

CASTE AND SOCIAL CHANGE : THE GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The caste issue has always been on the forefront of our national politics. Whereas the controversial announcement of the implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations by the then Janata Dal Government opened the Pandora's Box, the electoral triumphs of many political parties such as Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (United), Janata Dal (Secular), Lok Janshakti Party, etc. during the last 2-3 decades have opened up new vistas for the possible caste-centred politics at least for the next few decades. The caste-centred electoral politics, however, is not a new phenomenon. Its roots can be traced back to the historical Pune Pact in 1932 in which reservations were made for the untouchables for assembly elections. With the advent of independence and adoption of universal adult franchise, a new phase began in the history of caste. Universal franchise opened the immense possibilities of securing political power for the majority middle castes who were earlier denied their legitimate share of power. At the same time, attempts were made for social reform and to remove the evils of caste-system such as untouchability. But the mechanisms such as Reservation Policy, whose aim was to give due economic and educational benefits to the lower-castes and thereby to ease the clutches of the caste-system in the long run, were later on abused and misused for political purposes. Moreover, these mechanisms did not prove sufficient and capable enough to bring about the desired social change. On the contrary, it intensified the social and political tensions in our society.

What was Gandhi's standpoint on such an important issue? What was his strategy to cope with this problem? How has it been received or reacted to by other leaders and by the people? It must be granted that his standpoint on this issue has become an issue of controversy due to some seeming contradictions in his views. On the one hand, for example, he supported the caste-system based on perfect Varna-System or perfect division of skills. On the other hand, he strongly criticized untouchability. As a result of this, he was severely attacked by both the radicals and the lower caste leaders on the one hand and the conservative Hindu Sanatanists on the other. Whereas the lower caste leaders called him a 'great hypocrite', and late Shri Kanshi Ram, the founder President of Bahujan Samaj Party, went to the extent

of rejecting Gandhi as the Father of the Nation, the conservatives saw in him a threat to the very survival of the Hindu religious and social order.

The controversy has inspired me to explore what really was Gandhi's standpoint on this issue. What I intend to do in this paper is to highlight Gandhi's views and opinions on the caste issue. The truth, in my opinion, lies somewhere in between the two extremes, and I shall try to argue that Gandhi's moderate approach is more useful in resolving the present social and political problems revolving around caste.

The caste system, often referred to as 'the steel frame of Hindu social order', has existed for several centuries providing basic structure to the Indian society. Though there is no unanimity regarding the origins of the caste system, it is generally agreed upon that its four main divisions – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra – were originally occupational, not essentially hereditary nor immutable. Over a period of time, the system suffered from degeneration by acquiring excessive rigidity, became completely hereditary, and was victimized by various kinds of customs and taboos. It created a hierarchy of social status with the Brahmins at its top and the Sudras or the outcastes at its bottom. The outcastes or the untouchables, who were engaged in the menial tasks, became the victims of ruthless oppression and systematic exploitation by the upper castes so much so that they were denied even basic human rights.

A voice of protest was raised against this inhuman and unjust system first of all by the saints like Nanak, Kabir and Chaitanya in the mediaeval period, and then by social reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, Dayananda Saraswati and V. R. Shinde in the 19th century.¹ From the 1870s onwards, the Indian leaders began to complain against the authoritarianism and racism of the colonial government and demanded social and political equality. But then, they came across the irony that they were denying the same thing to large masses of their won people – the outcastes or the untouchables. Hence, the then Indian leaders were rather forced to tackle the problem of untouchability without any further delay. However, there were three different opinions about how to tackle the problem and, hence, three different modes of action.² Some leaders like Bankim Chandra, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Bipin Chandra Pal, Tilak and Aurobindo Ghose decided to argue from within the Hindu religious framework and tried to fight the conservatives with their own weapons. Some others like Surendra Nath Banerjee, Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahatma Phule and Wyomesh Chandra Banerjee followed the basic principles of European liberalism and argued that untouchability was inhuman,

unjust, against the fundamental equality of all men and denied basic human rights. Leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai, Rama Iyer, Bhulabhai Desai and Savarkar gave attention to the political dangers of untouchability saying that it had become a moral obligation and a political liability. Gandhi's comprehensive approach against caste – system was unique in itself and assimilated many of the above-mentioned arguments.

Gandhi challenged the scriptural basic of untouchability saying that it is mentioned nowhere in the sacred texts like the Vedas, the Upanishadas and the Gita. Untouchability, he said, was a 'perversion' of the originally sound Varna System. He also said that "Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is harmful both to spiritual and national growth."³ Being a champion of individual liberty and equality, he could not tolerate the hierarchical structure of caste-system and criticized it in the strongest possible words. He was wise enough to notice the political significance of the caste issue and, therefore, put it on the national agenda and launched a nation-wide campaign against untouchability.

It is generally argued that Gandhi did not reject the caste-system in toto and, in the name of reforming it, he tried to maintain a kind of status quo. Though the early writings of Gandhi seem to confirm this argument, the charge does not contain a whole truth. A dispassionate analysis of his writings would show that he was humble enough to change his views on caste when he found that they were inconsistent with the principles which he believed to be fundamental. In other words, Gandhi's social ideas, like that of his economic and political ones, also underwent a process of evolution.

It is well known that Gandhi was highly influenced by Hindu philosophy and his implicit faith in the fundamental principles of Hinduism prevented him from rejecting any of the essential things of Hinduism. Since Varna System, according to Gandhi, was one such essential thing of Hinduism, it was difficult for him to reject it. He defended it in these words: "Varnashrama is, in my opinion, inherent in human nature, and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science. It does attach to birth. A man cannot change his Varna by choice. Not to abide by one's Varna is to disregard the law of heredity."⁴ He, however, tried to clarify the relationship between Varna and Caste and also between Varna and birth. He said, "I regard Varnashrama as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present ideas of caste are a perversion of the original. There is no question with me of superiority or inferiority. It is purely a question of duty. I have indeed stated that Varna is based on birth. But I have also said that it is possible for a Shudra, for instance, to become a Vaishya. But in order

to perform the duty of a Vaishya he does not need the label of a Vaishya. He who performs the duty of a Brahman will easily become one in the next incarnation.”⁵

But when he saw that the existent caste-system was defended in the same of Varnashrama and his defence of Varnashrama was interpreted differently, he declared unmistakably that “Varnashrama of the Shastras is today non-existent in practice. The present caste system is the very antithesis of Varnashrama. The sooner public opinion abolishes it the better.”⁶ When asked whether he believed in the superiority of Varna, he categorically said, “No, not at all, though I do say Brahmanism is the culmination of the other Varnas, just as the head is the culmination of the body. It means capacity for superior service, but not superior status. The moment superior status is arrogated, it becomes worthy of being trampled under foot.”⁷

Similarly, Gandhi, in his early age, defended the caste system which left the impression that he was conservative in this respect. In 1920, he said, “I am one of those who do not consider caste to be a harmful institution. In its origin, caste was a wholesome custom and promoted national well-being.”⁸ It seems that while defending the caste system, Gandhi had the original four-fold division of ancient times in his mind in which he saw many merits.⁹ And he concluded that “Caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration.”¹⁰

Gandhi subsequently came to realize the inherent defects of the caste-system. It divided the Hindu society into innumerable groups and sub-groups and fostered hostility and suspicion among themselves. Its excessive rigidity and limited range of social contacts left no room for scientific knowledge and progress. And above all, it defended and promoted untouchability. This led him to say that ‘the innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better.’ He also said that “Varna has nothing to do with caste. Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the name of Varna.”¹¹ He made it very clear that “I do not believe in caste in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap in progress.... A sort of hierarchy has been evolved in the caste-system. Assumption of superiority by any one person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, so far as it connotes distinction in status, is an evil.”¹² His anger with the current form of the caste-system led him to declare that “Hinduism does not believe in caste.”¹³

Let us now see how have Gandhi's ideas been received or reacted to by lower-caste leaders and by eminent scholars. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar called Gandhi 'a social reactionary' and said, "Mr. Gandhi may be taken to be not in favour of caste. But Mr. Gandhi does not say that he is against the Varna System. And what is Mr. Gandhi's Varna System? It is simply a new name for the caste system and retains all the worst features of the caste system."¹⁴

Dennis Dalton observes: "Above all, Gandhi sought, in so far as it was possible for a moral reformer in India, to promote social harmony and not to provoke abrupt change with violent consequences... there is little novelty in Gandhi's position on caste. Except, that is, for the element of style ... The admixture of continuity and innovation ... always characterized his style..."¹⁵

According to Dr. V.P. Varma, "The defence of the Varnashrama is not a conservative apology for traditional social system... Gandhi was a reformer through and through but he did not like to give a rough handling to social patterns for the sheer delight of novelty and social experimentation... It appears that with the passage of time Gandhi's historicist conservatism slightly yielded place to some kind of radical social equalitarianism."¹⁶

Gunnar Myrdal maintains that "When it came to the social aspects of caste and the status of women, Gandhi was an uncompromising radical leveler and never more so than in his later years. Throughout his life Gandhi was adamant in his condemnation of untouchability. It is true that in preaching an all-embracing, tolerant syncretism he sought to defend a purified and functional caste system as a means of social organization. But he was opposed to the caste system as it existed in India."¹⁷

A good deal of controversy also prevails regarding Gandhi's strategy to deal with untouchability and casteism. It is argued that he didn't pay his full attention and energy in a concentrated manner to the cause of eradicating untouchability as he did for some other issues. Doubts were raised even for his integrity and commitment to the issue of caste. As the Bahujan Samaj Party leader, Mr. Kanshi Ram, observed, "What has Gandhi done? He fought tooth and nail against the interests of the downtrodden people. In September 1932, he went on fast against reservations. Later it was propagated that Gandhi was responsible for reservations. He was a great hypocrite, to my mind."¹⁸ Another charge leveled against Gandhi is that he considered eradicating untouchability as the duty only of caste Hindus and did not

make the untouchables a 'party' to his campaign. It made the outcaste people rather passive and dependent on the caste Hindus for their emancipation, prevented them from organizing themselves to give united fight against their oppressors and also hindered the emergence of a strong indigenous Dalit leadership. In the words of Prof. B.C. Parekh, his campaign "gave the Harijans dignity but not power; moral and, to some extent, social but not political and economic equality; self-respect but not the self-confidence to organize and fight their own battles."¹⁹ The radicals also argued that his approach was too soft and attention was paid more on eradicating untouchability rather than eradicating the caste system.

Though some of these arguments sound appealing and convincing, they do not contain the whole truth. First of all, it must not be forgotten that apart from the problem of untouchability, Gandhi had many other equally, if not more, important problems to be tackled. He was excessively involved in fighting the greatest imperial power of the world. Hence, in spite of all his good intentions, he could not devote his time and energy to it beyond a limit. His commitment to the cause of eradicating untouchability is evident from his statement 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."²⁰ And who else but Gandhi would be more worried about the rights of the untouchables? While opposing the idea of separate electorate in the Second Roundtable Conference in London, he stated unambiguously that "We do not want on our register and on our census untouchables classified as a separate class. Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Muhammadans, so may Europeans. Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? ... If I was the only person to resist this thing, I should resist it with my life."²¹ And he did resist it at the risk of his life when the Communal Award was announced in August, 1932.

The charge that Gandhi prevented the outcaste people from uniting themselves and hindered the emergence of their own leadership seems baseless. On the contrary, it was he who encouraged Nehru to appoint Ambedkar as Law Minister in his 1946 Cabinet and then to continue in free India's first Union Cabinet.²² He did criticised the militant activities of the outcaste people as it was against his life-long cherished principle of non-violence. Not only Gandhi but, I am sure, anyone of us would ever like such militant and aggressive approach. As against this, Gandhi launched a nation-wide campaign against untouchability and came out with a number of constructive programmes for the upliftment of the untouchables. It gave them a measure of dignity and self-confidence and the courage to stand up for their rights. It is due to his life-long efforts that the independent India was confident enough to abolish untouchability by a single stroke of pen. Thus, Prof. B. C. Parekh has rightly observed that "The Sanatanists were right to see him as their most deadly

enemy, and Ambedkar was wrong to question his commitment and enormous contribution.”²³

The argument that Gandhi was interested only in eradicating untouchability rather than caste itself also needs to be analysed carefully. The circumstances under which he was conducting his campaign were unique and restricted his options. As mentioned earlier, the most important task before him at that time was to gain India's freedom and he was not prepared to do anything that would undermine India's nationalist forces. From the 1930s onwards, the problem of communalism was one of the greatest hindrance to India's nationalist movement. A sizeable number of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians had left the Congress. Under the circumstances, his direct attack on caste system would have raised new tensions between the caste Hindus and the outcastes. This would have certainly undermined our freedom struggle. Hence he decided to attack caste-system indirectly by launching a campaign against untouchability. He was confident enough that his campaign would undermine the caste system in the long run. Jawaharlal Nehru clarified this point in 1956 in these words:

“I spoke to Gandhi repeatedly : why don't you hit out at the caste system directly? He said that he did not believe in the caste system except in some idealized form of occupations and all that; but that the present caste system is thoroughly bad and must go. 'I am undermining it completely,' he said, 'by my tackling untouchability.’

You see... he had a way of seizing one thing and concentrating on it. 'If untouchability goes,' he said, 'the caste system goes.’”²⁴

It is, thus, quite clear that Gandhi's opposition to the current form of caste system was equally strong to that of untouchability. What prevented him from launching a direct attack on caste itself were perhaps the strategic considerations dictated by the then prevailing circumstances.

There is still a long way ahead to go. In spite of Gandhi's life-long untiring efforts and in spite of abolishing it by constitutional provisions, untouchability still exists in different forms in almost every part of the country. Harijans still remain socially oppressed, are denied basic human rights and are punished brutally for giving the slightest offence to caste Hindus. The cases of atrocities against the Dalits are increasing throughout the country.²⁵ Naturally, this has increased the feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction among the Dalits and roused anger and bitterness in their minds. They have now become aware about their rights and will not hesitate to

grab them if not given in a just and peaceful manner. The time has come to pay due attention to their grievances and problems and to launch wide-ranging constructive programmes for their upliftment, failing which they will not hesitate in overthrowing the existing order as a Dalit poet, Shankar Limbale, says in these words :

I do not ask
for the sun and moon form your sky,
your farm, your land,
your high houses or your mansions.
I do not ask for gods or rituals,
castes or sects.
Or even for your mother, sisters, daughters.

I ask for my rights as a man.
you give me my rights.
or else

I will uproot the scriptures like railway tracks.
Burn like a city bus your lawless laws my friends!
My rights are rising like the sun.
Will you deny this sunrise? ²⁶

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