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WOMEN AT A DISADVANTAGE



“Woman, I hold, is the personification of self sacrifice, but unfortunately today she does not realize what tremendous advantage she has over man” is the condition of women observed by Gandhi. According to Gandhi, both men and women are of equal rank, but they are not identical. They are a peerless pair, being supplementary to one another, each helping the other so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived.

Throughout the history of India, women in India have been placed at disadvantageous position vis-à-vis Indian men. Despite changes in political governance and acceptance of democracy as the basis of Indian polity, position of women in India has been at a constant decline in the status and living conditions. Women have been subjected to various societal gender biases in terms of stereotyped notions and prejudices about their capacity, aspiration and so on.

INDIAN LANGUAGE AND ROLE OF WOMEN

Dr. Sankaranarayanan, a senior scholar in Indian linguistics, presents this argument:

Indian languages, both classical and current, exhibit certain markers that reveal the status accorded to women in the Indian society. Different people may interpret some of these markers differently, but the vocabulary nuances certainly show the status we accord to our women in our society.

There is no Indian language that could be treated as an exception in this regard. Sometimes the enthusiasts and the traditionalists may claim that the status of women in the by-gone ages was equal to that of men, or that the women had great educational opportunities and that they excelled in many fields. While it is true that there were several women poets, statesmen and intellectuals in the past, the status accorded to women as a group was indeed inferior to that of men. We all desire to prove that we had a golden age in the past during which every thing was all right and milk and honey flowed. But the present reality could not come about in a day nor was it a degradation of the past.

<http://www.languageinindia.com/sep2001/genderandlang.html>

Independent India has achieved many successes in science and technology, but there still exists many social evils like dowry harassments, molestation and discrimination of women in work places, etc.



In this article we would like to review Gandhian ideology on women's emancipation, and present a critique of this ideology in relation to the current status of women.

The concept of **self** is the most important factor affecting the behaviour of women. Self-realization of the potential of women was severely restricted in the pre-independence period due to various socio-cultural conditions and conditioning. There was an urgent need to make special efforts to enable women to become self-reliant, by positive and active interventions in the direction of confidence building in the cognitive, psychological, economic and political areas.

- Cognitive empowerment involves an understanding of the subordinate conditions and their causes. It calls for knowledge and an understanding of the self, as well as the need to make choices, which may go against cultural and social expectations.
- Psychological empowerment is concerned with women's feelings and the belief that they can change their situation themselves. As women are normally socialized to be submissive, to serve and let the men in their lives make all the decisions affecting them.
- Economic empowerment involves the ability of women to engage in income generating activities, which will give them an independent income.
- Political empowerment entails the ability to analyse situation politically and also, mobilization for social change (Stromquist, 1993).

DOMESTIC SLAVERY OF WOMEN



According to Gandhi, “domestic slavery of women is a sample of our barbarism.” He was of the view that domestic work ought not to take the whole of a women’s time and they should be free from this drudgery of cooking. He advocated non-cooked food like fruits and vegetables as a part of the daily diet in the *ashram* too. Moreover, he took keen interest in his women colleagues and associates and devoted considerable time, energy and effort to understand women’s strengths, hopes and aspiration. He assigned them with specific tasks, with challenges that women themselves were apprehensive of fulfilling but the accomplishment of which infused them with a refreshing self-perception and generated self-confidence in them.

FAULTY EDUCATION OF WOMEN

Gandhi wrote that the education of women was as faulty as that of men. No thought had been given to the relations of men and women or to the place of women in Indian society. He said that woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate to the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as a man is in his. This ought to be a natural condition of things and not as a result only of learning to read and write. Just by the sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying his superiority over women, which they do not deserve and ought not leave.

MERE EDUCATION IS NO SOLUTION

Gandhi, in his foreword to the first book of the *Bhaguni Samaj* series, wrote that we shall not solve the problem of women's education merely by educating girls. Men have to be teachers to their wives, and that not merely to make them literate, gradually, it should be possible to introduce women to the subjects of politics and social reform. The men in such a case will have to change their attitude towards their wives. Moreover, he stressed that a woman's beauty did not consist in the jewels that she wore but in the possession of a pure heart. They should also teach this truth to their children and train them to build up their character by giving them proper education.



ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE AND MORALITY AMONG WOMEN

Gandhi was clearly opposed to any exclusive 'male monopoly' and did not, for a moment, countenance the specious logic that "economic independence of women would lead to the spread of immorality among women and disruption of domestic life." While women were to be 'part-time workers' in the new order he envisaged, this was not to be out of any lack of economic opportunity; Gandhi wished to see the opening of all offices, professions and employments to women; otherwise there can be no real equality. It is evident from his content "we should not give up the ideal of women's duty while espousing the cause of rights," equal stress on duties as on rights to women.

RESTORING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC STRENGTH

As explained by Vina Mazumdar, one of the major factors motivating Gandhi's entire economic philosophy and programme for the development of village economy, cottage industry and the intrinsic dignity of human labour, appears to have been the desire and necessity of restoring women's lost economic strength and to ensure their economic environment in the broader sense.

Thus, Gandhi attempted to increase the recognition of the value of women at home and the primary relationship. Apart from that, he also stressed the need for the qualitative transformation of the 'outer' public which would acknowledge women's genius and accord the 'feminine' an equal status in human evolution.

LEARN SATYAGRAHA AND BECOME INDEPENDENT, SELF-SUPPORTING!

Gandhi made a crucial contribution toward women's progress and for their active participation in the political area. In one of his regular talks to the Ashram women, Gandhi raised the rhetorical query that, "Can women be self supporting?" and replied: "My heart says that she can. If she learns Satyagraha she can be perfectly independent and self supporting. She will not have to feel dependent on any one. This does not mean that she shall not take any help from others. She will certainly. But if such help be not forth coming she will not feel destitute... one should give up the idea that one is helpless... women should think how best they can themselves cast off their own weakness".



SELF-REALIZATION OF ONE’S OWN POTENTIAL AS THE KEY

Gandhi believed that the realization of self (self-realization of one’s potential) is the first stage of emancipation of women. He wanted women to realize the bravery and courage, which need not be the monopoly of men.

During the freedom movement, the struggle for women’s right and equality was seen as an integral part of the struggle for national independence. For example, Dr. Annie Besant claimed in her presidential address of the Indian National Congress in 1917:

by the adhesion of a large number of women who brought to its helping the uncalculating heroism, the endurance, the self-sacrifice, of the feminine nature. Our League's best recruits and recruiters are amongst the women of India; and the women of Madras boast that they marched in procession when the men were stopped and that their prayers in the temples set the interned captive free (Dr. Annie Besant's 1917 Calcutta Congress Presidential Address, cited in M. S. Thirumalai, <http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2005/lingreorganization1.html>).

WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE INDIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Gandhi played the most vital role in involving large number of women in the nationalist movement. He was keen to get the “cultured” women-power involved in the service of the nation. He says, “If cultured women of India will make a common cause with the villages, they will produce a silent grand revolution in the village life of India”. He pleaded with the Hindu widows that they should come out of their customary shells to serve the poor and the unfortunate and become servants of the nation, which means the evil widowhood should also be removed from the society.

Later as insisted by Gandhi, women’s participation in the salt-sathyagraha and the civil disobedience movement brought in the change in the traditional notion regarding

women's 'inferiority' to men. In satyagraha movements, women had demonstrated that they were not 'cowardly' and were, in fact, capable of 'fighting' just as well as, if not better than, the men. A vision and statement made by Dr. Annie Besant was demonstrated true. Thus, as observed by Panikar, women's own perceptions and self-view underwent a considerable transformation after participation in public/political arena and continues to bring great changes in the women's attitude towards their betterment and the betterment of the society as a whole.

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