



MAHATMA GANDHI'S VIEWS ON WIDOWS' REMARRIAGE



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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhiji is best identified as father of nation for his contribution towards struggle against the British. But Gandhiji was also a social reformer and emancipator of women and downtrodden. He was against the child marriage and forced widowhood. The present paper highlights his views on widows' remarriage.

KEYWORDS : Mahatma Gandhiji's Views , child marriage and forced widowhood.

INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a major political and spiritual leader of India and the Indian independence movement. He was the pioneer of *Satyagraha*- resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, firmly founded upon *ahimsa* or total non-violence- which led India to independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. He is commonly known around the world as Mahatma Gandhi ("Great Soul", an honorific first applied to him by Rabindranath Tagore) and in India also as *Bapu* ("Father" in Gujarathi). He is officially honoured in India as the Father of the Nation, and his birthday, 2 October, is commemorated there as *Gandhi Jayanti*, a national holiday, and world-wide as the International Day of Non-Violence.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porbander, a coastal town in present-day Gujarat, Western India, on October 2, 1869. His father, Karamchand Gandhi, who belonged to the Hindu Modh community, was the *diwan* (Prime Minister) of the Porbander state, a small princely state in the

Kathiawar Agency of British India. His mother, Putlibai, who came from the Hindu Pranami Vaishnava community, was Karamchand's fourth wife, the first three wives having apparently died in childbirth.

In South Africa, Gandhi faced discrimination during his studies directed at Indians in 1893, then he determined to struggle against Racism. Gandhi's first major achievements came in 1918 with the Champaran agitation and *Kheda Satyagraha*, although in the latter it was indigo and other cash crops instead of the food crops necessary for their survival. In December 1921, Gandhi was invested with executive authority on behalf of the Indian National Congress. Under his leadership, the Congress was reorganized with a new constitution, with the goal of *Swaraj*.

Whenever there is a mention of emancipation of Indian women, unforgettable contribution of a great social reformer Mahatma Gandhiji is bound to be discussed. Today, any socially sensitive person would admit that had Gandhi not come on the front, position of Indian women would not have been elevated to the extent it is at present.

On equality of women with men Gandhiji said, "...Just as fundamentally man and woman are one, their problems must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a compliment of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help" (Gulati, 1999). Radhakrishnan states, "it cannot be denied that many women activists in India have strong reservations about Gandhi's views about women" (Johnson, 1999). Gandhi writes, "Wives should not be dolls and objects of indulgence, but should be treated as honoured comrades in community service"... "Women's capacity for sacrifice, suffering and patience cannot be found in men" (Mishra, 2004).

Gandhiji considered woman as the other half of man. Naturally he despised the idea of getting dowry at the time of marriage. In fact, he never wanted women to wear ornaments to increase their beautiful look. He desired that they should raise themselves through dedicated service to the needy. So he blessed such of the persons to marry a Harijan (Bharati, 2000).

WIDOWS' REMARRIAGE:

Gandhiji was especially considerate regarding the plight of the young widows. He lent wholehearted support to the efforts of earlier reformers to put an end to the evil customs of child marriage and he shows a sense of unhappiness over the social plight of millions of widows. He opposed the custom of enforced widowhood and opined that, "every widow has as much right to marry as every widower. Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon, enforced widowhood is curse" (Hingorani, 1941). In Gandhiji's view, one of the glaring examples of the problem of Indian womanhood was the custom of child marriage. He saw the evil of neglect of childhood as intimately related to child marriage. Gandhiji argued that women's health was necessary condition for their emancipation and empowerment. Gandhiji emphasized the potential of widows as servants of the nation as well as in public service. Gandhiji hoped that while including themselves in the public service, women could be able to devote certain time for the better cause of the nation. Lastly, he said that widowhood imposed by religion or custom is an unbearable agenda and degrades the religion itself. It is good to swim in the waters of tradition or religion, but to sink in them in suicide. Therefore, if women were to get justice, scriptures needed to be revised and all religious texts biased against the rights and dignity of women should be changed. For this Indian women had to produce from amongst themselves new sita's, Droupadis and Damayantis, pure, firm and self controlled (Navajivan Trust, 1987).

He bitterly deplored the treatment and position accorded to widows in Hindu Society. While advocating for Hindu widow remarriage he said, "Every widow has as much right to remarry as every

widower. Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon in Hinduism, enforced widowhood is a curse. Speaking about it again, particularly when certain sections in the country wondered as usual, whether an enactment of law forbidding this practice would not be helpful in stamping out the evil, he pointed out that, "no outside imposition can cure Hindu Society of the enforced widowhood of girls, who don't even know what marriage is. The reform can come, first by the force of enlightened public opinion among the Hindus, secondly by parents recognizing the duty of marrying their girl widows. His fearless condemnation of this custom is seen in another vehement statement of his. "The curse of every widow, who is burning within to remarry but dare not for fear of a cruel custom, descends upon Hindu Society so long as it keeps the widow under an unforgivable bondage (Shridevi, 1969).

In consistency with his view that marriage is a sacrament and not a contract, Gandhi admired those widows how remained faithfully to their husbands and if possible, carried on the husband's unfinished work and served society like Ramabai Ranade or C. R. Das's widow, Smt. Basanti Devi.

Though Gandhiji was not in favour of widow remarriage (with the exception of child widows) yet he was against "forced widowhood" and recommended that bramacharya way of life, or penances and fasts would help a widow to attain moksha or eternal bliss, he was of view "Voluntary widowhood is a priceless boon in Hinduism, enforce widowhood is a curse". For Gandhiji "marriage means the union of the bodies. It connotes the union of the soul too" (Gulati, 1999).

Protesting against the prevalent belief that a widow denotes ill luck and that a widow crossing one's path is an ill omen, Gandhi announced "I do not consider it inauspicious to see a widow. I consider it to be my good fortune to see a widow in the early hours of the day. Her blessings are a great boon for me. Seeing her, I forget all my difficulties. Man is an insignificant creature compared to a widow. It is impossible to imitate the widow so far as her patience is concerned. What value can a man's temporary renunciation have before the ancient heritage possessed by the widow? Service is the main goal of a widow's life" (Jain,1971).

While he regarded voluntary widowhood as the glory of Hindu religion, the existence of young widows was construed as a blot of the Hindu society. Four main rules formulated by him for safeguarding both the widow and the Hindu society are:

- a) No father should get his daughter married before she reaches the age of fifteen.
- b) In case of girls under 15 who have already become widows, their fathers should make arrangements to get them well married.
- c) If a girl of 15 becomes a widow within one year of her marriage, her parents should encourage her to get marry again.
- d) Every family should treat a widow with utmost respect and the parents and parents in law should give her facilities to expand her knowledge.

Above said rules, according to him, were not drastic enough to eradicate the evil. Therefore, the real remedy lay in seeing that like the widow, the widower also does not get remarried. So long as this cannot be ensured, observance of the above mentioned four rules may help in easing the situation to some extent. The ultimate remedy suggested by Gandhi, viz., considering the widow and a widower on par so far as remarriage is concerned shows his genuine concern for equality and fair play. His advice to the guardians of girl child widows was to get the child widows well married. He preferred not to call it remarriage because he refused to believe that they were really married even though the orthodox sections of the society including Pandits cited texts to prove that the first marriage of the girls was

righteous and sacrosanct, thus proving that he cared more for being true to his own conscience than accepting old text and traditions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Though, Gandhiji's struggles were identified as national movement, still he has contributed much towards the socio-economic development of women and downtrodden. He was opposed Sati practice and forced widowhood. To prevent widowhood at an early age, he was against child marriage. Due to child marriage, there is increase in the numbers of young widows and consequently, there are increasing widows in society. To counter this problem, he argued for abolition of child marriage and forced widowhood and strongly agreed for widows' remarriage. In this way, he was supporter of widows' remarriage.

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