

Gandhi's Views On Depressed Classes

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INTRODUCTION

The Depressed Classes occupied a central place in Gandhi's social thought. Since childhood, Gandhi's sensitive mind was touched by the sufferings of the Depressed Classes. He was very much concerned about untouchability in the name of caste system in Hinduism. It was not Hinduism but its abuses which pained Gandhi's heart. He strongly advocated that without social and material improvement of those people who are treated as untouchables India cannot attain true 'swaraj'. Gandhi's views on the Depressed Classes and his articulation of concern for them. We will also discuss the methods suggested by Gandhi to address their problems and the varied responses to his approach.

DEFINING DEPRESSED CLASSES

Caste being considered as an integral part of the Hindu social system promoted social hierarchy and in the name of the Shastras to maintain ritual purity, a large section of the Hindu society was categorized as untouchables. who belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy and were referred as 'Achhuts', 'Panchamas', 'Antyajas', etc and they were denied access to the Hindu temples and faced religious and social disabilities. Economically, people belonging to the Depressed Classes were mostly landless laborers or engaged in menial occupations like scavenging, leather work, etc. Since the last decade of the 19th century, the term Depressed Classes came into use in official parlance. V.R.Shinde, a social reformer from Maharashtra, formed "The Depressed Classes Mission Society of India" and wrote in 1906 that 'the term Depressed Classes does not include the comparatively blessed human beings, hordes of whom are still defiantly standing outside the pale of civilization in India...' The socio-religious reform movements in India like Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, etc. tried to draw our attention to such social disabilities and appealed for eradicating the social prejudices. There was also growing awareness among a section within the Depressed Classes to assert for removing social disabilities and ask for their rightful place in society and endow

them their legitimate rights to education and government jobs. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, who was influenced by Phule's ideas, tried to explain the hollowness of the caste system and questioned the religious basis of the origin of untouchables. The efforts made by the British government to enumerate the Depressed Classes separately in the census of India and to make special provisions for their educational and material development encouraged the mobilization of the Depressed Classes in different provinces since late 19th century. The Depressed Classes started demanding representation in various legislative bodies, admission of their children in all schools, reservation in government jobs and expressed their solidarity towards the British for protection of their rights. Since early 20th century there was change in the British attitude towards the problems faced by the Depressed Classes and started taking pro-active policies to protect their interests. The Government of India Act of 1919 made provision for nomination of Depressed Classes in the provincial legislative councils. In the light of this brief background on the Depressed Classes,.

GANDHI ON DEPRESSED CLASSES

Till the emergence of Gandhi as the leader of Indian National Congress the nationalist leaders refrained from taking up issues pertaining to remove social disabilities. Gandhi, from his childhood days, was very much concerned with the removal of untouchability. In his opinion 'Untouchability has made Indians untouchables in the whole world and those who wanted to see the condition of untouchable Indians should go to South Africa and realize what untouchability meant' (Gandhi's speech at Ranchi, 17-9-1925). He was also of the opinion that without integrating the vast sections of the Depressed Classes in the Hindu society and without removing untouchability, it would be difficult to achieve 'swaraj'. 'Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen. If the lot of the Panchama is not improved, when we are all suffering, it is not likely to be better under the intoxication of Swaraj.... The Satyagraha Ashram founded by Gandhi in 1915 resolved to abolish untouchability. 'In Hinduism', Gandhi said, 'there is no sanction for treating a single human being as untouchable. In the estimation of a Brahmana knowing and living his religion, a Shudra is as good as himself. The Bhagavad Gita has nowhere taught that a Chandala is in any way inferior to a Brahmana' In place of using terms like 'untouchables', 'panchamas', 'antyaja', etc., Gandhi coined the term 'Harijan', meaning 'Children of God' because he was of the opinion that other expressions were derogatory. Gandhi brought the issue of untouchability at the centre of

Indian politics.

Although Gandhi was critical of untouchability and the restrictions on inter-marriage and inter-dining in the name of caste, he was not opposed to Chaturvarna. He argued that 'Varnas...have been sanctioned by the Shastras. Whether or not people are conscious of them, they do exist all over the world as we see. There are everywhere these four classes: one to impart knowledge of God for the welfare of the world, another to protect the people against manifold dangers, a third one to carry on the work of farming, etc., to sustain the community and one class to work for these three classes. There is no feeling of high and low to this division' Untouchability.

According to Gandhi untouchability meant a slow destruction overtaking the Hinduism. This is nothing but the disintegration which Hinduism is going through. As and when this disintegration becomes rapid and imposing, it would be difficult to restrain it. Gandhi gives his argument in the following words why do I say that untouchability is a curse, a blot and a powerful poison that will destroy Hinduism? It is repugnant to our sense of humanity to consider a single human being as untouchable by birth. If you were to examine the scriptures of the world and the conduct of peoples other than Hindus, you would not find any parallel to the untouchability I have brought to your attention just now. I can well understand a person being untouchable whilst he is performing a task which he himself would feel makes him untouchable. For instance a nurse, who is nursing a patient who is helpless and bleeding... soiling his clothes and suffering from a disease giving out from his body a foul smell, such a nurse whilst she is nursing such a patient is untouchable. But when she has washed herself, she becomes as touchable as ourselves. She is not only just as fit to move in society as any of us, but she is also adorable for the profession which she follows. She is worthy of our respect and, so long as we have ranks in our society, she must occupy a very high place amongst us."

Gandhi also gave the example of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, who belonged to the Depressed Classes but intellectually superior to thousands of intelligent and educated caste Hindus. Gandhi's argument was that the latter should not be judged because of his caste, as he deserves equal respect and dignity as any other caste Hindu for his intellectual acumen and ability.

Gandhi, one way of removing the curse of untouchability was to bring about a change in our everyday conduct. It does not express itself in enthusiastically touching an untouchable

to prove one's sincerity to remove it. Rather, the conduct should be regulated in a manner that will make it absolutely evident to them that a better day has dawned for them all.

One can easily understand as to how Gandhi tried to address the issue of untouchability without challenging the Varnashrama and its religious basis. To remove untouchability what he prescribes is a change in the social attitude towards lower castes by considering them as equal to others. His approach was to bring change in the minds of higher castes by exposing the hollowness of untouchability. His thinking was to remove the notion of untouchability without much change in the Hindu social structure.

INTEGRATING THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

In place of constitutional safeguards and legal provision for the protection of the Depressed Classes, Gandhi gave more emphasis on educating people to treat the underprivileged as equal and to allow them into temples, schools and common wells. Gandhi firmly believed that without integrating various sections of Indian people in the movement against the British, it would be difficult to achieve political freedom. In December 1920 at Nagpur, in the Annual Session of Indian National Congress, Gandhi said, 'the movement of non-co-operation can only succeed by complete co-operation amongst the people themselves, this Congress calls upon the public associations to advance Hindu-Muslim unity and the Hindu delegates of this Congress to call upon the leading Hindus to settle all disputes between Brahmins and non-Brahmins wherever they may be existing and to make a special effort to rid Hinduism of the reproach of untouchability, and respectfully urges the religious heads to help the growing desire to reform Hinduism in the matter of its treatment of the suppressed classes' In 1924, as president of the Belgaum session of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi brought a resolution asking the members to pay more attention to the needs of the Depressed Classes. The Belgaum Congress also supported the satyagrahis at Vaikom in the Travancore state where the local satyagrahis were demanding the access of the untouchables to the roads near the temple. Gandhi himself visited the place in 1925 and urged upon the local authorities to declare the road open for the untouchables. It is considered in history as the first major demonstration of the Congress volunteers for the cause of the Depressed Classes.

In 1930, when Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement, he again reminded the Congress workers that the rights of the Depressed Classes cannot be overlooked for the cause

of 'swaraj'. Many leaders of the Depressed Classes being not convinced of Gandhi's approach towards the grievances of the Depressed Classes represented directly to the British government for their rightful representation in various representative bodies. The government agreed to the demand for special electorate for the Depressed Classes. Gandhi was not in favour of special representation of the Depressed Classes because he was of the view that the problem of the Depressed Classes needs to be addressed through measures of general socio-cultural improvement. So, in the Round Table Conference in London which Gandhi attended as the Congress representative, he opposed the idea of special representation of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi wrote, 'so far as Hinduism is concerned separate electorate would simply vivisection and disrupt it. But I know that separate electorate is neither penance nor any remedy for the crushing degradation they have groaned under' Though in principle Gandhi was opposed to the reservation of seats, for the sake of a compromise with the leaders of the Depressed Classes, agreed to accept an agreement for reservation of seats in joint electorates between the caste Hindus and Depressed Classes. After hard bargaining the Depressed Classes leaders agreed to accept the reservation of seats in legislative bodies through joint electorate. Then finally in the Government of India Act, 1935 provision was made for reservation of 151 seats in the provincial legislatures.

'Unfortunately the betterment of the economic condition of peasants will not necessarily include the betterment of that of the Harijans. The peasant who is not a Harijan can rise as high as he likes and opportunity permits him, but not so the poor suppressed Harijan. The latter cannot own and use land as freely as the savarna peasant... therefore, a special organization for the service of Harijans is a preemptory want in order to deal with the special and peculiar disabilities of Harijans'

In 1932 Gandhi established the Harijan Sevak Sangh to initiate Constructive Programme for the social and material development of the Depressed Classes. The Harijan Sevak Sangh started a journal titled 'Harijan' to create awareness in society for the welfare of the Depressed Classes. Instead of adopting a confrontationist line, Harijan Sevak Sangh believed in pursuing caste Hindus for a change of heart and strongly advocated for the removal of untouchability and wanted legislation for temple entry. During 1933-1934 Gandhi travelled various parts of the country to educate people about the need for temple entry and removal of untouchability. In 1930s when he devoted himself to the Harijan movement he expanded its

scope by incorporating the village development in it. . He wrote in Harijan, ‘Some readers have taken exception to the way in which the columns of “Harijan” are being occupied with the development of the village industries scheme, and some other [sic] have welcomed the change in what they had thought was a monotony of presentation. Either opinion is probably hasty. Any problem connected with the welfare of village as a whole must be intimately related to the Harijans, who represent over a sixth part of India’s population. If a village gets good rice and flour, Harijans will benefit by the change as much as the rest of the population. But there is a special sense in which Harijans will benefit. Tanning and the whole of the raw hide work is their monopoly and economically this will occupy the best part of the new scheme’

As part of his Constructive Programme, Gandhi wanted to provide quality education to the children of the Depressed Classes so that they can stand on equal footing with the upper castes. He desired to remove the rigidities in minds considering some occupations as below the dignity. He was opposed to the idea of conversion to any other religion to get rid of the caste system. He appealed to promote cleanliness, to improve methods of scavenging and tanning, to encourage parents to send children to schools, to abolish untouchability, in order to uplift the Depressed Classes.

CRITIQUE OF GANDHI’S VIEWS

In his own times Gandhi faced strong opposition from a section within the Congress (considered as orthodox Hindus) for his approach towards the cause of the Depressed Classes. In their opinion, the need of the hour was political emancipation and once it is achieved social emancipation would automatically follow. They were also not inclined to go against the prevailing Hindu social system for the sake of integrating the Depressed Classes. They were opposed to any special provision for the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes in the legislative bodies because they believed that this would divide the Hindus. . During Gandhi’s Harijan tour during 1933-34, orthodox Hindus staged demonstrations against Gandhi in places such as Nagpur, Amaravati, Akola, Guruvayur, Belgaum, Puri, Pune, Ahmedabad, Benares, Allahabad, etc. Reporting on Gandhi’s campaign for temple entry and removal of untouchability, the official report noted: ‘As for the Sanatanists it is doubtful if Gandhi’s eloquence has converted one of them. At Poona, another centre of Hindu orthodoxy, the orthodox section of Hindus carefully avoided him. At Benares the Sanatanists

publicly burnt his portrait.’

The Depressed Classes responded in different voices to Gandhian initiatives for social and material development of the Depressed Classes. Although there were people within the Depressed Classes who found in Gandhi an advocate for eradicating the social evils, many were skeptical of the outcome of Gandhian initiatives. Most prominent among such Depressed Class leaders was Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. Gandhi tried to address the problem of untouchability without attacking the caste system and through self-purification he desired to remove untouchability. Ambedkar wanted to develop an independent identity for the Depressed Classes and to do away with the caste system. Ambedkar wrote in the first issue of Harijan, ‘The out-caste is a by-product of the caste-system. There will be outcastes as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcastes except the destruction of the caste-system. Nothing can help to save Hindus and ensure their survival in the coming struggle except the purging of this odious and vicious dogma’.

To Ambedkar, more than un touch ability it is important to understand the problems of untouchables. He was not agreeable to the Gandhian suggestion of treating untouchability as a religious question. Ambedkar was opposed to the paternalistic attitude of Gandhi and other Congress leaders towards the Depressed Classes and asserted that the Congress has done nothing to help the Depressed Classes in their struggle against the Hindu orthodoxy. He strongly advocated for special electorate for the Depressed Classes so that they have their own representatives in the legislative bodies to protect their interests. The book written by Ambedkar, ‘What the Congress and Gandhiji have done to the Untouchables’ familiarizes one with Ambedkar’s reservations about Gandhi’s prescriptions towards the problems faced by the Depressed Classes

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