

## The Role of Sardar Patel in the Upliftment of Women

Dr. Vasant Patel<sup>1</sup>

“The belief that women's problems will be solved when Swarajya (Independence) comes is not correct. The truth is that women have been deposed. Swarajya (Independence) will be achieved when they are placed in their proper place”<sup>2</sup>

The contribution of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who expressed such a noble thought, has been important for the equality of men and women and improving the status of women by ending the customs and traditions that enslave women.

The era of social consciousness and national vigil began in the nineteenth century. At that time it was not easy to criticize against the existing customs and traditions. It was not easy to fight for the rights of women especially. It was a daunting task. Among the reformers who came forward in these dire circumstances were Raja Rammohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Behramji Malabari, Mahadev Gonvid Ranade, Maharshi Karve, Durgaram Mehta, Narmadashankar, Poet Dalpatram, Karasandas Mulji etc. These thinkers and reformers made a concerted effort to eradicate the practice of sati and many similar women-exploiting practices and customs.<sup>3</sup> Female education started. Educational institutions were started through the efforts of Ranade, Vidyasagar, Karve, Dalpatram and Annie Basent. The progressive Sayajirao started schools in his state for girls' education in Vadodara.

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<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of History, Sardar Patel University, Vallabh Vidyanagar

<sup>2</sup> Gupta, Vishwaprakash And Gupta Mohini, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, *Vyakti aur Vichar, Radha Publication, New Delhi. 2006 p.-213 (15-6-1938)*

<sup>3</sup> Desai, Neera. *Bhartiya Samaj Mein Nari, Mc millan India, New Delhi, p - 45.*

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After 1857 the situation changed. The purpose of establishing the Public Assembly in Poona and the Indian Association in Bengal was to organize the awakened citizens. The All India National Congress was founded in 1885 by the efforts of the liberal Englishman A. O. Hume with the aim of bringing intellectuals and workers together on a platform to discuss and deliberate for the progress of the nation. It was made clear at the outset that the Bharatiya assembly- Congress was the only political body in which there was no scope for social reforms.

Due to such restricted attitude, Mahadev Gonvid Ranade founded the Indian National Social Congress in 1887 for discussion and solution of social questions. After 10 years the position of Congress changed. In 1895, Surendra Nath Banerjee said, "We love and respect our women but do not yet believe that they are worthy of proper representation."<sup>4</sup> The surprising thing is that despite the establishment of many Universities in India from 1854 to 1882, in 1875, Mumbai University did not allow the daughter of Postmaster Khurshedji of Belgaum to take the matriculation examination. Calcutta University Syndicate also did not agree due to technical reasons. This barrier was removed in 1877. From 1882 to 1900, Kadambini Bose and Chandramukhi Basu from Calcutta, Cornelia Sorabaji from Mumbai, Vidyagouri and Shardaben from Gujarat became the first female graduates by the year 1900.<sup>5</sup> We all know that Vidyagauri and Shardaben were the first to graduate from Gujarat but are unaware of the female upliftment activities of Krishnagauri Hiralal Rawal, who was born in a Brahmin family in a hinterland like Lunawada in Panchmahal district of Gujarat itself. Krishna Gauri published an article on child marriage and widowhood in the issue of Hitechchu dated 22-4-1897. She has advocated for improving the status of women. Krishna Gauri has researched well before writing her novel 'Sadguni Hemanta Kumari: The Story of Social reform'. She has received the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.-88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.-142.

honour of social reformer who living in the village life of Gujarat and being the first Gujarati woman novelist. This novel of her was published in 1899.<sup>6</sup>

And now there was an important change in Indian politics and society. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi came to India in 1915. Before that, in South Africa, he created a movement against the British government with the new method of non-violent *satyagraha* and brought justice to the Hindi people. This was a great historical event. The special features are 1) pure animosity observed in the struggle and 2) women's entry into public life.

For the first time in a foreign country, women went to jail for *satyagraha*. This event had a great impact on the liberal intellectuals of India. Feroz Shah Mehta who advised Gandhiji in 1901 that nothing could be done about the problem of overseas Hindi until India got independence and also said that Gandhi need not go to South Africa. But after hearing the news of the women going to jail, Feroz Shah told in the Mumbai Town Hall meeting that Gandhiji became angry after hearing this news. India cannot remain silent.<sup>7</sup>

In this country, women's advancement was also one of the activities that Gandhiji undertook for the upliftment of the country. To make women stand on equal footing with men in every sphere of life, the Congressmen were made aware of their duty. It was not yet clear in the minds of the members of general assembly that women were equal partners in the struggle for *swarajya* (Independence). Women have been oppressed under the laws and customs which were framed by men and in which women had no participation at all. Women have been taught to believe that they are the servants of men for so long, it is the duty of members of general assembly to create in women the ability to realize their full status and play their part as a companion of men.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mehta, Shirin, *Gujarat ma narichetna, Darshakitihaasnidhi, Ahmedabad, 2009, p.-269.*

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi M.K, *Dakshin Africana Satyagraha no itihaas, Navjeevan Prakashan Mandir, Ahmedabad, p.-286.*

<sup>8</sup> Gandhiji (Editor-Lallubhai Makanji), *Strioane Strioni samasyao, Navjivan Prakashan Mandir Ahmedabad, 2007, pp.-5-6 (Editorial Note)*

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Gandhiji gave priority to the work for the upliftment of the neglected and oppressed sections of the society.

Inspired by Gandhiji's ideas, many social and political activists and intellectuals from across the country joined Gandhiji. Vallabhbhai has admitted that in the year 1915-16 he was crossing his fortieth year. At that time, Gandhi was attracting a number of bright and intelligent youth towards him. He was often surprised by that fact.<sup>9</sup> In April 1917, the Magistrate in Champaran district of Bihar ordered Gandhiji to leave the district. Gandhiji refused to implement this order. Leaders of Gujarat assembly took note of this bravery. Vallabhbhai also agreed to the decision to make Gandhi the President of the Gujarat assembly. Vallabhbhai's hatred and contempt for Gandhiji was eliminated.<sup>10</sup>

After joining Gandhiji, Vallabhbhai's scope of work increased. Vallabhbhai felt that public work must be done and only then people can be educated. Public service work can be done through the municipality. In public life from 1917 to 1950, Vallabhbhai did many works in the political and social field. Sardar Patel's work directly and indirectly for the empowerment of women is also worth mentioning. He strongly believed that society cannot progress until women are given a proper status. His attitude towards social problems remained positive due to his English education.

When Vallabhbhai went to London to study as a barrister, the work he did to save a woman who was suffering from torture should be described in the words of Manibahen Patel. Every day the screams of a woman were heard from the basement where they went to rent in London. One day the owner of the house went out. Sardar asked the cleaning lady there whose screams are heard every day, the lady said, don't give my name, but the house owner's sister is in the basement and this woman wants to grab her property, so that sister is

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<sup>9</sup> *Gandhi, Rajmohan (Translation-Nagindas Sanghvi) Sardar Patel A Devoted Life, Navjivan Prakashan Mandir, Ahmedabad, 2010, p.-35.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid, p.-37.*

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 screaming. Sardar left that house within twenty four hours and went to live elsewhere. He complained about it in the court, it was a very sensational case. This lady was punished.<sup>11</sup> Vallabhbhai brought justice to a woman at abroad by getting rid of trouble.

In May 1917, Vallabhbhai was elected unopposed in the municipality. On November 3, 4, 5, 1917, a political conference was held in Godhra under the presidency of Gandhiji. Gandhiji was appointed as the president and Vallabhbhai Patel, Haribhai Amin and Indulal Yagnik as ministers in the executive board of 23 members.<sup>12</sup> Along with this political council, the social reform council was also held. Vallabhbhai took full interest in the discussion of social reform. On the proposal of Gandhiji, Shardabahen Mehta became the president of this conference. Shardabahen indicted the cultured men for their subservience and inferiority to women.<sup>13</sup> Her impassioned words were as sincere as they were sarcastic.

Even today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Indian Parliament has not decided that 33% reserved seats should be reserved for women. The increase in pay and rent allowances can be passed without delay by consensus. Parliamentarians have been unable to reach a consensus for years citing theoretical and technical reasons. This is a pattern of male dominated attitude not only lack of desire. In this direction the work done by Vallabhbhai Patel in 1919 needs to be revived.

A resolution was presented in the Mumbai Municipality on 12 December 1918 to allow women to become municipal councillors. The councillors of Mumbai city municipality objected. If women come and sit in the municipality, housework will get a big boost. Women deserve only to do housework and raise

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<sup>11</sup> *Patel Maniben Vallabhbhai's article, Ame Bap Dikri, Sardar Shatabdi Samarak Granth-1, Gujarati Section, Editor, Jashwant Shekhdiwala, Sardar Patel Uni, Vallabhvidyanagar, 1976, p.-91.*

<sup>12</sup> *Yagnik, Indulal, Autobiography, Vol-2, Publisher, Arunaben Mehta Memorial Trust, Vadodara, 2011, p.-39.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid, p.-40.*

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children, they need to stay within the four walls, if they pay attention to such things, what will men do?<sup>14</sup> The situation in Ahmedabad was completely different. Women were more active in their rights. The Ahmedabad Women's Home Rule branch also decided to send a delegation to the province for women's rights and to draw the attention of the government to amend the Mumbai Municipal and Local Acts that prevent women from becoming members of parliament.

Vallabhbhai presented an important proposal in the General Assembly of Ahmedabad Municipality. In this proposal dated 13 March 1919, the Sardar stated: 'No woman can become a member of a municipality because of section 15(1)(c) of the Bombay District Municipal Act. If half of the population of the society is women then such a discriminatory law cannot be changed? I know that the municipality does not have the power to change the law. If all the municipalities demand to change the unjust law, surely the government will be forced to reconsider. So you fellow members will support. This proposal of Vallabhbhai was welcomed by all the members and passed unanimously.<sup>15</sup>

On 24 April 1934, a women's organization named Jyotisangh was established in Ahmedabad. Gandhiji's purpose behind establishing this organization was to awaken the power of sisters and join them in the freedom struggle. Jyotisangh sisters go to the homes of the poor and city women turn to villages, poor uneducated women and built a bridge. But Sardar Vallabhbhai did not like the structure of Jyotisandh at all.

Sardar Vallabhbhai stated to the clairvoyant Mridulababen that 'yet yesterday the fact that a woman died after drinking poison. If you have heard, then do what any other women's association has to do. The program of picketing, liquor ban, burning of foreign cloths etc. cannot run the women's

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<sup>14</sup> Qadri, Rizwan, *Sardar Patel Ek Sinhpurush*, Gurjar Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 2003 p.- 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p-54.

movement or else merge into Crogress.<sup>16</sup> In short, Sardar Vallabhbhai wanted to say that there are many women's problems in the society, such as the place of women, injustices done to women, rape, dismissal, divorce, which goal will Jyotisingh achieve? As a result, Khadi Mandir, a creative program branch, was born. From the above statement of the Sardar, we can understand how much he was concerned about the issues and problems of women.

Girls education started in the city. It is true but the situation was opposite in rural areas. When the government conducted a survey of rural schools in Gujarat in 1924, limited, very few schools were in villages. The surprising thing was that there was not a single girl student in these limited number of schools.<sup>17</sup> Vallabhbhai was aware of this situation. Through the establishment of Vitthalakanya Vidyalaya in Nadiad, arrangements were made for the girls of the surrounding villages to get education. Sardar used to keep an eye on the activities of this organization when he came to know that the organization has to take loans to run it. Then on 18 April 1947, he told Ravjibhai Manibhai Patel that, 'The condition of having to run the school with loans is considered unbearable. You should leave all other work and devote yourself to this work only to get rid of the financial crisis.<sup>18</sup> For the work of girl education to be done well, the organization should be financially strong. All efforts were made by Vallabhbhai. Sardar Patel gave time to time advice on the work being done by ashram schools in tribal areas.

Wherever he got a chance, in the meetings of the national struggles, he gave guidance to remove the superstitions and vices prevalent in the society, opposed the practice of child marriage, welcomed remarriage by widows, condemned the backward rightists and encouraged women to take part in the national movement. In 1921, he told the farmers of Dholka that, 'if I had the

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<sup>16</sup> Mehta Shirin *loc.cit.*, p.-200.

<sup>17</sup> Desai, Neera, *op.cit.*, p.-140.

<sup>18</sup> Patel, Maniben, *Sardarshree's letters, Vol-2, 3rd Edition, 1981 Sardar Memorial Bhavan, Ahmedabad, p.-565.*

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power, I would make it a law to kill those with a gun or hang them from a tree who marries twelve-thirteen-year-old girls.’

When Sardar Patel visited Bihar in December 1929, thousands of farmers came to hear him. Sardar Patel gave speeches on the problems of Bihar like exploitation of landlords, helplessness of farmers, keeping women behind the veil, untouchability. In one of his speeches against the injustice of keeping women behind the veil, he said that, ‘you are not ashamed that you yourself are suffering from paralysis by keeping your women behind the veil? Who are those women? Do you believe that you can protect your mother, sister, wife by keeping them in the veil? What is their so much disbelief? Or are you angry because they see your slavery coming out? You have kept them like slave animals, so their children have also been like slave animals. In Bardoli, I told people that I will not do *satyagraha* if you do not allow me to meet and talk with your wife’s. The ladies understood, started coming to the meeting, and after a while women were coming to the meeting as much as the men. Go and listen to what I am saying to your friends and tell them that a farmer came from Gujarat and said that if you do not come out, we will never be happy. If I had a right, I’d tell all the women to divorce them instead of being women of such timid and coward men.<sup>19</sup> From the above speech of Sardar Patel in Bihar, we feel that it was not normal to go to other states and speak so boldly and only a Sardar could speak like this. It is not the work of today's leaders.

Sardar Patel gave people an understanding about women's awareness in many places at different times. Some of the important points are here.

1. Those who marry children of tender age in the name of *dharma* are demons.
2. Do not marry girls under the age of eighteen. There is a virgin English girl of twenty-two-twenty-five years old is sitting outside the hospital in our village. Do not put all the burden of women on young children and crush them. They are a tender flower, a blossoming bud.

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<sup>19</sup> Bhatt Siddharth Narahari, *Sardarni vicharshrushti*, pp.-127-128.



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3. It is necessary to instil confidence in women. She should attain its rightful place.
  4. Sisters! Why do you think you are weak? You are power incarnate. Is any man born without a mother? That's why you give up your inferiority.<sup>20</sup>
  5. Trust and love women, improve the behaviour of men towards women and use language with moderation and discretion. If women are treated like this, then women will give birth to brave children.

The declaration of equality in the Constitution is a great achievement for Indian women. It is true, but even after getting Swarajya (Independence), the problems of women have been solved? Women got their rightful place? Vallabhbhai had already said that the belief that the issue of women will be solved when Swarajya comes is not correct. In the progressive society of the 21st century, women are still not placed in the right place and therefore Swaraj (Independence) has not been achieved in the true sense of Vallabhbhai's vision.

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<sup>20</sup> Gupta, Vishwa Prakash And Gupta Mohini, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, *Vyakti aur vichar, Radha Publication, New Delhi, 2006 pp.-211-213.*