

Economic Status of Women in Gandhian Thought

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Abstract

In the All India Women's Conference held in December, 1936, Gandhiji sent his message, saying : 'When women, whom we call abala become sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful.'¹

In today's socio-economic-political scenario all over the world, empowerment of women holds the key position in government policies. of all the facets of women's development, broadly categorised as legal, political, economic and social, their economic empowerment occupies an area of utmost importance . Since Gandhiji began his championship for the cause of the depressed, he paid wholehearted attention to the resurrection of the status of women. Gandhiji believed that the female of human species is definitely more courageous and morally superior to the male and that the economic and moral salvation of India rested mainly with the Indian women, for they were going to nurture the future generation.

Employment and work participation of women has been in existence in India since the Vedic period. They were free to choose any occupation of their interest. However, the burden of providing for family expenses did not rest with women. Likewise, Gandhi also favoured equal rights and freedom of women. He regarded women the natural mistress of the household (Grihswamini) and wanted to exempt her from the dual burden of a bread - winner as well as a home - maker. She looks after the family earnings and distributes it. Gandhi's ideology is capable of providing solution to the problems encompassing economic empowerment of women in the new millennium.

Keywords: Economic Status, Women empowerment, Gandhian thought, Economic Empowerment, Economic activities, Equality.

Introduction

In the All India Women's Conference held in December, 1936, Gandhiji sent his message, saying : 'When women, whom we call abala become sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful.'¹

Since Gandhiji began his championship for the cause of the depressed, he paid wholehearted attention to the resurrection of the status of women. In his concept of 'Ramrajya', he envisaged that there would be no inequality due to sex, among other things.

In today's socio-economic-political scenario all over the world, empowerment of women holds the key position in government policies. Of all the facets of women's development, broadly categorised as legal, political, economic and social, their economic empowerment occupies an area of utmost importance in the new millennium. This paper focuses on the emphasis Gandhiji laid on economic empowerment of women, along with concern for their security, as inherent in his writings and speeches.

Review of Literature

Gandhi holds out a promise for the liberation of various strata in the world today. Within Women studies, the view of Mazumdar (1976), that Gandhi's ideas on women 'propagate equality in the family and society, dignity of a woman's personality, the opening-up of wider opportunities for women for her self-development and refusal to be regarded as sex symbols'², are reflected in other articles also, such as those written by Forbes (1979), Ahmed (1984) and Jain (1986).

Regarding economic status of women varied views have been presented (See Kishwar, 2006). According to Jain, Gandhi made propaganda for self-reliance of women by postulating their economic independence. However, Kishwar (2006) opines that 'Gandhi failed to put an economic content in his conception of women'³. While Patel (2006)

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attributes this to the social basis of Gandhi's ideology of human, Kishwar records it as a limitation or at best a contradiction within Gandhi. She accepts that 'Gandhi showed in practice that he was actively creating conditions which could help women break the shackles of domesticity'.⁴ According to Patel, Gandhian ideology, among other things, assumes that 'women are not 'play things' but creative individuals', however, 'to retain her purity, a woman should not do economic work; by doing economic work her purity and honour are violated'.⁵

Aim of the Study

From the review of literature, it is evident that doubt exists among researchers about Gandhiji's views on economic activities of women. Hence, the present paper attempts to further explore Gandhiji's ideas on ways of improving the economic status of women, and their involvement in economic activities, as reflected in his thought regarding equality of women, in order to find how they can be useful in mitigating the practical problems faced at present, both by the government and the society, in economically empowering the women. Literary sources about his speeches and writings and life have been analysed for this purpose.

Economic Aspects of Women Empowerment in Gandhian Thought

But Gandhi's ideas on economic aspects of women empowerment can be understood only through his basic economic concepts. According to Gandhi, 'that Economics which worships Kuber and encourages accumulation of wealth by the powerful at the cost of the powerless in false and evil'.⁶ He believed that economic laws should be in accordance with life's highest moral values. He propounded the economic concept of simple living and high thinking. That is why, in women upliftment also, he seems to give more importance to morality over materialism.

Singh (1995) comments that 'Gandhi pleaded for equal rights to women, thought about every details of their problems and introduced them in social services apart from their familial obligations. This resulted in mass participation of women in India's freedom movement'.⁷ Gandhi opined that finally it is the women who has the right to decide what she wants.

Gandhiji advocated that 'under the law of the land, there should be no obstacles against women, which are not there against men'.⁸ So, when he said that in a well-ordered society, the additional burden of maintaining the family ought not to fall on her. The man should look to the maintenance of the family, the women to household management, the two thus supplementing and complementing each other's labours; and that 'the care of the children and upkeep of the household are quite enough to fully engage all the energy',¹⁰ and further, that 'women in the new order will be part-time workers, their primary function being to look after the home',¹¹ and so on, he could certainly not be abstaining women from choosing an occupation of their interest. On the other hand, he seems to be exempting women from shouldering the responsibility of a bread-winner because he regarded 'maternity' as a 'dharma' which women will always be

upholding. Thus, he realised before hand the problem of dual-burden of a bread-winner and a home-maker being faced by working women today.

Furthermore, he held that - 'she is essentially the mistress of the house. He is the bread-winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread. In fact, she is the nurturer of the family'.¹² Without or with even meagre earnings, 'she is the queen, not the slave, of the household over which she presides'.¹³ Here, Gandhi seems to be influenced by ancient Vedic society, where daughter-in-law is honoured as 'Samragyi'¹⁴ over the entire family and wife as husband's advisor and mistress of the house.¹⁵

Today, on the other hand, those working women whose husbands are facing difficulty in acquiring jobs, are inflicted with more domestic violence than the other women. If modern society also follows the above path shown by Gandhiji, where women are the keepers and distributors of family income, they are accepted as mistresses of the house and they are free to work for time-durations of their choice, such a grim situation would not have arisen.

Gandhiji wrote that human beings cannot be made virtuous through legal measures. 'There can be no law which can prevent anyone from using kitchen as a toilet and drawing room as a stable. However, public opinion or people's taste would not tolerate this disorder. Sometimes it does take some time to cultivate public opinion, but it is the only effective solution'.¹⁶ Similarly in the present century also, Prevention of Domestic Violence Act cannot be effective without cultivating a public opinion against domestic violence.

Again, we find a reflection of Vedic concept of 'ekatva' in Gandhian thought when he writes that men and women are no different entities, but two parts of a single entity. Therefore, he advised the women to start civil rebellion against all unwanted and vulgar restrictions on them. He held that only those restrictions which are voluntary, are fruitful. He continues that such a civil rebellion will not harm anyone. Though, before starting it, the protesters should be pure and their manner of protest, intelligent'.¹⁷ Thus, in his ideology, the women need not wait for the mercy and concern of the society, but to have confidence in themselves and take the initiative. He declared that due to household work, the women need not suffer from inferiority complex vis-a-vis men. Similarly, he was against taking the meaning of equality to mean that they may be compelled to bear all the responsibilities borne by men. He regarded such a policy to be unbalanced policy of women reform. Gandhiji was against any competition between men and women. According to him, without mutual and active cooperation between men and women, their very existence is impossible, as significance of both is equal for the creation and development of mankind. Gandhiji has been proved right today when in developed countries of the world like Japan, women are opting to remain unmarried due to lack of cooperation from husbands thus putting God's process of creation of mankind in danger. Similarly in India too, now solitary women are finding life more smooth, in spite of many security

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precautions that they have to take. If anything more they need it is 'a wife at home', to quote the recently retired Chief Secretary of Rajasthan, Mrs. Kushal Singh. In an interview to daily newspaper Dainik Bhaskar, she, moreover, said that she feels satisfied that she has succeeded in proving wrong the society's age-old notion that the parents of a girl-child were 'bechare'.

Gandhi told the workers that our actions will affect the public more than our speeches and articles. And by his deeds also, he showed that men can bestow motherly care and concern just as they can adopt other 'womanly' qualities of non-violence and satyagraha, which he said he learnt from his wife's behaviour. He enjoyed preparing breakfast and serving it in plates for the residents of Phoenix Farm. In Young India as well as Harijan, he regularly wrote articles on diet reform. He also presented his own tried out recipes for cheap and nutritious meals. He experimented with ovens, cooking vessels, quality of water to be used, steaming, boiling, baking, various ways of making bread, preparing various dishes from nutritious but neglected food items, etc.

In her aptly titled book *Bapu, My Mother*, her grand niece Manu Gandhi recalls how Bapu often said to her that though he had been a father to many, he was a mother to her.¹⁸ He opined that as men and women are identical, similar, in essence, their problems should also be identical. Both have the same identical soul inside them.¹⁹

Similarly, Gandhi insisted on every Congressman to take to spinning, hitherto considered a women's occupation, as a necessary qualification. This despite resistance within the Congress on the ground that this amounted to wasting the energies of men. This was a step in breaking the hold of oppressive stereo-types and in weaning men away from aggressive 'manliness'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, though Gandhi saw the home as the main sphere of activity of most women, it should not be taken to mean that he was not inclined to empower them economically. Following emerge from his various writings and speeches -

Firstly, he favoured abstinence as well as morality in all economic spheres of life, hence the sphere of women's economic status could not be bereft of this. Secondly, he recognised the glory and grandeur of all the works of women as mothers and home makers, regarding them as important and essential as any tasks done by men outside home. So he left the responsibility of maintenance of the family mainly on men. Thirdly, through his own actions and statements he emphasised that men and women are identical and that he was himself a 'woman' and a 'mother' also. So he concluded that men and women have the same problems and they are not competitors. Fourthly, in the then prevailing oppression of women, he urged women to exercise their right to take all their decisions themselves, even resorting to civil rebellion, if necessary. He advocated equality to women in all spheres of life. Fifthly, by his concern about women's safety while working in factories, he was perhaps expressing their own

sentiments as well as his dislike for western factory-based development process, because he himself asked women to go to villages and work there. Sixthly, he challenged the idea of a rigid gender-based division of labour on several occasions. An illustration of this is his spinning programme for all Congressmen. Moreover, he appreciated women 'shining as lawyers, doctors and administrators' in Europe at that time.²⁰ He only seems to be against menfolk compelling women to go out to earn for the family, in order to exempt them from the dual burden of a bread-winner as well as a homemaker. He emphasized that what ever women wanted to do, they should do it voluntarily, and not driven by force or greed.

Lastly, Gandhi's thought seems to be influenced by ancient Vedic thought. Gandhiji believed that the female of human species is definitely more courageous and morally superior to the male and the economic and moral salvation of India rested mainly with the Indian women, for they were going to nurture the future generation. He thus gave utmost respect to women, especially the mother, as in the Vedic period, where mother was given a hundred times more respect than father : Sahastranam cha pitran mata gauravanirichyate.

Employment and work participation of women has been in existence in India since the Vedic period. Vedic women were free to choose any occupation of their interest. However, the burden of providing for family expenses did not rest with women. Likewise, Gandhi also favoured equal rights and freedom of women. Women in Gandhian thought also seem to be economically empowered in a harmonious family atmosphere devoid of tyranny. He regarded her as mistress of the house who protects and distributes family income as in Vedic society. Gandhi's ideology is, thus, capable of providing solution to domestic violence and other practical problems encompassing economic empowerment of women in the new millennium

Role of women as mothers demands special status and facilities at workplace, since this is the most vital role for the continuation and promotion of society and by which men are also served immensely. Today, women in India are shedding ignorance and the country need not 'trade with half of' her capital,²¹ as Gandhi had lamented, when he said that 'due to condition of our women, many of our agitations are left half-way through, many of our tasks do not give appropriate results.'²⁶

Endnotes

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9. *Harijan*, 12 October 1934, in SAUS p 9
10. *Ibid*
11. *Harijan*sevak, 16 March, 1940, in SAUS, p 11
12. *Harijan*sevak, 24 February, 1940, in SAUS, p 9
16. *Young India*, 9 July, 1925 in SAUS, p 115.
17. *Harijan*sevak, 23 March, 1947, in SAUS, p 21.
18. Cited in Kishwar, op cit, p 306.
19. *Harijan*, 24 February 1940, in SAUS p 19.
20. *Young India*, 11 June 1925, in CW, Vol. 27, p 220.
21. *Gandhiji*, op cit, p 17. From his speech at Annual Conference of Bambay Bhagini Samaj, 20 Febraury, 1918.
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