



GANDHI'S VIEW ABOUT UNTOUCHABILITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Untouchability is a 'direct' product of the caste system. It is not merely the inability to touch a human being of a certain caste or sub-caste. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people that relates to a deeper psychological process of thought and belief, invisible to the naked eye, translated into various physical acts and behaviors, norms and practices. The problem is of great amplitude and has various facets that are studied and researched time and again. Several forms of untouchability have been identified, many of which are apparently free India's additions to the list. From time immemorial Dalits have been deprived of their right to education and the right to possess land and other forms of property. Left with nothing but their physical labor to earn their livelihood they have all along been forced to do the toughest and most menial jobs for survival. Apart from the denial of access to public roads, tanks, temples and burial/cremation grounds there are other forms of untouchability. While untouchability is still rampant and is taking new forms particularly in villages, the constitutional ban and compulsions of modernity and development have to some extent blunted its rigor. Rail transport has been unifying forces in society. Although all state governments claim that they have abolished manual scavenging reports reveal that this practice is very much alive in many places. Postmen have also been found to practice untouchability.

For Gandhiji, the change had to come primarily in the hearts of caste Hindus. He staked his life for retaining the Scheduled Castes within the Hindu fold. Gandhiji wanted political freedom before the rights of various classes could be secured.

INTRODUCTION

The disease of untouchability is fairly old in our society. It generated social hatred and discriminatory feeling of high and low, and as a result of it later category suffered for centuries in the hands of the former. Time and again, ceaseless efforts were made by social reformers to alleviate the status of downtrodden and bring them to a level by which they could breathe and subsist with some confidence in the society. This was, however, a most complex problem the complete or satisfactory solution of which could not be evolved in spite of efforts by prominent personalities including social reformers, educationists and political leaders of our society.

For example, Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Nanak, Dayanand Saraswati and others played their social and religious role at one time or the other. Besides numerous socio-religious reform movements had deep linkage with the cause of the untouchables who were labeled as a serious stigma on the fair name of Hinduism.¹

Untouchability originated in India around 400 A.D. It arose out of the struggle of supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism. It has molded the history of India. During the pre independence era the untouchables were used to be called as depressed class. The origin of untouchability is an enigma. It is generally held that it is perverted outcome of the caste system. The Rigvedic people knew no caste system, but the later vedic people divided themselves for different occupation of labour and according to aptitude, capacity and liking of the individual. Those who took to learning were called Brahmins and those who took to governance were called as Kshatriyas and those who resorted to trade were called Vaishyas and those who served the forgoing three classes were known as Shudras. The result was that the original four divisions became watertight compartments and degenerated later into the present caste system. The untouchables were from the lowest strata of the Hindu society.

Gandhi was highly grieved about the caste system that characterized Indian society. But it was untouchability that particularly pained him. Whole the life, he worked hard at eradicating this heinous practice from its very roots. Gandhi thought caste system to be a social evil, but untouchability was a sin. All his life, Gandhi worked for untouchables. Gandhi worked relentlessly to elevate the social status of the untouchables in India. He wanted penance for crimes of discrimination that have been perpetuated for thousands of years as he wanted society to work hard to relocate the untouchables on an equal footing with the other members of society.

Gandhi supported his conception of absolute equality on the basis of the metaphysical philosophy of non-dualism, according to which, essentially, all the people are aspects or mode of the some spiritual equality. From his young age, Gandhi claimed to have sentiments against untouchability and he would argue even with his mother when she would practice it in her own life and actions.² He said repeatedly that he wanted to be born as an untouchable and to experience their pains and agonies and make efforts for the eradication of this great evil.

Gandhi was not much interested in historical research, he, to some extent, subscribed to the view that section of Hindu society which practices beef-eating and carrion-eating was degraded to the condition of untouchables because orthodox looked with great horror and beef-eating.

According to Gandhi, untouchability as it is practiced in Hinduism today, is a sin against God and man and is therefore, like a poison slowly eating into the very vitals of Hinduism. In his opinion, it has no sanction whatever in the Hindu Shastras taken as a whole. Gandhi helped the untouchables who were working independently for the upliftment of their own people.

Untouchability of a healthy kind is undoubtedly to be found in the Shastras and it is universal in all religions. It is a rule of sanitation. That will exist to the end of time but untouchability as we are observing today in India is hideous. It has degraded both the untouchables and the touchables.³ Gandhi said that swarg is a meaningless term, if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjection, and deliberately deny to the fruits of national culture. We are seeking the aid of God in this great purifying movement, but we deny to the most deserving among his creatures the rights of humanity.⁴

The untouchability is an old institution, nobody has ever denied. But if it is an evil, it cannot be defended on the ground of its antiquity. There is untouchability even amongst untouchables merely demonstrates that the evil cannot be confined and that its deadening effect is all-pervading. The existence of untouchability amongst untouchables is an additional reason for cultured Hindu society to rid itself of the curse with quickest dispatch.

Untouchability in its extreme form always caused Gandhi so much pain, because he considered himself to be a Hindu of Hinduism saturated with the spirit of Hinduism. As Gandhi always regarded it as an excrescence in Hinduism, he had even no hesitation in renouncing Hinduism itself. To remove untouchability was a penance that caste Hindus owed to Hinduism and to themselves. Thus the purification required was not of untouchables but of the so called superior castes. Gandhi believed in the technique of change of heart⁵ of hindu orthodoxy but in his philosophy, the change of heart meant doing penances on the part of the leaders of Hindu orthodoxy, because this sin of the institution of untouchability was existing on the basis of the support of orthodoxy. He wanted the orthodox leaders to come forward and fraternize with the untouchables.

Gandhi regarded caste as "drag upon Hindu progress" and untouchability as an "excrescence upon varnashrama". The untouchables were denied even the ordinary facilities of life.⁶ In some part of India, especially in the south, not only was untouchability practiced on a vast scale but unapproachability and invisibility too. Gandhi dedicated his entire life to the services of harijans, the untouchables. Gandhi called Harijans as man of God and always kept in view their special plight which he endeavored to uplift by devising schemes for a change in their status. He identified himself with them, calling himself a harijan. He undertook the work of a scavenger and stayed with them in Delhi and Bombay in 1946.⁷

Gandhi was in favour of the opening of all temples to the harijans. His contribution to Vaikom Satyagraha, which was intended not to get the temples opened for the free passage of untouchables, was an eye-opener to all India. His subsequent work in connection with Guruvayoor king of Travancore to proclaim the opening of all temples under his control for worship by untouchables and unapproachable.

Gandhi was absolutely devoted to the total eradication of untouchability. He received the word Harijan for the untouchables which was originally used by Gujarati Saint Poet Narsi for the Antyjas. His own ashrama was absolutely free from the taint of untouchability.

Gandhi said, "I do not want to be reborn. But if have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts leveled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, prayed that, if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra, but as an Atishudra."

For Gandhi broomstick was a symbol of revolution. He was of the opinion that society devoid of equality and brotherhood could never reach the state of revolution. Such a society can never fight against slavery. He believed that the Valmiki are the most downtrodden even among the Dalits. They occupy the same place in the society which the mother occupies in the family. He said:

By treating removal of untouchability as an Ashram observance, we assert our belief, that untouchability is not only not a part and parcel of Hinduism, but a plague, which it is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat. Every Hindu, therefore, who considers it a sin, should atone for it by fraternizing with untouchables, associating with them in a spirit of love and service, deeming himself purified by such acts, redressing their grievances, helping them patiently to overcome ignorance and other evils due to the slavery of ages, and inspiring other Hindus to do likewise....

Removal of untouchability means love for, and service of, the whole world, and thus merges into ahimsa. Removal of untouchability spells the breaking down of barriers between man and man, ultimately leading to unity of all beings. We find such barriers erected everywhere in the world, but here we have been mainly concerned with the untouchability which has received religious sanction in India, and reduced crores of human beings to a state bordering on slavery.'

Gandhiji stood for Sarvodaya but the journey must start with antodaya. He was never moved by the feeling of pity rather he was driven by a strong sense of duty. That was also true of his work for the harijans. That is why in his scheme of constructive programme, harijan seva occupied a central position.

OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the current world social scenario.
- To find an answer to the present social problems of untouchability by addressing the causes.
- To view the world through Gandhi's beliefs and writings.
- To understand Gandhi's concept of removal of untouchability.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on secondary data. Information has been collected from various books, journals and reports.

CONCLUSION

The main problem in India today is to build a social, political and economic system which will gratify the major national goals. Nation building activities in India require that the lowest and the humblest must receive equal opportunities of recruitment, socialization, mobilization, participation and involvement in the political system with every other citizen. The Gandhian approach to the problem would demand that there should be no discrimination and no inequality. Towards the end of his life, Gandhi favoured marriages between the Harijans and the high caste Hindus. This Gandhian idea, if it materializes would be a step to end the iniquitous system which has been the shame of Indian society for long centuries. It is a satisfaction, however, to find that there is no legal disability of any kind today in India in the path of the political and economic development of untouchables. To that extent, a tremendous forward step has been taken. Complete integration, however, would be a burning problem for the future.

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