



Reviews of Gandhi's Views on Caste, Casteism and Untouchability

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Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, at Porbandar, in the present-day Indian state of Gujarat. His father was the dewan (chief minister) of Porbandar; his deeply religious mother was a devoted practitioner of Vaishnavism (worship of the Hindu god Vishnu), influenced by Jainism, an ascetic religion governed by tenets of self-discipline and nonviolence. At the age of 19, Mohandas left home to study law in London at the Inner Temple, one of the city's four law colleges. Upon returning to India in mid-1891, he set up a law practice in Bombay, but met with little success. He soon accepted a position with an Indian firm that sent him to its office in South Africa. Along with his wife, Kasturbai, and their children, Gandhi remained in South Africa for nearly 20 years. Revered the world over for his nonviolent philosophy of passive resistance, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was known to his many followers as Mahatma, or "the great-souled one." He began his activism as an Indian immigrant in South Africa in the early 1900s, and in the years following World War I became the leading figure in India's struggle to gain independence from Great Britain. Known for his ascetic lifestyle—he often dressed only in a loincloth and shawl—and devout Hindu faith, Gandhi was imprisoned several times during his pursuit of non-cooperation, and undertook a number of hunger strikes to protest the oppression of India's poorest classes, among other injustices. After Partition in 1947, he continued to work toward peace between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi was shot to death in Delhi in January 1948 by a Hindu fundamentalist. Mahatma Gandhi's views on caste and casteism can be understood from Gandhi's personal practices with regard to caste restrictions and religious obligations; how community life in Gandhi's different ashrams was organized, since it reflected the basic principles of Gandhi's philosophy of life and can be seen



as an extension of his own practices and some explanations that are generally put forward to clarify some of Gandhi's writings in which he explicitly defends and validates caste, Varna, and some of its restrictions. While Gandhi's opposition to untouchability was consistent and uncompromising, his attitude to the caste system of which untouchability was a morbid growth—seemed to be marked by a certain ambivalence in the early years after his return from South Africa. He was very much moved by their social distress and started a nationwide movement to remove their disabilities. Gandhiji's Campaign against Untouchability: Gandhiji who regarded untouchability as a blot on Hinduism wanted to do away with it completely

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GANDHIJI'S VIEW ON CASTEISM

He regarded untouchables as. Shudras and not as the Panchamas or fifth Varna or Avarna. Hence he sincerely felt the need for bringing about a basic change in the caste structure by uplifting the untouchables and not by abolishing the caste as such. He appealed to the conscience of the people to realize the historical necessity of accommodating the "Harijans" by providing them a rightful place in the society. Gandhiji had much compassion for the Harijans. He said: "I do not want to be reborn. But if I am to be born, I would like to be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows and sufferings." He was of the opinion that the practice of untouchability was a moral crime. He said that "if untouchability is not wrong, then nothing in the world is wrong." He believed that a change of heart on the part of the Hindus was essential to enable the social and cultural assimilation of Harijans.. He wrote in 1920 "... Without the removal of the taint [of untouchability], "Swaraj" is a meaningless term." He even felt that the foreign domination of our country was the result of our exploitation of almost one-sixth of our own people in the name of religion. He advocated positive means for the uplift of Harijans. He addressed various public meetings reposing doctrines of Harijan welfare. He led several processions of Harijans with other upper caste people and made them participate in "poojas, bhajans, keerthans and puranas". He believed that opportunities of education and temple entry would reduce social inequalities between Harijans and caste Hindus. He launched movements for cleaning Harijan residential areas, for digging wells for them and for similar other beneficial things. Gandhiji wrote in



“Young India” in April 1925. “Temples, public wells and public schools must be open to the untouchables equally with caste Hindus.” He started two journals, ‘Harijan’ and ‘Young India’ through which he advocated his ideas. He started an ashram where people of all castes and creeds could come and stay without any differences. Gandhiji served the “Harijan Sevak Sangha” started by the social reformer Takkar Bapa in the year 1932 for working out the religious and social welfare of the Harijans. The organisation opened schools and dispensaries in various places and arranged for free educational facilities and scholarships for Harijan children.

Political Role of Gandhiji: As a much respected political leader of the masses, Gandhiji could never ignore the tasks of the removal of untouchability and upliftment of Harijans. Gandhiji entered the Indian freedom struggle in 1919. From 1920 onwards, under the leadership of Gandhiji the Indian National Congress became committed to get the independence on the one hand and to the removal of untouchability on the other. In 1920 itself, he declared that “Untouchability cannot be given a secondary place in the programme” of Congress.

Protest against the Proposal of Separate Electorate for Harijans: Gandhiji was very much against the British policy of “divide and rule”. He condemned the British policy of separating the Harijans from the rest of the Hindu. Hence he protested against the proposal of creating separate electorate for the Harijans. He said to Ambedkar who was in favour of the proposal, that “the political separation of the untouchables from the Hindus would be suicidal to the nation.” Gandhiji declared at the Minorities Committee of the Second Round Table Conference in London [1932] that “we do not want the untouchables to be classified as a separate class. Sikhs may remain such in perpetuity, so many Muslims and Christians. Will the untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? I would rather feel that Hinduism died than that untouchability lived. I will resist it with my life.”

EFFECTS OF CASTEISM

On the one hand, Casteism serves to further the interest of a small number of individuals. On the other hand, it is proving harmful to the nation as a whole. Casteism hinders the growth and development of nationalism. It has divided Indian Society into a large number of groups and sub-groups. There is also division in the same caste. Very often there occurs both inter-caste tension



and intra-caste tension which lead to national disintegration. Casteism poses a serious obstacle in the functioning of democracy. Many of the professional politicians exploit Casteism and at election time ask the people to vote for them on caste considerations and they also succeed in their evil designs. Even illegitimate and immoral practices are resorted to in securing the interests of one's own caste. By promoting narrow loyalties, Casteism has weakened the modernization of the polity. By retaining outmoded caste cohesion, Casteism has stood in the way of the building up of a secular society. Casteism has a lion's share in encouraging corruption. Inspired by the sense of Casteism people try to provide all kinds of facilities and benefits to their own caste men. Fair play is ignored. All sorts of wrong practices are justified on one pretext or the other. The appointment to government and private services on the basis of caste has led to an increase in the number of inefficient and worthless people. Competent persons with professional expertise are neglected. Less competent people look after the whole scientific and technical activities. This amounts to colossal national loss in terms of industrial and technological advance. Casteism crumbles down the process of development. By encouraging corruption, nepotism, favoritism and blind caste loyalty, Casteism arrests the implementation of developmental programmes.

GANDHI' VIEW ON UNTOUCHABILITY

Before understanding the Gandhian approach to untouchability and how he proposed to deal with it is necessary to understand Gandhi's understanding and estimation of the Hindu caste system or *varnashram*. It is instructive perhaps to begin by studying some of his utterances on the issue remembering the fact of course that he was a declared follower of the Hindu *Sanatan Dharma*. As such he would have perhaps approached the caste division idea with a positive frame of mind at least at the beginning to try and understand its benefits. It is also of course true that like all human beings Gandhi evolved in his thoughts over the period of his life.

Writing in 1920 he somewhat defensively wrote: 'Man, being a social being, has to devise some method of social organisation. We in India have evolved caste; they in Europe have organised class. Neither has the solidarity and naturalness of a family, which, perhaps, is a God-ordained institution. If caste has produced certain evils, class has not been productive of anything less.'

Gandhi was indeed quite open in seeing positive aspects in the caste system. For instance he regarded it as scientifically organised. He commented: 'Caste system has, in my opinion, a scientific basis. Reason does not revolt against it. If it has disadvantages, it also has its advantages. It does not prevent a Brahmin from serving his Shudrabrother. Caste creates a social



and moral restraint. The doctrine of caste cannot be extended. I would restrict it to four divisions. Any multiplication would be an evil. Gandhi realised that for the cause of forging a national identity and a national spirit the leadership will have to eliminate or dilute social divisions. And one of the worst divisions unique to India was the caste divide with untouchability as its ugliest manifestation. Thus as a matter of political strategy for the cause of the freedom struggle it was an urgency to fight the caste divide and eliminate untouchability. Also as a social reformer who believed the key to national regeneration was a rebuilding of the national character, particularly the Hindu character, he saw it as a vital imperative to eliminate the evils of caste and untouchability. Also as somebody who had it as one of his goals the spiritual revival of the Hindu religion, he came to see it vital and most urgent that untouchability be eliminated and the caste rigidities diluted. But as has been explained above, as a follower of the Hindu *sanatan dharma* he never for one moment would have thought that *some* kind of caste system or varnashram can not exist or that can not be devised that would be good and for the benefit of society. He also probably in all likelihood thought it's true meaning may have been lost by Hindus over thousands of years of abuse and social degradation. He attempted to draw the contours of what would be an acceptable system to him. He commented in 1926 for instance: 'I do not believe in caste as it is at present constituted, but I do believe in the four fundamental divisions regulated according to the four principal occupations. The existing innumerable divisions, with the attendant artificial restrictions and elaborate ceremonial, are harmful to the growth of a religious spirit, as also to the social well-being of the Hindus and, therefore, also their neighbours.

Conclusion :-

After the Labor Party took power in Britain in 1947, negotiations over Indian home rule began between the British, the Congress Party and the Muslim League (now led by Jinnah). Later that year, Britain granted India its independence but split the country into two dominions: India and Pakistan. Gandhi strongly opposed Partition, but he agreed to it in hopes that after independence Hindus and Muslims could achieve peace internally. Amid the massive riots that followed Partition, Gandhi urged Hindus and Muslims to live peacefully together, and undertook a hunger strike until riots in Calcutta ceased.

In January 1948, Gandhi carried out yet another fast, this time to bring about peace in the city of Delhi. On January 30, 12 days after that fast ended, Gandhi was on his way to an evening prayer meeting in Delhi when he was shot to death by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic enraged by Mahatma's efforts to negotiate with Jinnah and other Muslims. The next day, roughly 1 million



people followed the procession as Gandhi's body was carried in state through the streets of the city and cremated on the banks of the holy Jumna River.

Gandhiji has been criticized for not recognizing Caste System prevailing as the root cause of Untouchability. Events like his opposition to separate electoral for depressed class, Poona pact etc sometimes appear doubtful but certainly his fight. Seeing the consequences of casteism I can suggest that public opinion and propaganda should be relentlessly directed against Casteism through press, radio, television and educational institutions in order that the feeling of untouchability finds no place in the minds of the people.

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