



Social Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi has played an important role in the India's freedom struggle, and has connected all sections of society together in an acceptable manner. Gandhian ideas are philosophical in nature. No doubt Gandhi was a social engineer who tries to build a new human society where every individual can live without violence and war. Gandhiji throughout his life worked for the betterment of women, untouchables, and other weaker sections of the society. In this paper an attempt has been made to draw out the importance of Gandhian thought, and his philosophy in society. The paper contends that by his non-violent methods Gandhian ideas and principles to some extent has succeeded in transforming the Indian society. Further, his ideas brought gender equalities, uniformity among the people and eliminate several inhuman practices like untouchability, widow remarriage, and prohibition of child marriages.

Key Words: Untouchability, Remarriage, Women, Gandhi, Non-Violence, Widow, Evil Practices.

Introduction

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi was born on October 2nd, 1869 in Porbander in modern Gujarat. His father Karamchand was a Prime (chief Minister in Kathiawar district. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the youngest child of his father's fourth wife; Putlibai.' He was married at the age of 13 with Kasturba. After the death of his father his family sent him to England in 1888 to study law. He had promised his mother that he would not eat non-vegetarian food, or drink alcohol, and remained loyal to his faith.

¹ Gandhi. M.K; *An Autobiography. The story of my Experiments with Truth*, Navajivan Publishing house, Ahmadabad, 1959, p. 3.

After completing his study in England, Gandhi eventually returned to India in 1891. His mother died when he was in England, the news of her death had been withheld from him by his brother because his brother assumed that Gandhi would get mentally disturbed that will affect his studies. After became a Barrister, he start practicing as a lawyer in Rajkot but he did not get much work there, and eventually came to Bombay. After a brief stay in India, he left for South Africa in 1893 to represent the case against the *Memen* firm, the firm of the Indian businessman namely Abdullah in South Africa. Gandhi's activities in South Africa can be regarded as

unparalleled and unequalled in the history of the world. The time which he spend in South Africa gave him valuable insight in familiarizing himself with the inhuman and highly deplorable situations that he face outside and helps him to develop appropriate concepts and techniques of non-violent defense. He resisted non-violently against oppression and exhorted the Indians to take part in public activities.

In 1914, Gandhiji returned to India after successfully leading the cause of Indians in South Africa. Soon after his return, Gandhiji has not participated in any political activity for almost a year because he thought he might first get acquainted with the national issues. He abstained from active politics till 1919 and became a active leader in India's national movement.² Gandhiji's criteria were not usual criteria of politics. He had certain principles of his own, and was working in accordance with his principles. Gandhiji did not make any compromise with his principles, his standard of success were moral and religious. He was a man of morals by all means; his morality can be perceived by his entire public actions. When he started his non-cooperation movement for attaining India's independence from the British rule, he was sentenced to six years imprisonment in 1922. In 1930 he started civil disobedience movement to break harsh *Salt Law* that was imposed by the British Government. Many Indians followed him and broke the restrictions on salt.¹ The Civil Disobedience Movement benefitted the Indian society in several ways. The above movement taught Indian masses how to gain freedom from the British rule without using any violent method, it also encapsulated the principle of non-violence in the Indian social structure. Despite, their caste differences the method of non-violence gathered Indian masses together, if the above principle would have not been applied in

² D. K. Dutta; *Social, Moral and Religious philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Intellectual Book Corner, 23 Daryaganj, Pratap Gats, New Delhi, p.18.

³ Ibid, p.20.

Indian politics, the Indian social groups perhaps would have tear down one another. By identifying his role in Indian society, one can reasonably claim that Gandhiji was a man of virtue who followed the path of non-violence to pursue his ideal goals throughout his life.

Society and Man

Gandhiji wanted to create a new society, a society free from exploitation and tyranny. He worked hard and set up Sarvodaya Samaj and Soshan Bihin Samaj to save people from exploitation.⁴ According to Gandhi every human being high or low, rich and poor should get equal opportunity for his development. The idea of the greatest good of the greatest number of people had not satisfied him. Gandhi wants the development and prosperity of all section of the society.⁵ According to Gandhi, the Swaraj of the people is the sum total of the Swaraj of the individual.⁶ This means that the society and individual are interdependent on each other. The individual can attain prosperity only if he attains freedom and peace in the society. According to Gandhiji though we should have individual freedom we must keep in mind that human beings are social animals, therefore, human beings should learn to adjust his individualism to the needs of social progress.

Gandhiji realized that the Poverty can only leads to demoralization and frustration. At the same time he was equally emphatic that the sole aim of development should not be purely materialistic. He held the view that material prosperity beyond the limits leads several evils. The ideal that the Gandhiji kept before us was that ‘our civilizations our culture and our Swaraj depend not upon multiplying our wants-self indulgence, but upon restricting our wants-self denial’.⁷

One objective for change should be the re-emergence of the individual. In modern times it's beneath human dignity to lose one's individuality to become a mere cog in the machine. I want

Dr Shubhangi Rathi “Gandhian philosophy of sarvodaya and its principles.” Available at, https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gandhi_sarvodaya.html .(Accessed on March 22, 2022).

Dr. Usha Thakker. Gandhian Perspective of Development. Available at, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gandhian-perspective-of-development.html> .(Accessed on March 22, 2022).

⁶ M.P. Mathai What Swaraj meant to Gandhi?. Available at, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/swaraj.htm> . (Accessed on March 22, 2022).

⁷ Mathurs (Ed.), *Economic Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 507.

every individual to become full-blooded and fully developed member of society. ⁸ On another occasion Gandhiji remarked, “If individual ceases to count what is left of society? Individual freedom alone can make man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. If it is wrested from him, he became an automaton and the society is ruined. No society can be built on the denial of the freedom of individual”.⁹ When we talk of development of the human personality or respect of individual self we do not imply that this will be something apart from the society. Man has to develop as an integral part of society and it is to contribute not only for his development but simultaneously to that of the group and the society of which he is a member.

Status of Women

The status of women in India varied in different classes, religion, ethnic groups and eras. The era before independence has witnessed the exploitation of women both in and the outside the home. The pre-and post Gandhian period is marked by the philosophy of some of the brilliant thinkers and social reforms such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Swami Dyanand Saraswati have emphasized on the issues while tried to improve the conditions of women in India. Gandhi however saw women not as ‘object of reform’ but as ‘self-conscious entity’ and he incorporated the women with the common masses’ in a natural way. The participation of the Indian women in the national as well as local mass movements made them an important part of Indian society. Their participation both at national as well as on domestic levels has changed their overall status in India. The call for the women participation was gave by the Mahatma Gandhi, who encouraged women class to take part in the freedom struggle of India. Gandhi called the women's participation in Satyagraha and social reconstruction programmes as more important than that of men. ¹⁰

Gandhi estimated that in a long drawn political struggle, he would achieve its desired goal only when all section of people work together irrespective of their castes, color creed, and gender and when people placed their efforts in a constant and organized manner. Gandhi sought the support of women for almost all of his political movements. The role of educated women in social and

Harryan, (1939), p. 438.

⁹ Quoted in Bondurant Joan, V., *Conquest of Violence*, P. 30.

¹ Jha Madhu; *Women in Decision Making position*, Kanishka publication, New Delhi, 2005, p.30.

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political sector could enhance and spread the Gandhian philosophy in the common masses in general and society in particular.

The women can become imamatess in the ashram and can contribute in Khadi and other social constructive programmes.¹¹ Apart from their physical differences, Gandhi believed that both men and women are same and equal. Women's are the counterpart of man, like men, the women are bestowed by nature with equal mental capacities. Gandhi endorsed the participation of girls in socio-political and economic sector, he emphasize that the girl don't seem to be playthings however "creative people who have a selected area for the development of novelty". For women rights, Gandhiji contends that a girl spends half of her age in performing household duties like wife, mother, and so on. To enhance the role and rights of women, Gandhi emphasized that women should not remain confined in the four walls of house, they must participate in the socio- political and economic sectors of the society.

Gandhiji aspired women's should take part in politics and should have an independent thinking. Women's should be enrolled in education and should be given practical education about different subjects. He vigorously opposed evil customs, infanticide, homicide, forced labour, child marriage and related traditional practices which are inhuman in nature and are major hurdle in societal progress. The long struggle of Gandhiji to establish the rights of women class bore excellent fruits in India in the post independence era.¹²

Untouchability

While addressing the question of social equality, Gandhi rejected the caste differences among the different sections of the society. He was against the untouchability or commonly known as out castes and Varna's. Gandhi perceived that the prevalence of untouchability among Hindus could be a denial of the principles of Gospel that could broke the pride of the Indian people. The evil practice like untouchability was the product of society that badly violates the human code of conduct." Gandhi from his childhood was totally against the untouchability and related evils. On evils like untouchability Gandhi has articulated "love of people fetched the objects of

¹¹ Mukherjee Subrata, Ramaswami Sushila; *Facts of Mahatma Gandhi Economic and social principles*, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p.300.

¹² Government of India (1940) *The Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, Navajivan Trust, p.59.

¹³ Gandhi. M. K; *The removal of Untouchability*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmadabad, 1959, p.177.

untouchability early into my life. My mother aforesaid, you should not bit this boy, he's untouchable. ¹⁴ Further, "Why not I inquired back and from that day, my revolt against this began." Gandhiji fought a massive war against untouchability throughout his political career, his movement against untouchability got stronger and stronger day by day, he even sacrifice his entire life for this noble cause. The fight against untouchability immersed the renunciation of his spouse and religion. However, apart from his personal troublesome, he remained strong and consistent against untouchability, and aspired to remove this inhumane practice in the minds of common masses through his writings, speeches and actions. Gandhi worked for the betterment as well as upliftment of Harijans and fought for their temple entry that ultimately compelled higher castes Hindus to open up the temples for the Harijans. The temple entry inculcated the feelings of uniformity and heals the wounds of Harijans, and made them believed that they are not outcastes before God.¹⁶

Child Marriage

Gandhiji was against child marriage, he considered child marriage as an immoral and inhuman act that undermines our moral and induced physical degeneration. Repudiating the claim that child marriage has a religious sanction, Gandhi contends, Smritis which supports early marriage do not depict the true essence of Hinduism and must be rejected as interpolations.¹⁷ As per the official statistics sources, the overall rate of maternal mortality of was 24.5 per thousand in 1931, while as England had 4.5 per thousand maternal mortality rate. The child marriages not only debilitated mother's health but also affected country's new generation and race. Gandhi believed that no real upliftment of women is possible without bringing the radical reforms in marriage system. Most of the disabilities from which women suffered were due to the evils which had crept into the marriage institutions. The early marriages and denial of right to remarriage were the primary causes among the women's to become widows. The traditional Hindu marriage customs such as polygamy, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage and heavy dowry etc was the biggest obstacles which terribly mistreats the Indian women and their development. Therefore, Gandhi believed in the form of marriage that was envisaged in the Hindu religion. He

¹ Gandhi.M.K; (1967 Ed Kher.V.B), *Political and National life and affairs*, Vol.II Navajivan Pub. House P. 106. ^{1b} Ibid.

¹⁶ Harijan, 11-2-1993.

¹⁷ Gandhi. M. K; *Women and Social Injustice*, Navajivan Pub. House Ahmadabad, 1958, p. 55.

advocated that he had no theory of marriage that is inconstant with a belief in transmigration, rebirth or Mukti.¹⁸ He supported the opening of the special institutions like Mahil Ashramas for rescuing young girls who were the victims of the above evil customs, and were sold by their parents for the sake money or other social causes. Gandhiji supported educated women's and young girls to work and rescue those girls, wives and widows who become the victims of these inhuman practices. He provided his unconditional support to educated and socially active women's to cultivate an environment wherein the child and early marriages would not happen. Gandhiji perceived that a child widow is not a widow in true sense. Gandhi's

support to remarriage of widows was strongly opposed by the Sanatana Hindus, who claimed that remarriages is not possible in Hinduism.¹⁹

Caste System

There is one more factor to be remembered regarding the class structure, for Gandhi, it is not an equivalent as Varnashrama. While the class structure is a solution to the social order like the Varna system that relies on the Hindu scriptures not on class structure. The laws of Varnas can be traced back to ancient scriptures like Vedas, which affirmed a man shall follow the occupation of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. There are unit of uncounted castes some dying out and new one's came into being. According to tenth Mandal of Rig Veda, there are four major Varnas namely, Brahamans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The above-mentioned Varnas have different duties and functions as per their hierarchy and status. For instance, the Brahmans were assigned with higher duties such as learning, teaching, priestly work, and related occupations. Second, the Kshatriyas were assigned with duties like protection of society, ruling of state and so on. Third, the Vaishyas main duty was to perform wealth, and wealth producing occupations for the welfare of the people and society. Lastly, the Shudras primary duty was to perform physical labour, and to clean the houses, cloths, washrooms of the above three castes.²¹

According to Gandhi, Brahmans cannot assume superiority in society as it goes against the laws of Varnas. He believed that in Vedas the four Varna's have been compared to four parts of the

¹⁸ Young India, 7-10-1927.

¹⁹ Bharati. K. S; Gandhian Studies and peace research series 4, *The Social Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi Publishing Company, 1956, p.58.

²¹ D. N. Jha. Ancient India in Historical Outline. Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 60- 61.

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body and. According to him, no Varna could claim superiority over other, every Varna should be considered equal and important so that caste based discrimination can be abolished and equality can be prevailed in the society. He attempted his best to give a new light to the old-age tradition of Varnashram, and used it as a means to promote welfare in the society. Gandhi also persuaded Congress Party to accept his idea of removal of untouchability as a primary and necessary means to prohibit the evil and inhuman practices and to achieve the goal of social equality.

Conclusion

Gandhi was a charismatic personality, and source of inspiration for the common masses. He appeared as a messiah for the oppressed people. Gandhiji through his non-violence method wanted to replace the discriminatory Indian social structure into ideal social order. His support to non-discriminatory social order helps in widespread the development and interconnectedness of caste-based Indian society. His ideas and thought helped in removal of several customary evils, unrest, and injustice and gender inequality from the Indian society. His dream of futuristic society was based on equality and equal opportunities irrespective of differences in caste, colour, creed, religion, and gender. Right from the beginning, Gandhiji

stood in favour of common masses but he shows his special concern to Ati-Shudras, Untouchables, and women class. He coined a special term “Harijan” to show his concern and love towards the suppressed groups of the society. He had faith in women's inherent capacity of non-violence. The experience of women participation in politics from his days in South Africa till the end of his life demonstrates that the women's never broke his expectation. With the help of Gandhian ideas and inspiration, the women's fought a massive battle for their rights both in and outside their homes. Gandhi adopted the good ideas of all religions; his love towards communal harmony helped him to become a man of morality and a firm believer of God. In the concluding remarks, it can be observed that the communal belief of peacefulness that appeared from the Gandhian philosophy has appeared a major means to eliminate many types' of evils, and hurdles from the Indian society.

