

GANDHI & UNTOUCHABILITY

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Abstract

The Caste system in India is a system of Social Stratification and social restriction. At first the word "caste" is mentioned in Purusha Sukta in RigVeda. Later scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita and Manusmriti state that the four Verna's (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) are created by God. However at the same time, Gita says that one's Verna is to be understood from one's personal qualities and one's Karma, not one's birth. The Brahmins, usually priests and scholars, are at the top, next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They are followed by Vaishyas, or merchants and the fourth are the Shudras; who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans and servants. At the very bottom are those who considered the Untouchables. Those performed such as occupations that are considered unclean and polluted like; scavenging and skinning dead animals are considered outcastes. Later this evil was worsly surrounding Hindu Indian Society. Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Nanak, Dayanand and others played their social religious role to remove this evil from Hindu Society. The work of removing Untouchability was undertaken in all earnestness by Gandhi during the Indian National movement. Gandhi began using the term 'Harijans' to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage, a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes.

Keywords: Harijans, Untouchability, Verna, Caste.

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The Indian caste system is a classification of people in to four hierarchically ranked Castes called Varna. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership position in society is monopolized by a few dominant castes¹. Historically the Caste system in Ancient India defined communities in to thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called 'Jatis'². The Jatis were grouped in to four well known Caste categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. At first the word 'Caste' is mentioned in Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda) and four order of the society has been mentioned. Later scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita and Manusmriti state that the four Varna's (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) are created by God. However at the same time, Gita says that one's Varna is to be understood from one's personal qualities and one's Karma, not one's birth. The Brahmins, usually priests and scholars, are at the top, next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They are followed by Vaishyas, or merchants and the fourth are the Shudras; who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans and servants. At the very bottom are those who considered the Untouchables. Those performed such as occupations that are considered unclean and polluted like; scavenging and skinning dead animals are considered outcastes. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four Varna and never a fifth, which was used as a reason to not accept the tribal people of India³. Untouchability peoples are not allowed to enter in public temples, public schools and to use public wells. This social boycott is applied on their children also. Untouchable people are confronted with this problem in their daily life. So they are not considered to be included in the ranked classes. In some cases, the Untouchables could face criminal charges if they polluted certain things with their presence. So Untouchability became a social evil which enhance the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on account of their birth. It generated social hatred and discriminatory feeling of high and low, and as a result of it latter category suffered for centuries in the hands of the former⁴.

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. Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Nanak, Dayanand and others played their social religious role at one time or the other.⁵

The Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha was attained a great success to remove this evil from Northern India. This success was remarkable and deserved appreciation.

Hindu Indian society worsely surrounded many social evils. Women were discriminated at all stages of life. Practices of female infanticide, child marriage, sati etc prevailed in Indian society. Indian society underwent many changes after the British came to India. The British new ideas (freedom, liberty equality) resulted in to several reforms movements for the improvement of conditions of Indian Women. William Bentinck banned Sati in 1829, widow remarriage act was passed in 1856, slavery declared illegal. But proactive British policies and the attempt to extend British rule by taking over native states provoked both the Hindu and Muslim communities to participate actively in the rebellion of 1857. With the end of this rebellion, British policy towards Indian society became much more conservative. Britishers changed their reforms policy towards Indian society. After 1857 they followed Divide and Rule policy .They tried to encourage the Indian society divisions on communal bases. So Britishers would not be interested to remove Untouchability (a social evil) from Indian society. Therefore British courts had recognized this evil custom. According the British India Panel Code the entry of Untouchable in to Hindu temple would be punishable as a crime under the I.P.C. They want to take political advantages from this as they follow their “Divide and Rule” policy in India. In the name of minorities, the depressed classes were attempted to be allured by Communal Organizations especially Muslim league.

When Gandhi comes back from South Africa to his motherland in 1915, he was also confronted from this evil. So Gandhi realized that without removing this evil from Indian Hindu society, they couldn't get Swaraj. During the Indian National movement some Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi who was one of the leaders of Indian National Congress tried to encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism. Therefore the movement against Untouchability has been gathering strong. The work of removing Untouchability was undertaken in all earnestness by Gandhi⁶. Gandhi drew a sharp distinction between untouchability and Verna or caste .According to him caste system had a scientific basis. It creates a social and moral restraint. He argued that the Four Division of the Indian Hindus society defined only their duties which they perform to serve society. Therefore there is no

question of superiority or inferiority. So Gandhi condemned the Brahmins superiority philosophy. He said that a Brahmin, who regards himself as superior being born to look down upon the others caste, is not a real Brahmin⁷. We are all children of same God. God can never create distinctions among their children so 'if we are children of the same God, how can there be any rank among us'⁸. He strongly regarded that Untouchables are integral part of Hindu community and Untouchability is no part of Hinduism. Gandhi condemned Untouchability and he wrote "Untouchability is a snake with a thousands of mouths, though each of which it shows its poisonous fangs..."⁹ Gandhi criticized the conversion of Untouchables into Islam and Christianity. In 1932 the British government announced the communal award for separation of lower Hindu castes from Swarn Hindu. Gandhi strictly stated that religious bonds are matter of the heart, so it is not right that others take advantages of the helplessness of Untouchables. Gandhi warned to Swarn Hindus that they would not be able to get "Swaraj", if they did not grant freedom to the depressed classes¹⁰. Mahatma also showed great concern about the Vykom Satyagraha which organized to obtain permission for Untouchables to use certain roads round about the temple in Travancore on 1924-25. Gandhi said that temples are houses of God worship and they are for all who believe in them. Temple entry is one spiritual act that would constitute the message of freedom to the Untouchables and assure them that they are not outcasts before God.¹¹ Later Swarn Hindus have open the door of their temples for lower caste peoples on the same terms as to other Hindus. On 24 March 1933, temple entry bill was also introduced by C.S Ranga Iyer.

The All India Congress Committee has also sanctioned an expenditure of more than Rs.50, 000 for Antyaja (Untouchable) welfare activities at various places. Provincial Congress Committee devotes greater attention to the depressed classes in regard to use ordinary wells, schools and temples. Gandhi also remarked that the Congressmen had certainly done much in this matter¹². Gandhi began using the term 'Harijans' to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage, a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes.

Gandhi stated Untouchables as "Harijans" as "men of God". He advocated many devising schemes for a change of their status. He said that there should be perfect freedom for Harijans to enter public temples and public schools and to use common wells. Gandhi also recommended

specially designed model schools and temples for the use of Untouchables. Gandhi strongly stated that Harijans should not look upon themselves as lowly, weak or crippled¹³

Gandhi advocated that Harijans would get high education which enhance their academic standard and would enable them to become better citizens for India. During the period of their education the boys will be taught handicrafts like. Carding, Spinning, Weaving, Dyeing and bleaching; carpentry, Smithy or Paper making, Book binding and Ordinary Composing etc. which should enable them to earn an Independent and decent living. They will have self confidence. He expected that this education encourage these boys to serve rest of the Harijans.

Conclusion:

Thus efforts taken by Gandhi for the upliftment of Harijan's status was unique in our History. Gandhi spends his sometime in between Harijans. He taught them the sense of cleanliness. He advised them to improve their economic and social standards with their hard work and honest means. After the independence, the Indian government officially recognizes historically discriminated lowest castes of India such as Shudras and Untouchables as scheduled castes.¹⁴ Since 1950, India has enacted and implemented many laws and social initiatives to protect and improve the socio-economic conditions of Dalit population.

They were given numerous concessions in the educational institutions, reservations in government departments, ministerial positions, reserved seats in the provincial Legislatures and Lok Sabha. By doing so, the social status of a sizeable population in this community has been raised.¹⁵

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