



Revisiting the views of Buddha and Gandhi on Gender Equality

• Divya Kumari • Shivi Sinha • Shreya
• Ameeta Jaiswal

Received : November 2012

Accepted : March 2013

Corresponding Author : Ameeta Jaiswal

Abstract : *Gender equality is a very relevant topic in present times. It means absence of discrimination on the ground of sex and equal opportunity given to female as to male. Despite the developments in science and technology and a consequent rise in the standard of living, gender discrimination still exists in the society. This project has been undertaken with the aim of finding out the causes of gender discriminations and trying to solve the problem by revisiting the views of Buddha and Gandhi on this issue. The causes of social inequality are patriarchal society, economic dependence, illiteracy, etc. And*

in order to fight discrimination the ideals of Buddha and Gandhi should be revisited and adopted. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. According to the teachings of the Buddha, there exists no practical difference between the sexes. Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings and a democrat. In the Buddhist text women are always named before men. Similarly, Gandhi was also a supporter of gender equality. He was neither feminist nor anti-feminist but gave a new perspective regarding gender equality. He brought about a revolutionary change in the status of women during his time. He opposed the harmful practices like female infanticide, purdah, female illiteracy, child marriage, dowry system, sati, polygamy and subjugation of wives and supported equality of sexes, women education, economic independence, birth control, widow remarriage and participation of women in constructive programmes. Hence, the conclusion is that by revisiting the views of Buddha and Gandhi and adopting them in our lives we can change the mindset of people regarding sub-ordinate status given to women and bring equality in the society so that the society becomes a better place to live in.

Key words: *gender discrimination, gender equality, economic dependence, revisiting.*

Divya Kumari

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2010-2013,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Shivi Sinha

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2010-2013,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Shreya

B.A. III year, Philosophy (Hons.), Session: 2010-2013,
Patna Women's College, Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Ameeta Jaiswal

Head, Department of Philosophy,
Patna Women's College, Bailey Road,
Patna – 800 001, Bihar, India
E-mail: ajphilpwc@gmail.com

Introduction :

Gender equality is a highly discussed topic in present times. Gender equality is made up of two words gender and equality. The word gender refers to the social and cultural roles prescribed to a male and a female. The word equality is a multi-dimensional concept. However, it means equal opportunity in the form of rights and privileges. We are talking of gender equality because gender discrimination still exists in our society, and equality remains only a utopia. Gender discrimination refers to the practice of granting or denying the rights or privileges to a person based on their gender. Gender discrimination may be defined as "differentiating people as male and female on the basis of gender or gender based functions and treating them unequally in the matter of social functions, or treating them unjustly in the distribution of burdens and benefits in society." (Y.V. Satyanarayana 186). Despite the development in science and technology, global economy, standard of living and brilliant thoughts in social, political, religious and philosophical fields, gender discrimination still persists.

There are several cause of gender discrimination and some important among them are as follows:

- (a) Patriarchal society and gender based division of labor.
- (b) Difference in socialization of children i.e. generating the feeling of being a boy or a girl in the mind of the child.
- (c) The system of seclusion.
- (d) Economic dependence, illiteracy, child marriage.

The Indian society is biased and though women are opposing discrimination they are still subjugated, oppressed and exploited whenever and wherever opportunity is found. Rape,

Foeticide, dowry-death, sexual-oppression and exploitation are taking place everyday. This had prevented Indian women from achieving a higher standard of living. In spite of natural inequalities human beings are endowed with certain capacities and needs that are radically different from other living organisms. Human beings are rational and responsible moral agents who have been provided with certain natural rights such as the right to life, the right to freedom, etc. The idea of equality has thus grown out of the idea of privilege. Hence, gender equality is a basic right and this can only be established by some strong basis and ideal as propagated by great philosophers Buddha and Gandhi where views on gender equality will help to uplift the status of women in society.

Objective :

Gender equality is an important factor of social progress and welfare but the irony is that it is almost lacking in society. Following are the aims of this project:

- (i) Construction of conceptual framework of gender equality by re-visiting the views of Buddha and Gandhi.
- (ii) Creation of new values as well as re-interpretation of thoughts of Buddha and Gandhi.
- (iii) Changing the mindset of people regarding subordinate status given to women and bringing about the feeling of equality in the minds of people.
- (iv) Develop a social ethics where in there is no male bias.

Significance :

The topic of 'Re-visiting Buddha and Gandhi on gender equality' is significant because the Buddhist and Gandhian conception of gender equality is very practical and motivating which will help in changing the mind-set of the people

regarding the status of women. It will also help to create a feeling of equality among men and women and secure a respectable position for women.

Methodology :

This project is based on materials collected from books, news-papers, magazines and internet and its interpretation is being done. The method is descriptive, analytical, critical and evaluative.

Buddhist perspective on gender equality :

The word **humanism** has gained importance in present times so that every theory and institution claims to have a humanistic outlook. Buddhism succeeded so well because it was a religion of love, giving voice to all the inarticulate forces which were working against the established order and the ceremonial religion addressing itself to the poor, the lowly and the disinherited (S. Radhakrishnan 402). Gautama Buddha who appeared in the 6th century B.C. is unique among the founders of religion. Buddha was a humanistic philosopher. He was more a social reformer than a metaphysician. His teachings reveal his humanistic attitude. After attaining enlightenment the Buddha preached his realization to bring about betterment in human welfare. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. His attitude towards women was therefore more enlightened and considerate. According to Buddha, a female child may prove to be a better offspring than a male. Women's position in Buddhism is unique. The Buddha gave women freedom to participate in a religious life and maintain their own position in the society. Before Buddha women's duties had been restricted to kitchen only; women were not even allowed to enter any temple or to receive any religious scriptures. They were subjugated in all circumstances. The Buddha was criticized by the prevailing establishment when he gave this freedom to women. At first this was not accepted by the society. His move to allow women to enter the

holy order was extremely radical for the time. Buddha had to face many evil criticisms for this. Yet, the Buddha allowed women to prove themselves and to show that they too had capacity like men to attain the highest position in the religious way or the life by attaining *arhathood*. Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings and a democrat. Buddha made efforts for emancipation of women. In the Buddhist text women are always named before men. In the beginning Buddha made rules for nuns to make them dependent on monks. It may be possible that the Buddha had already delivered teaching to monks an instead of repeating it again he preferred women to consult and get knowledge from monks.

Gandhian perspective on gender equality :

The contemporary Indian thinker Gandhi had very efficiently and brilliantly expressed his views and written on numerous issues that concerned the Indian society in particular and humanity in general. His view on gender equality is remarkable. He was neither a feminist nor an antifeminist. The Mahatma by far can be considered as the best friend of women in India and the world. The Mahatma by far was one of the most honest and divine historical figures of the modern age. The Mahatma's purity of thought and honest intentions are beyond question. He wanted women to play an important role in social, political and economic life of India. He opposed the social evil practices like female infanticide, *purdah*, the dowry system, female illiteracy, child marriages, widowhood, sati and polygamy and subjugation of wives. Gandhi did not stop at opposing the practices which were derogatory to women but also forcefully advocated in favour of various rights of women.

Following issues were supported by Gandhi: equality of sexes, education, and economic independence, women in political arena, property,

birth-control, women as individual, and women in constructive programmes.

Thus, we find that Mahatma Gandhi was the most powerful and effective supporter of women power.

Conclusion and Suggestions :

- By revisiting the philosophy of Buddha and Gandhi on gender equality it was realized how rationally they have expressed their views concerning numerous issues that concerns the Indian women.
- Their philosophy will motivate the people to undergo a change in their behavior and mind set regarding women.
- Their teachings should be made a part of curriculum in the schools and colleges.
- A new society should be re-constructed based on the values of Buddha and Gandhi.
- Everyone should respect each other and understand the dignity of human being for a better and peaceful society. People should follow the thoughts of Buddha and Gandhi for the progress of society and preservation of mankind.

References :

- Bakshi S.R. (1986). *Gandhi and His Social Thought*. Delhi : Criterion Publications.
- Conze Edward (1958). *Buddhist Wisdom*. London: George Allen and Unwin Limited.
- Gandhi M.K. (1942). *Women and Social Injustic*. Ahmedabad : Navjivan Publishing House.
- Gupta Suman (1999). *Women in Modern India*. Delhi : National Publishing House.
- Iyer Raghav (1991). *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi Ideas*. Delhi : Oxford University Press.
- Lal Basant Kumar (1973). *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*. Delhi : Motilal Banarsidas Private Limited.
- Radhakrishnan S. (2008), *Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Raju P.T. (1992). *The Philosophical Tradition of India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Private Limited,.
- Satyanarayana Y.V. (2010). *Ethics: Theory and Practice*. Dorling Kindersley (India) Private Limited.
- Sharma Dr. K.N. (1994). *History of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi : Surjeet Publications.
- Varma V.P. (2006). *Political Philosophy*. Agra : Lakshmi Narain Agarwal.