



SMT. HANSABEN MEHTA: NEW INDENTITY TO INDIAN WOMEN

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Historiographic trends suggest that autobiography, biography etc can be help to understand contemporary environment and society. Smt.Hansaben Mehta (1897-1995) has been recorded as significant reformist, social activist, freedom-fighter, educator and women writer in India. Her life sketch refers her to be daughter of Shree Manubhai Mehta, who was a Professor of Philosophy in Baroda College latter he served as Diwan of Baroda and Bikaner state. Smt.Hansaben Mehta's paternal grandfather, Nandshankar Tuljashankar Mehta, was the first to write a Novel in Gujarati. Being as Nagar Brahmin she married to Dr. Jivraj Mehta, who was from Vaishya community, this marriage led to huge uproar and resulted ex-communicated by her community¹. In 1918, after completing graduation with honors in Philosophy from Baroda College, she left the following year for England to study Journalism and Sociology. Here she met Sarojini Naidu and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur that turned her life, inspired by these two ladies and her husband she joined the freedom struggle. Being a social activist she started work as a member of the committee for Bombay Municipal Schools and also served as the President of the "Bhagini Samaj". During the campaign against the Simon Commission she play crucial role by picketing shops selling foreign goods and liquor, also went to jail in 1930 and 1932. She was also elected as member of Bombay Legislative Council in 1931 and also became president of AIWC in 1945-46 and latter became member of constitutional assembly. She also served as a secretary to the National Council for Women and was also President of the All India Women's Conference². In international arena, she served as Vice President of the International Alliance for Women and also represented India in the Joint Human Rights Commission and working committee of UNESCO³, but her major contribution was in the field of education as vice chancellor of SNDT University from 1946-48 and The M.S University of Baroda in 1948-56. She researched and wrote 20 books focusing on the problems of women and children, 16 of them in Gujarati. She also translated into Gujarati some of Shakespeare's plays and parts of Valmiki's Ramayana. Many Universities conferred on her the honorary degree of D.Litt, in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the development of education in India; and also awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 1958.

Smt. Hanshaben Mehta believed that social condition of women in India underwent a tremendous change during the time of freedom movement, before that she did not have independent status of their own and entirely depend ended on men for everything. She believed that educational backwardness was one the reason of their backwardness and this educationally backwardness of women due to social evils like child marriage, purdah etc. unless these evils were removed, there was no hope for their advancement⁴. Educational reconstruction or advance is not possible unless there is concurrent social reconstruction. The only remedy here therefore was to introduce compulsory education and the prevention of child marriage. Strict measure should also be taken prevention of child marriage as otherwise the enforcement of compulsion will be very difficult. In the all India women's conference held in Poona in 1927 under the President ship of H.H. the Maharani Chimnabai Gaekwad of Baroda, she introduced

a resolution for the prevention of child marriage by fixing the age of marriage for boys and girls. Her plea was that it would be difficult to plan a programme of education for girls unless one knew how long the girl would remain in school, As a result of this Sir Harbilas Sarada introduced a bill for the prevention of child marriage in the Central Legislature and latter on this became an Act⁵.

Smt. Hanshaben Mehta was also not in favor to separate educational problems from social problems and believed that education was the key to progress and unless Indian woman were educated they would not be able to enjoy their rights. She stands for the freedom and equality with men. Equality however was not mean identity but equality for opportunity. If freedom and equality are the basis of human development, women must be entitled to share them with men. There should no disability attached to her sex. Men and Women are to society what the two wheels are to chariot and both are equal importance⁶.

Smt. Hanshaben Mehta believed that being as woman without education it is not possible for anyone to understand her responsibility. We must lay great emphasis on the right of every woman to be educated. We must demand the removal of all kinds of barrier which obstacles of women education. She also believed that present education system was not fit for the all-round progress of women. There were one or two things however that must be made clear with regard to women's education. It would have to be type of education that helps the fullest development of women's personality and trains her to be useful member of society. All the aspect of human personality – intellectual, physical emotional and spiritual must be given free scope for development, she believed that today education is one sided it tries to develop the intellectual side⁷. Even then the way education was imparted and the foreign medium employed in the in the higher stages has not helped to develop it fully. There was a great deal of bookish knowledge, but real thinking was rare therefore we should have to change both the medium as well as the method of imparting knowledge if we desire men and women to be original rather than imitators. She also argued that emotional side was also neglected in the country. She believed that in our country also our present degeneration and anti social tendencies were not a little due to the lack of education on spiritual side, if this is not properly nourished it creates a vacuum in the mind which gets easily filled with superstition or false ideas of religion or some other kind of "ism" which leads to further complications⁸.

This Great Lady also believed that economic measure which has come in the way of women's education was poverty of her parents. They cannot afford to spend on their children's education and when they have to choose between the education of their sons and daughter, they prefer to send their sons. Parents did not think that education was necessary for a girl in order that she may fulfill her function as a wife and a mother. She believed that apart from this the conception that woman is not required to earn is not quite correct, even if a woman marries, she may become a widow and if she was not educated may find herself in a very helpless position or she may be called upon to supplement her husband income

which insufficient for the needs of family. Successful introduction of free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 will no doubt accelerate the pace of women's education⁹.

Smt. Hanshaben Mehta had also argued for co-education at all stages, primary, secondary and higher, belief which is unfortunately not shared by everyone in this country. According to her two kind's people who are against co-education, one kind of people opposes it purely from an orthodox point view their belief that the members of the opposite sexes must be kept apart¹⁰. Then there was second kind of which argue against co-education on psycho physiological ground, She believed that one -not take the view of the first kind of people seriously because they are orthodox people who believe in the segregation of sexes thought out life, but for the second kind of people has to be considered with due respect because these people are not opposed to co education altogether but only during the adolescent period and the question therefore is whether there is any scientific truth in the objection raised by them¹¹.

After education she gave much importance to the health of women. Every woman should have facility to maintain and protect her health. She wished woman to be physically fit so that she may enjoy life, she may be able to shoulder the responsibility of a mother and bring forth healthy children and be able to do work which would require continuous physical or mental strain. Physical training has become an important part of an educational scheme¹². Physical strength gives the women confidence in herself and she was able to move about freely without fear.

The Belief of Smt. Hansaben Mehta was that society has not given much importance to work as housewife. She works from early morning till late at night, an average housewife hardly enjoys rest or holiday and yet this work is not considered of value in that it was not productive and bring no return in the form of money, it was the one of the reason why there was growing dislike among educated and more awakened women for this kind of work and prefer to seek careers outside home. It is time that the importance of this work is recognized and the condition of work also improved, besides this the housewife should have a right to a part of her husband income.¹³

She also believed that every woman shall have right to leisure. With exception of very few women belong to the upper rich in this country; the Indian woman did not enjoy much leisure. She also believed that the woman should become self reliant. The present belief that a woman was not to required to earn was mistaken Even if she was placed in circumstances in which was not necessary for her to earn it was always desirable for women to feel herself economically independent¹⁴. It was her economic dependence that has brought her down to the present state, it was therefore necessary for her to learn some art or take up some professional training.

Smt. Hansaben Mehta was also prorogated Home science education in India, Her efforts led towards to establishment

of the Home Science faculty in Baroda University, which was the first of its kind in India, and later she played great role in the establishment of the Lady Irwin College of Home Science in New Delhi. She believed that home science was very much misunderstood in past. It did not mean only cooking, washing, and sewing, but it was more than that. It means education centered on the home, home means food, shelter, clothing, children, family and environment. Home Science education was closely related to life. The aim of this education was to improve the conditions of home life and make out homes centers of a happy cultured life. Environments play an important role in the life of man

She also played crucial role in drafting the Hindu Code Bill. Earlier the Hindu Code bill was drafted by the committee under the chairmanship of Sir B. K.Rao to revise Hindu Code. The Hindu code bill as prepared by this committee was far from satisfactory, that why she pointed out defects in a meeting at Kolhapur, it was only after India became free that the Hindu code bill was introduced in the parliament, there was strong a oppose of this bill. Few members wanted to change inheritance of girls in family property. While there were other who did not object to giving a share of family property but were against dissolution of marriage, some of them felt that the code bill was broken up into separate bills on "Hindu Law of Marriage and Divorce" and on "Hindu Law Succession" it would be impossible to make any headway, so letter on she met with the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to consider this proposal, this was letter done and it was in 1955 that the two bill on "Hindu Law of Marriage and Divorce" and "Hindu Law of succession" were passed¹⁵. Under this new Hindu code polygamy is forbidden and divorce allowed under conditions same for both men and women. The Hindu women acquires her property right on same basis as man, she succeeds to her father's property equally with her brother and holds it in her absolute right. She also played crucial role in forming of charter of Indian women's right. In her presidential address to the Hyderabad session of A.I.W.C in 1945, she had mentioned the various disabilities of Hindu women which needed to be removed and the desire to improve women's status. At her suggestion the conference decided to prepare a charter of Indian women's right. The committee was appointed under the chairmanship of the late Raj Kumai Amrit Kaur and Smt. Lakshmi Menon as members to prepare draft. She also met Gandhiji with Raj Kumai Amrit Kaur and prepared draft. Gandhiji also instructed that the charter should include not only rights but duties as well as¹⁶. The standing committee of the A.I.W.C accepted drafts at its meeting in Calcutta in July 1946, since then though the Indian women's particularly the Hindu women, have made remarkable advance politically and socially, much remains to be achieved.

In short, Smt. Hansaben Mehta played pivotal role in the movement for emancipation of women. Today the women of India enjoy rights, privileges, facilities etc, are very largely due to persistent efforts of this great Lady and women during that-time

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