. Webliorgography: www.mkgandhi.Org
5. Guha, Ramachandra, op.cit p-183-184
6. Webliorgography: www.mkgandhi.Org

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