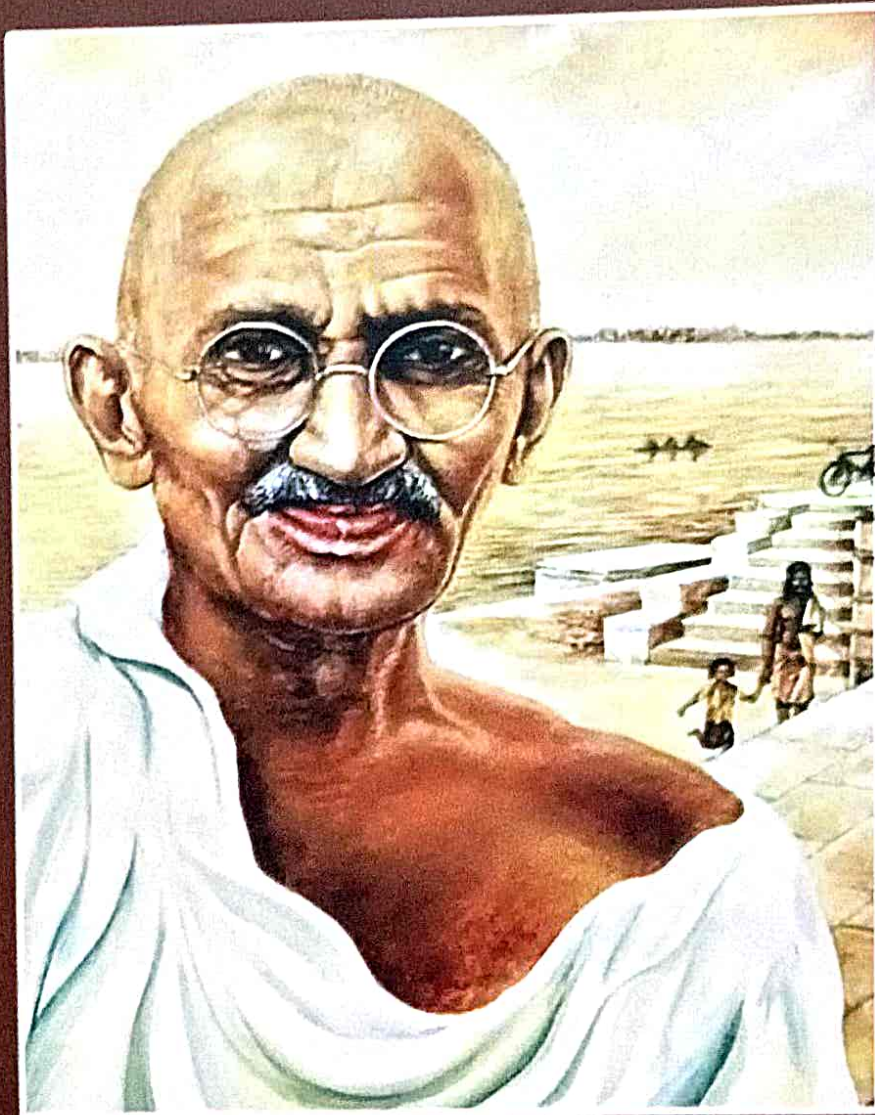


A STUDY ON GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY



Edited by
Dr. Krishna Jyoti Handique

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Relevance and Applicability of Gandhi's Vision Towards Empowering Women in India.

Nitul Kr. Borah

Anjan Saikia

M. K. Gandhi was an outstanding Indian of the twentieth century who considerably influenced human thinking in the contemporary world. The world, in fact, experienced new impetus with the freshness and optimism of his ideals even in an age of dehumanization and pessimism. Achieving success in South Africa, Gandhi later landed on his homeland, India and waged a nationwide war against the injustices of the British colonialists. His writings are undoubtedly the result of his varied political-social ideals that he introduced during his long-standing struggle against the imperialists for gaining long-awaited independence. Autobiography, Satyagraha in South Africa and Hind Swaraj are

his famous books in which he penned his thoughts and strategies that he selected as tools against the exploiters. For him, the entire world is a family and thus his focal motto was 'the development of all (Sarvodaya). He took the shelter of truth, love, non-violence and many others to wage a relentless war against the injustices and inequalities of the Britishers. To him, self suffering, satyagraha can bring peace, tranquility and bravery in this restless world. Thus Gandhi harboured the principle of all-round development in every field as well as sphere of our day to day life. He appealed common people to gather under the same banner without considering their casts, status, gender discrimination. Gandhi, perhaps, was well aware of the fact that a society can't expect and achieve success without active participation of the female community. Therefore, he insisted and included female workers to subvert the idea of physical weakness of women. This paper is an attempt to assess relevance and applicability of Gandhi's vision towards empowering women in the present context.

Relevance of Gandhian ideals is beyond any question. However, there may be some inconsistencies and impractical references in his writings, but the merits and outstanding concepts inspired the followers to overlook the trivial faults. Hence his philosophy has still retained relevance and reverence around the world. Status of Indian women is the sphere that we are going to discuss here. It needs mention here that women were generally thought as poor, infertile, barren and attributed many other such negative associations. Men have

a biased attitude that women have an intellectual paucity which eventually deprives them from their inborn rights, liberty etc. Most often they have to confine themselves within the four walls of their household affairs. They were even not allowed in the educational sector a century back, of course, this scenario has necessarily changed in course of time. Unfortunately there are still some fields and aspects where women are exploited in one way or other. To erase such discrimination and inequalities is another way to uplift our society. Women's participation, therefore, acquires immense importance in any field.

'Empowerment' is a fashionable and highly loaded word which means decentralization of authority. Its main objective is to ensure the participation of deprived section of our society. In short, empowerment means equal status and freedom to develop the deprived section. Women empowerment is now a widely discussed area around the world. The deprived section has to face lots of hurdles and circumstances which eventually result in the growing inequalities and violence. Thus this type of discrimination affects badly our requisite development. Comparatively Indian remains undeveloped due to such discrimination and therefore the country has not attained its expected development in any field-political, social, economic etc. Our goal is to create an awareness amongst people regarding the empowerment of women in Indian societies. Woman is God's greatest gift to humanity who has the power to create and destroy. Many

well-known personalities came in the limelight because of their wives and mothers. Napoleon, a famous French ruler, once states:

“Give me a mother and I shall give you a nation.”

Gandhi was also considerably influenced by women during his lifetime. The frequent reference to the influence of his mother, Putaliba and his wife, Kasturiba in his life generally finds place in his writings. Regarding the tremendous influence of his wife, he once says that it is because of her that he is today he is. This aptly shows his respect for women, his preference for equal liberty and opportunity of the female community for the welfare of a nation. Most importantly his spiritual bent of mind seems to come from them. Hence his devotion to women began with his devotion to his mother and wife. Until a child grows up and becomes independent, a mother selflessly devotes herself to his care and this very fact attracted him much and later highly favoured equal rights liberty for women. Once he told a co-worker:

“He saw no hope for India’s emancipation while her womanhood remained un-emancipated. He held men to be largely responsible for the tragedy. In the course of his social reform work, the realization came to him that if he wanted reform and to purify society of the various evils that had crept into it, he had to cultivate a mother’s heart” (Gangrade, K.D., Page no, 118).

A scholar, Richardson L. Johnson, says that the fun-

damental aspects of his soul politics has its main basis in his mother and wife. Of course, it would be wrong to say that women's influence on him was limited within the corpus of his family. He was also influenced by some of the late nineteenth and twentieth century women who formed organizations and educational institutions that transformed the condition of women predominantly among the upper middle class in urban centres. Women, according to Gandhi, could do much to transform India at all levels.

A close observation of the present day scenario exhibits that women are still harassed in different sectors and fields. Just take the example of marriage which is popularly considered as a religious sanctimony. But the pre-matured marriage and deaths of the brides evokes another concern. In today's world, especially in some parts of India, marriage seems to a bond of wealth in most cases. It results in domestic violence, their premature death owing to the atrocity and harassment inflicted on them for dowry. Our daily newspapers publish such pathetic incidents regularly. Many well educated persons even harass their wives for such reasons instead of safeguarding them.

Gandhi did not like Indian society's preference for a boy and general neglect of a girl child. In most cases a girl is not allowed to born. Surveys done in India display that every year about four million women risk their lives and involve in illegal abortions. Every year many pregnant women die in this process, but their deaths are never reported by

their families. A survey, accomplished by the World Health Organization, shows that about 15 million abortions take place in the world in every year and interestingly most of these happen in Asian countries. An alarming fact regarding India is that about 6.7 million abortions are done in unhygienic condition. Thus the picture does not change as per expectation and requirement. Gandhi said in an interview with a noted birth control proponent, Margaret Sanger that he was against contraception. Therefore, Gandhi's philosophy does not lose its ground even after a century. His ideals may be an inspiration for us and our future generation for controlling such immoral activities as abortion.

Gandhi took an opposite stance against gender discrimination. For him, the girl is the nobler sex. She may be physically weak, but she is strong in suffering. He considered women as 'the embodiment of sacrifice and ahimsa'. He further states:

"A daughter's share must be equal to that of a son. The husband's earnings are the joint property of husband and wife as he makes money by her assistance. If a husband is unjust to his wife, she has the right to live separately. Both have equal rights to the children. Each would forfeit these rights after they have grown up, and even before that if he or she is unfit for them. In short, I admit no distinction men and women expect such as has been made by nature and can be seen with human eyes" (Ganrade, K.D. page no. 121).

A study on our societies clearly discloses the fact that

this right is still not given to women in India. A family is actually the result of both husband and wife, but the unacknowledged truth is that men have become the super power within the family allowing nothing in the decision making process. Thus for the empowerment of women, Gandhi's ideals are excellent allowing women to actively participate in the decision making and property gaining process. As a passionate lover of humanity, Harijans, and the poor commanded his most tender interest.

Gandhi's humanitarian attitude established him an implacable enemy of all injustice and inequality. He was indeed a friend of the downtrodden which was seen as an isolated and poverty ridden section by the educated and aristocratic people. Even in South Africa, he worked among the poorest. Unfortunately, in our present day world, poor women do not get the required importance even from the women of the aristocratic families. The aristocratic ladies harbour their own style and fashion unlike the poor village women and clearly so their reluctance to talk and share their feelings with the downtrodden. In this respect too, Gandhi's philosophy does not lose its ground even in the twenty first century, rather its relevance becomes more significant. His humanitarian attitude provided the Indian women of that time a platform for playing a significant role in the freedom struggle.

In the political sphere also the equation is not encouraging. Of course, the parliament recently passed a bill which proposes 30% reservation of assembly and parliament seats

for women in India. Male dominance is, thus, also evident in politics owing to the fact that women are still reluctant to work in such an important field. Obviously there are many reasons behind their reluctance and here mention may be made of the prohibition from their parents, husbands and so on. For their upliftment, they have to actively participate in politics and other such important grounds.

The smuggling of human beings from poor to rich countries is another crucial issue to be discussed here. Men have still the habit of using women as sex objects. To remove prostitution, women have to take an active part, otherwise this growing insult on them will be more violent in the near future. Gandhi's philosophy once again matters in this context because he considered women as the incarnation of 'Ahimsa'. Men also have to erase their overt and excessive sexual desires and synchronically women have to create an awareness amongst people. Even after 60 years of independence, atrocities on women continue unabated. Almost 70 percent of the rape victims disappear from their homes. The scornful attitude of their parents, relatives, threats and continued harassment from the offender compel them to do that. To empower women for a better fortune, both men and women have to adopt a humanitarian attitude and learn to know how to respect each other. All these prove that we have not been able to clothe our women even after 60 years of independence. Gandhi brought this problem in the lime-light in 1917 during the time of his visit to a poor village. He

said:

"I happened to visit a village in the Champaram district of Bihar. I found some of the women dressed very dirty. So I told my wife to ask them why they did not wash their cloths." Quickly a woman replied in the following manner:

"Look now, there is no box or cupboard containing other clothes. The saree I am wearing is the only one I have. How am I to wash it? Tell Mahatmaji to get me another saree and I shall then promise to bathe and put on clean clothes everyday" (Gangrade, K.D., page no. 126).

Gandhi's philosophy also works in the economic sphere. He appealed every Indian irrespective of men and women to weave their clothes at home. This can be seen as an attempt to establish them self-dependent and synchronically it helped women to work equally with men. Women can accept the ideals of Gandhi to empower and strengthen their position. Therefore, jobless women can work at home and finally become economically independent by weaving clothes. This crucial measure undertaken by Gandhi in the 20th century can assist us much in the development of our present Indian economy as well as our nation.

On the whole the mentioned aspects once again prove that the condition of women in some fields is still pathetic and shocking. Although our constitution renders women complete liberty and equality, unfortunately their participation in politics on equal footing with men remains a distant dream. The general and biased idea concerning women's

inferiority is still prevalent in our society from time immemorial. Women should too cease to see themselves inferior which can empower them in future. Hence Gandhi's philosophy bears immense importance in the context of women empowerment and hopefully its importance will never fade away.

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