



THE ROLE OF MAHATMA GANDHI IN EXTERMINATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The world is beset with numerous social problems including maltreatment, inequity, subordination, carnage and slavery etc. The scenarios of Indian social problems are relatively different from other lands or societies. The most vulnerable practices adopted by Hindus social system and discriminated people basing on their social conditions and social status. The Indian society strongly stratified and controlled under the four fold caste system. The out caste people called as chandalas or panchama caste and treated them as untouchables. Since the ancient times it was prevalent in every part of the Indian sub-continent. The untouchability defined as the discrimination of certain caste people and their inhuman treatment based on their caste system. According to my understanding the untouchability was not a problem if anyone belongs to upper caste happened to be touch or share eatables or using water with the untouchables, and then the upper caste fellow was supposed to purify themselves by taking a holy bath and perform some ceremony. It was somehow better, but there were some other susceptible and intolerable acts prevailing in caste system i.e. panchamas were unseekable, unshadowble and untalkble etc, so where is the life to survive them.

Mahatma Gandhi stated that the practice of untouchability is a leper wound in the whole body of Hindu politic. Gandhi was named Dalits as Harijans which means children of God and in 1933, he agitated movement against social discrimination and aimed at gaining socio-economic, political upliftment and social justice for downtrodden people in the society. In 1932 September, Gandhi went on a fasting to protest against segregation of untouchables and started a journal Harijan in Yeravda Jail. Then many Hindu leaders get together and discussed the alternative electoral arrangement agreed for approval of British Government. In 1933 November, Gandhi was dedicated himself to campaign against untouchability and conducted country wide tour to educated the orthodox Hindu community. After the intense great effort of the national leaders especially the Indian Constitution supported the abolishment of untouchability. Now it is formulating laws against practice of any discrimination and it considered to be one of the most dreadful social crimes.

Key words: Discrimination; Dalits; Untouchability; Orthodox; Harijan; Constitution; Upliftment, Vulnerable, Discrimination, Abolishment.

“No real progress is possible in the society unless and until the practice of untouchability is rooted out and millions of so called untouchables are made free from virtual slavery and serfdom.”

--M.K. Gandhi

The so called untouchables have been suffering the stigma of untouchability followed by servitude, illiteracy and grinding poverty. Eventually, the founding father of the Constitution of India, who visualized a society based on justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, provided inter alia, for the abolition of untouchability (The Constitution of India, Article 17 Act.). On the other hand the practice of untouchability which goes directly in contrast with the constitutional ideal, divides our society into touchables and untouchables (Dr.Kshir Sagar R.K,1986). Untouchables' as a name generically applied to persons in the lowest classes of Hindu society is relatively of recent origin. It first appeared in print in 1909. Gandhi used the word 'Harijan' or Children of God, for the poor depressed untouchables of India. The word 'Harijan' was first used by the great Saint Narasinha Mehta, a Nagar Gujarati Brahman, who defied the whole community and claimed the 'untouchables' as his own.

The term 'Harijans ' for the untouchable classes was popularized by Gandhi and for many years he himself used 'untouchables', 'Panchmas', 'Antayaja' (the last born) and 'Bhangi'. But in early 1930s Gandhi began to publicize the 'Harijan' meaning 'Children of God' as part of propaganda against untouchability. In his writings he always used Harijans as the name signifying 'untouchables'. He proclaimed that view that the caste system had to be abolished since it was contrary to basic, elementary, moral and religious principles and positively harmful to the spiritual and moral growth of the nation (Ray. B.N, 2008). Gandhi stated that, birth and observance of forms can not determine one's superiority and inferiority and he strongly displayed his opposition to it in relation to his recognition of the imperfections and weaknesses of Hinduism, and his conviction that if untouchability were to be considered an integral part of the Hindu way of life, he would have to stop calling himself a Hindu. Untouchability is prompted by the spirit of social aggression and the belief in purity and pollution that characterizes casteism. It is generally taken for granted that dalits are considered polluted people at the lowest end of the caste order. Untouchability is present in nearly every sphere of life and practiced in an infinite number of forms. It is in this sense a corollary of the caste system, and the only way to get rid of it seems to be to get rid of the caste system itself (Dr.Kshir Sagar R.K,1986).

Gandhi wrote, The untouchable has toiled, the moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we are delighted in suppressing him. Gandhi made a clear distinction between a Harijan and a Durjan. Our own fellow beings have become 'untouchables' because of evil in us. Indians were 'untouchables' in South Africa and suffered all insults much in the same way as the 'untouchables' in India suffered at the hands of their own brethren. The issue of untouchability assumed a truly national dimension after Gandhi offered unqualified support to the Vykam Satyagraham. In March 1925, he went personally to Vykam, addressed public

meetings. The satyagraha bore fruit and, in January 1926, the Travancore government announced the opening of the public roads around the temples to the untouchables. At its Karachi session in March 1931, the Congress adopted the Resolution on Fundamental Rights drafted by Gandhi. Relevant sections of it constituted a legal attack on the institution of untouchability. It necessarily indicates the relations between the caste Hindus at one hand and the so called untouchables on the other. Untouchability as a relational phenomenon implies the strained relations between these two groups of touchables and untouchables. The most orthodox caste Hindus observe "touch-me-notism" (Bushman L.I and Sinha, 1996). the less orthodox but more jealous observe "notional" untouchability, and the intermediate castes forming land owner class resort to caste prejudice and atrocities. Untouchability is described as a sin, blot, curse and stain imposed on a group of people by another group of people. It has sustained a number of jolts, but it is unimpaired. It is a basic and unique feature of the Hindu social system and order. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people. It is a spirit of social aggression that underlies this attitude". According to the L. Elaya Perumal Committee, "untouchability is not a separate institution by itself; it is a corollary of the institution of the caste system of Hindu society. It was stated by P.R.Thakur, one of the Hon'ble members of the Constituent Assembly itself that untouchability is nothing but the symptom of the disease, namely, the Caste system. It exists as a matter of caste system. According to Hutton, untouchables had to work between midnight and day break and were not allowed to come out during the day time because the very sight of them was polluting. It is necessary that we 'first cast out the beam of untouchability from our own eyes before we attempt to remove the mote from that of our "masters" (Ray. B.N, 2008).

As a politician, Gandhi said: "Swaraj is as unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity" (Young India, 1920). He said, "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born as untouchable so that I may lead a continuous struggle against the oppression and indignities that have been heaped upon these classes of people" (Young India, 1921). Gandhi was well aware that it was merely a political settlement achieved partly as a result of his fast and only the beginning of the end of the untouchables' travails in order to better organize the campaign for the amelioration of the untouchables' condition, Gandhi set up a new body in October 1932. It was first named the All India Anti-Untouchability League and later renamed the Harijan Sevak Sangh. In early February 1933, Gandhi, brought out a weekly journal called Harijan. The chief purpose of the magazine was to carry out propaganda work for the removal of untouchability.

According to Gandhi, the practice of untouchability was "a leper wound in the whole body of the Hindu politics". He thought that the Harijan had also a right to lead a Social life of dignity and self-respect. He said, "The practice of untouchability is a heinous crime against humanity and divinity". His motivational role was in the struggle of untouchability eradication in India. Gandhi inherited the position of the Congress party on untouchability first recorded in a resolution in 1917 which urged upon the people of India, "the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed upon the depressed classes"(Ramesh Chandra and Sangh Mitra, 2003). The Congress passed a resolution in 1917 to abolish untouchability and Gandhi saw 'the removal of untouchability as a most powerful factor in the process of attainment of Swaraj (The Young India, 1921). Gandhi supported the 'Temple Entry Bill' introduced in the Madras Legislative Assembly, but ignored his own

promise of fasting in order to facilitate the entry of untouchables into the Guruvayur temple in Kerala (Vasant Moon). Gandhi was who wrote and spoke most on the removal of untouchability.

Gandhi's abhorrence of untouchability and his association of such practices with the sweeper caste, appear rooted in childhood experience. A scavenger named Uka, an 'untouchable', used to attend our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why it was wrong to touch him. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering contact with Uka as sinful" (Ramesh Chandra and Sangh Mittra, 2003). Gandhi, in the beginning did not consider the practice of inter-dining and inter-marriage essential for the removal of untouchability. At one time I did say that inter-dining was not essential part of the campaign for the removal of untouchability. Personally, I was for it. Today, I encourage it. In fact, today I even go further." (Harijan, December 8, 1920, p. 4). Gandhi feels so strongly about the inequity of untouchability that he expresses the desire, should he not attain moksha, or liberation from the realm of *samsara*, to be reborn as an untouchable in order that he might identify himself with their sufferings and sorrows. Gandhi was strong and vigorous opposition to the practice of untouchability within the Hindu way of life. "He was not content with passively accepting the fact that it was a crime; he actively opposed it and sought to undermine it by means of satyagraha since it was contrary to truth and to his conception of the ideal social order (Ray. B.N, 2008).

While Gandhi was imprisoned in Yeravda jail in 1932 he undertook a fast on behalf of the untouchables and opposition to caste expressed itself also in his attempt to abolish the caste labels that Hindus applied to themselves. Gandhi described the Yeravda Pact, which was reached on 24 September after hectic negotiations, as "a generous gesture on all sides". He relates the question of untouchability to his basic beliefs concerning truth, *ahimsa* and *sarvodaya*. 'Removal of untouchability means love for, and service of, whole world, and it thus merges into *ahimsa*.' The immorality, injustice, inequality, inhumanity and soul-destroying nature of the practice of untouchability were vehemently opposed by him. While Gandhi's opposition to untouchability was consistent and un-compromising, his attitude to the caste system of which it was a morbid growth seemed to be marked by a certain ambivalence in the early years after his return from South Africa. He wanted to reform the individual for the reformation of the society, as the individual is the integral part of the society.

It had been said that Gandhi wrote and spoke more about untouchability than any other subject. Many of his statements about it are available in a series of topical volumes issued by his publishing house in Ahmedabad. The one that appeared within his lifetime are entitled "The Bleeding Wound (1932), "My souls Agony" (1932), and "Untouchability" (1944). Those published after his death – "The Removal of Untouchability" (1954) and "For workers against Untouchability" (1954). For Gandhi, the good of the individual is reflected in the society and he is the starting point of the social regeneration and he was opposed to the traditions and customs, of the Hindu society as they are meaningless and irrational. Untouchability is an inhuman institution in the Hindu society. He raised his voice against this inhuman practice, as it is an outrage of human dignity." Gandhi believed in the spiritual oneness of all life and his crusade against untouchability and his leadership of the Indian Independence movement were based on ideals of social and political justice (Kripalani, J.B, 1970). He was of the opinion that the people who are talented will have more advantage to earn more. Though he was always conscious

of the fact that exclusive institutions for the sake of the untouchables' immediate benefit, he was prepared to recommend exclusive institutions for their proper education and training.

The untouchability offences act, 1955, enacted in pursuance of this principle of the Indian Constitution, abolished the practice of untouchability and it is proclaimed in Article 17 the principle of equality to all citizens, irrespective of caste differences. Gandhi viewed the problem of untouchability as basically a religious and spiritual one. He saw the movement to eradicate untouchability as "a sacred ritual self-purification" as he considered the untouchables as an integral part of the collective Hindu self. He was quite sure in his mind that untouchability would be removed, when majority of Hindus realized that it was a crime against God and were ashamed of it. Gandhi worked out for equitable distribution and referred to the Marxian definition 'to each according to his need. He considered it as the real definition of economic equality and stated that equal distribution of wealth could be brought about through non-violence. One of the major difficulties in any analysis of his attitude towards untouchability, class and caste must be his inconsistency in many areas and appears to have been fairly consistent in that he rejected. He continued to play with an untouchable boy even though his mother had forbidden it after in South Africa he associated with untouchables and had untouchable friends and clients. Gandhi even lodged an untouchable in his own home it from childhood. An untouchable family was admitted to the ashram and Gandhi adopted their daughter Lakshmi as his own.

He was also begun cleaning toilets which were the work of untouchables. His disciples voluntarily emulated him so there were no untouchables in the ashram since all did the work of untouchables. This disregard for traditional Hindu mores was reinforced by Gandhi's rule that "food and water should always be handled and therefore polluted, by untouchables. Thus no one could live at the ashram who would not give way at least slightly on the orthodox taboo." Gandhi said little publicly on untouchability until he had begun to take action against it himself. In 1928 Gandhi urged untouchables to clean up their habits and to caste Hindus he asserted, "this blot untouchability poisons the whole caste system, even as a drop of arsenic would poison a tankful of milk." Gandhi regarded untouchability as an "inhuman boycott of human beings" and thought that its removal was a prerequisite for the attainment of home-rule. He once said, "If it is proved to me that untouchability is an essential part of Hinduism for one would declare me an open rebel against Hinduism itself." As far as Gandhi was concerned untouchability was not a part of early Hinduism and he regarded untouchability as a corruption of Hinduism (Jolly,S.K. 2006).

At that time Gandhi's position was a very orthodox one and subsequently his attitude was to change completely. In 1927 his son Devadas fell in love with the daughter of a Brahman and asked to marry her. At first Gandhi objected to the inter caste marriage. Eventually the two fathers agreed that if their two children still wished to marry after five years then they would allow them to marry. In his search for the pure essence of Hinduism, Gandhi seems to have concluded that class, caste and untouchability are in fact no part of Hinduism or were perhaps only temporary measures to prevent the disintegration of Hindu society (Jolly,S.K. 2006). By 1946 Gandhi was saying that he hoped for a classless and casteless India and his final hope for a classless and casteless India reflected his religious strivings towards ahimsa and the realization of unity, both of which he saw as being

essential prerequisites for the realization of 'Truth'. A group of caste Hindu leaders came forward; who with the help of the leaders of the depressed classes hammered out a political agreement known as the Poona pact which dissolved the system of separate electorates for the untouchables (Trilok Nadh, 1987). Gandhi declared his determination to root out the untouchability. The agony of the soul is not going to end until every trace of untouchability is gone. Again, "..... I shall undergo as many fasts as are necessary in order to purify Hinduism of this unbearable faint" (Trilok Nadh, 1987). He declared categorically that "Harijan service will be always after my heart and will be the breath of life for me, more precious than the daily bread (Trilok Nadh, 1987). After his release from jail, Gandhi shifted his whole attention towards the removal of untouchability and launched an anti-untouchability movement on national level. It is a self-evident fact that untouchability, a most venomous evil of Hindu society, has dehumanized a sizeable section of humanity, called untouchables.

The victims of untouchability suffered a lot due to the stigma of it including oppressive and degraded status and it even marred the progress of the nation to a great extent. Therefore, it had been vehemently opposed by many socially conscious persons including saints, social reformers and political leaders in the past: Eventually, it was abolished under the constitution of India, which came into implementation on 26th Jan, 1950. Gandhi's special concern for untouchables also improved their style of living. He taught them principles of hygiene, social manners and how to do their work less wastefully. He combated their insanitary habits and organized distribution of soap among them on a large scale. Thus, in spite of the fact that removal of untouchability and the elevation of the Depressed Classes by means of education and economic development had been there in the platform of social reformers for some time, it is true to hold that vitality was imparted to the movement only by the efforts of Gandhi (Kripalani J.B. 1970). In the year 1936, in the issues of Harijan there was an exchange of views between Gandhi and Ambedkar on three concepts - chaturvarnya, caste and untouchability. Gandhi requested Ambedkar to send a message to be published in the first issue of 'Harijan'. Ambedkar sent the message which started the controversy between the two champions of the untouchables' cause. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar about their views on caste and untouchability is the testimony of deep differences about the problems of the depressed classes between the two great persons. Ambedkar opposed Gandhi to a greater extent. He argued that without destroying the caste system there can be no upliftment of the untouchables.

Dr. Ambedkar, since he blamed Hinduism for social inequality, he believed in conversion of religion. Gandhi reacted by saying, "The great wrong under which he has labored and perhaps the bitter experiences that he has undergone have, for the movement, warped his judgment... I do not mind the untouchables, if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity...."(S.R. Sharma, 2006). Dr. Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for the untouchables. Gandhi declared that he would resist it with his life. "I say, it is not a proper claim which is registered by Dr. Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the untouchables. It will create a division in Hinduism."(S.R. Sharma, 2006). Gandhi did not appreciate Ambedkar's demand, and declined to accept that the untouchables were a community separate from the Hindus. The Poona Pact represented a victory for Gandhi as it was accepted that untouchability was 'a social' and not 'a political problem'; and that it was a problem of Hindu religion and not of the Hindu economy. Untouchability is abolished by the Constitution of India

and enforcement of any restriction, disabilities or limitations on the ground of 'untouchability' is an offence punishable by law (N.K. Bose, 1972). Gandhi said that "the caste system is a hindrance, not a sin but untouchability is a great sin and crime and he considered it as a stain on humanity and began to question the practice of untouchability and firmly believed that ultimately the removal of it depended on the change of heart of millions of caste Hindus. Gandhi instigation Anti-Untouchability League, was founded on September 30, 1932, which on December 9, 1932, was converted into the 'Harijan Sevak Sangh'. It was to work for the social, economic and educational development of the untouchables. In January-27, 1935, Gandhi addressed a meeting organised under the auspices of All India Harijan Sevak Sangh in Delhi. He spoke at the meeting of central assembly members. In his speech he urged removal of untouchability by legislation.

Gandhi was against Ambedkar's attempts at extricating the untouchables from the Hindu framework. In 1920, he considered untouchability to be a heinous crime against humanity, and an arrogant assumption of superiority. Gandhi also rejected the scriptural authority that untouchability claimed to have and before he came under the Christian influences in South Africa, when he was yet a child, he used to laugh at his mother for making him bath if he touched any untouchable. Then in Durban he was prepared to turn Mrs. Gandhi away from the house because she would ill treat Gandhi could endure to be separated from the entire world besides, but not from Maganlal, Gandhi's nephew. He too packed up his things. On Gandhi's suggestion, Maganlal and his family went to Madras and learned more of weaving from an untouchable for six months. They mastered the art of weaving and after mature consideration also washed their hearts clean of untouchability his untouchable friend Lawrence (CWMG, C.F. Andrews, 1921). When in 1925, Gandhi asked a temple trustee that it is fair to exclude a whole section of Hindus, because of their supposed lower birth, from public roads that can be used by non-Hindus, by criminals and bad characters, and even by dogs and cattle?, the temple trustee replied in the negative that, they are reaping the reward of their karma. "Okay!", said Gandhi and asked whether they (the untouchable) are worse than even criminals and beasts?... the trustee replied again, they must be so, for otherwise God would not condemn them to be born untouchable (Zelliot-1972). In 1938, Gandhi prayed and requested others to pray that untouchability get perished. If this doesn't happen, it is far better that Hinduism perished (D.G. Tendulkar, 1962).

The radical difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar in viewing the problems of the untouchables and in advancing solutions to these problems can be appreciated better with the help of two statements, one by Gandhi and the other by Ambedkar (Trilok Nadh, 1987). According to Ambedkar Gandhi merely contented himself with sermons on untouchability. Gandhi's programme for removal of untouchability was merely words not followed by any action. Gandhi and Ambedkar had differed on the issue, In 1932 Gandhi went for a "fast unto death" in prison to protest against the 'separate constituency' proposal and practice of untouchability. His fast was ended after a compromise was worked out with Ambedkar, this initiatives led to opening of public road and temples etc., for Harijans or untouchables. Gandhi termed untouchability as a 'hydra - headed monster'. Not all the stories told in the Puranas are good. There are some most dangerous also. According to Gandhi it is not necessary to follow even all the sinful activities executed by the characters of Puranas. The fact that there is untouchability even amongst untouchables reveals its all pervading effect. Gandhi viewed that the occupation of untouchables was

not only desirable but a necessity for the well-being of the society. He did not believe in the mere removal of physical untouchability, but in the removal of all distinctions of superiority and inferiority attaching to birth. Gandhi had launched a struggle to root it out completely from the social face of India. He opined in an article authored by him in 1920 that “Without the removal of the taint of the practice of untouchability, *Swaraj* is a meaningless term”. Gandhi never reconciled himself with untouchability and according to him" untouchability was an excrescence. Gandhi's unique weekly” Harijan” commenced publication from February 11, 1933, from the Yeravda Jail.

Despairing of getting social justice within the Hindu social order, he declared in 1935 that he would call on the untouchables to leave the Hindu fold and seek conversion to some other religion as the only means of escaping caste tyranny (M.K. Gandhi). He said that the movement to give the untouchables free access to all public things etc., was sheer tokenism and that Gandhi's offers did not go beyond this. Gandhi and Ambedkar tried to work together in the All-India Anti-Untouchability League, formed immediately after the conclusion of the fast with Gandhi then propagating a new term for untouchables that of Harijans or 'people of God' the body was soon renamed as The Harijan Sevak Sangh." Gandhi launched a major campaign in 1933-34 against the practice of untouchability, touring India in person to put pressure on caste Hindus to open access for the untouchables to public wells, tanks, roads, schools, temples and cremation grounds. The state and central governments and the NGO's also must adopt some programmes like untouchability eradication awareness programmes in each Indian village. It is true to accept with Sharad Pawar said;

"I must, however, admit that vestiges of untouchability are still surviving in rural areas. It is the village which is stills this unit of our administration and it is there that our future work lies."(Vivekananda).

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