



Gandhian View on Untouchability

Dr. Sadek Ali

*Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy
University of Gour Banga, Malda, W.B.*

Munna Khatun

*M.Phil Research Scholar
Department of Philosophy
University of Gour Banga, Malda, W.B.*

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Abstract

Among many issues of the social and political philosophy untouchability is important one. From the ancient time to till now it is a burning issue in the Indian society. Some peoples as well as some common classes are neglected in various ways like societal, economical, position in the society so and so forth. The term 'untouchable' generally means to restrain to touch someone because he or she is the lower class and the backward class of the society. In Hinduism and in Gita, peoples of the society are divided into four categories on the basis of Guna and Karma that is Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. On the other hand, sometimes we believed that the four varnas are categorized by birth. Sometimes Shudras are called the untouchable because they have the duty or karma to serve the people of the upper classes. The term untouchability, is used by various synonymous terms like choma, dalit, aspishya, achool, chandala, ati-sudra, scavenger, and harijon called by Gandhi. In contemporary Indian philosophy Dr. B.R Ambedkar and M. K Gandhi both are the reformers of the Indian society. As such human being has the value that means the ethical value, so in the ethical standpoint each and every human being has the same ethical status. They have human rights to live, equality, freedom to speech, liberty etc. But the pioneer and the reformer of the Indian society, Gandhi is trying to motivate all the peoples in educationally, ethically, politically and established a peaceful society in India. He also tried to make a fraternity society by the help of ethical and political background for the upliftment of the Indian society. I also highlighted here the ethical standpoint of

Gandhian philosophy to make a peaceful India depending on Gandhi's non-violence concept.

Key words

Untouchability, Dalit, Struggle, Suppression, Priests, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Abolish, karma, Condemn, Hindu scripture, Discrimination, Religion, satyagraha, non-violence

I. INTRODUCTION:

Verna is the criterion used to determine the status of various castes in Indian Hindu society. Verna marks the position of a race or caste in the ladder of social rank. The three upper castes of Hindu society - Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and the fourth is lower caste as Shudra. Subsequently, many other sub-castes were born based on labour. Various types of untouchability in the Hindu society originated from the sub-castes. Behind the origin of untouchability the dogmas of labor and traditional religion are connected. The lowest in terms of occupation or labor or 'neglected' occupations in the eyes of the ruling class were assigned by the then social legislators as 'Antaja' or 'Untouchables'. Although the Shudras were generally associated with low-level manual labor in society, the Shudras were not relegated to being 'outcasts' or 'untouchables'. Later, in the development of division of labour, a number of Shudras were also dragged down to the 'Antaja' stage. People who were engaged in essential and manual labor were regarded as barren and neglected in the eyes of the society. Gradually, there was no chance for their upper castes to pass higher castes in the caste category. Untouchable castes, despite being part of Hindu society, did not have a place in



the quartet. A tireless struggle has been going on in India for centuries so that the untouchables also get the social status of the Hindu society. It was Mahatma Gandhi who for the first time launched a systematic campaign against the curse of untouchability and condemned it as a blot on Hindus. Untouchability is perhaps the greatest evil that has crept into Hinduism.

Gandhiji was a devout Hindu. To him Hinduism was a way of life. After twenty one years in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1915. He founded an ashram, intended to be a model community, where he eroded the barriers of caste by inviting a family of untouchables to live alongside the caste Hindus. Gandhi opposed untouchability and criticized caste. Gandhi observed in April 1946: I have late been saying that the Hindus have to become *ati-sudras* not merely in name but in as Gandhi said: "I myself have become a *harijan* by choice... a *harijan* by birth may repudiate his Varna but now can I who have become a *harijan* by choice? I have not hesitated to suggest to caste Hindus that today they have all to become *ati-sudras*. If the canker of caste feeling is to be eradicated from Hinduism and Hinduism is not to perish from the face of the earth."

The all India congress committee which was meeting in Delhi to discuss the partition of India in June 1947 Gandhi told: "...if you do away with the distinction of *savarna* and *avarna* if you treat them *shudras*, the untouchables and *adivasi* as equals then something good will come out of the bad things... but if we oppress them and oppress those following other faiths then it will mean that we do not want India to survive, that we are out to destroy it."

He said, "The need to provide the leadership for the untouchables, to lead them before they lead themselves, energized elite nationalism to formulate the untouchable question. Gandhi, a consummate politician and visionary, captured the spirit of nationalism's response to reform in 1921. It was the story of his childhood encounter with uka, a scavenger, a story which inspired Mulk Raj Anand to compose "*untouchable*" (1935): 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. If I accidentally touched Uka, I was asked to perform ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not seemingly protesting that it should be so. I was a dutiful and obedient child, and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents. I often had tussles with them on this matter. I told my mother

that she was entirely wrong in considering contact with Uka sinful."

"Gandhiji himself denounced the practice of untouchability operating in the Hindu society and launched the anti-untouchability campaign for awakening the consciousness of the Hindus to the wrong inflicted on the harijan community.

Gandhi describes "the ideal bhangi in the harijan on 28 November 1936: The *bhangi* constitute the foundation of all services. A *bhangi* does for society what a mother does for a baby. A mother washes her baby of the dirt and insures his health. Even so the *bhangi* protects and the safeguard the health of the entire community by mainstreaming sanitation for it.

In the harijan, 18 July 1936, Gandhi writes in reply to Ambedkar's indictment to his thoughts on untouchables: Varna and ashram are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the unsterile calling. It defines our duties. It is necessarily conducive to the welfare of humanity and to no other."

M. K. Gandhi labeled untouchables as *harijans* to suit his politics in 1930s. It was said, as politician and Mahatma Gandhi sought to weave the divergent interests in India into a unified opposition to British, at that time, trying to pursue a course of reform without rending the social fabric of Indian society."

But B.R. Ambedkar demanded separate identity and separate representation in the form of communal representation in 1919. In a statement submitted to Southborough committee he demanded for communal representation to untouchables, believing that there will be no protection for the right of *dalit* in Hindu majority. Conceding the demand of Babasaheb, the British government declared "communal award" in 1932 granting separate electorate to untouchable under which the untouchables can elect their representatives from their electorate. But Gandhi opposed their separate identity and labeled them as *harijan* as part of his political strategy to strengthen the hands of Hindus and swell their political majority.

Socially they (the untouchables) are lepers. Economically they are worse than slaves. Religiously they are denied entrance to places we miscall 'horses of god'. They are denied the use, on



the same term as the caste Hindus, of the public roads, public schools, public hospitals, public wells, public taps, public parks and the like. They are relegated for their residence the worst quarters of the cities and villages, where they practically get no social service. Caste Hindu lawyers and doctors will not serve them. They are too downtrodden to rise against their suppression.

In 1933 Gandhiji started a weekly and named it *harijan*- name given by him to the untouchables. For the last twenty years since its inception the paper has been doing untiring service to the *harijans* and their cause.

Mahatma Gandhi also led the moment for the temple entry of the harijans and it was mostly due to his efforts that a number of law were passed by different states in India by which discrimination against the untouchables is made a panel offense. The Indian constitution has more than one special clause dealing with the matter. Article 15(2) of constitution says: No citizen shall on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to: (a) access to shop, public restaurants, hotels, and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of states funds or dedicated to the use of general public.

According to the article 17- untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. Article 25 empower the state to throw open "Hindu religion institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus". Article 29 provides that no citizen can be denied admission into any educational institution maintained by the state or avoided by it on grounds of religion, race, caste, or language.

Though legally the practice of untouchability is abolished, it must however, be admitted that untouchability in one form or other still exists in the villages where superstition has become a conviction and tradition, a deep rooted custom, with most of the villages and orthodox people.

Gandhi was basically a traditional Hindu spiritualist who did not see any fault in the conservative principles of the Hindu society except in its orthodoxy, which kept a large number of its members deprived and depressed. Moreover, the *harijans* were an integral part of Hindu society; their lot was inescapably entwined with that of the

Hindus. It was, therefore, necessary to make appropriate reforms in the Hindu social organization as a means of the upliftment of the harijans.

In 1922, Gandhi was a defender of the caste system. Gandhi said on 3rd February 1925: "I gave support to caste because it stands for restraint. But at present caste does not mean restraint, it means limitations. Restraint is glorious and helps to achieve freedom. But limitation is like chain. It binds. There is nothing commendable in castes as they exist today. They are contrary to the tenets of the *shastras*. The number of castes is infinite and there is a bar against intermarriage. This is not the condition of elevation. It is a state of fall."

In reply to the question: what is the way out curse of the untouchability? Gandhi said: the best remedy is that small castes should fuse themselves into one big caste. There should be four big castes so that we may reproduce the old system of four Verna.

The old Verna system prevalent in ancient India had the society divided into four orders: (1) Brahmins, whose occupation was learning; (2) *kshatriyas*, whose occupation was warfare; (3) *vaishyas*, whose occupation was trade and (4) *shudras*, whose occupation was service of the other classes.

Gandhiji explained this *varnadharma* in his '*harijan*' dated 28.9.1934: "Varna is intimately, if not indissolubly, connected with birth, and the observance of the law of Varna means the following on the part of us all of the hereditary and traditional calling of our forthfathers in a spirit of duty.

The unique characteristic of Gandhi's leadership lies in fact that he was able to carry with him all the sections of Hindu society. To the *sanatanists* he explained from the *Gita* and other scriptures that untouchability had no sanction in Hinduism. In fact he gave a long discourse discussing the essence of *shastra* and particularly that of the *Gita* to illustrate the liberal tradition of Hinduism in which he took pride. He completely won the confidence of the *sanatanists* when he declared himself a *sanatanist*. But, on the other hand, he told Ambedkar that the latter was an untouchable by birth while he himself was an untouchable by adoption. In this connection it may be mentioned that though Gandhi unambiguously rejects the notion of untouchability, he strongly supports the Verna system. He could not combine with Ambedkar who wanted to reject the Hindu social order totally. Gandhi was for mending and not for ending the system. He justified the Varna system



based on the birth with a view to maintaining balance and harmony and avoiding competitive feelings; for him it was also an effective instrument to restrict materialism.

In the *Gita*, we read that the Verna is according to 'guna' and 'karma' and not just according to the birth. The same question was put to Gandhiji also and he said: I swear by the *Bhagavad Gita* because it is the only book in which I find nothing to cavil at. The *Gita* does talk of Verna being according to 'gune' and 'Karma' but 'gune' and 'karma' are inherited by birth..... The law of Verna is nothing, if not by birth.

Gandhiji called himself a *sanatanist*. He believed in the *varnashramadharma* also but not as practiced through the ages. "I regard *varnashrama* as a healthy division of work based on birth," he wrote "Varna means – predetermination of the choice of man's profession. The law of Varna is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. Every child naturally follows the 'color' of his father, or chooses his father's profession. Verna therefore is in a way the law of heredity. Varna is not a thing that is superimposed on Hindus but men who were trustees for their welfare discovered the law for them. It is not a human invention, but an immutable law of nature, the statement of a tendency that is ever present and at work like Newton's law of gravitation. Just as the law of gravitation existed even before it was discovered, so did the law of Verna. It was given to the Hindus to discover that law, by their discovery and application of certain laws of nature. The people of the west have easily increased their material possessions. Similarly, Hindus by their discovery of this irresistible social tendency have been able to achieve in the spiritual field what no other nation in the world has achieved.

"Gandhiji wrote in *harijan*: Hinduism does not believe in caste. I would obliterate it at once. But I believe in *varnadharma* which is the law of life. The law of Verna is nothing but the law of conservation of energy. The only way with Gandhi to eradicate the evil of untouchability was the non-violent way. He does not want that there should remain or crop up any feeling of hatred or ill-will between the high caste and the low caste people. So 'the only means open for many purpose are those of ahimsa and truth.' He was a man who practiced first and then preached. He could put his ideas to practice and that he did.

Gandhi could help *harijans* only as long as they followed the path suggested by him. If they took to violent methods and left the path of truth and ahimsa, it was not possible for gandhiji to do

anything for them. He was ready to live and suffer with them quietly and patiently there was no room for violence and brute force in his constructive programme. He told the caste Hindus that it was not enough for them to hold the belief passively that untouchability was a crime. He held the priests responsible for the misery and sufferings of the untouchables.

Gandhi on the one hand, was determined to eradicate the problem of untouchability "root and branch" and, on the other hand, wanted to preserve the basic unity of Hinduism. Gandhi pleaded with the untouchables to be patient and not to give up their religion. He also prayed that the Hindus become sensible to remove the curse of untouchability from Hinduism. Abolish untouchability among them. The *Harijan Sevek Sangh* must try to secure decent living conditions for *harijans*. They must see to the proper drainage and cleaning of the *harijan* quarters, and the making of roads. They must obtain for *harijans* a good supply of water. The *Sangh* must construct for them good wells from which even the *savarnas* would be tempted to take water for themselves.

Conclusion:

Gandhi talks of the law of Varna, "the law of Verna means that everyone will follow as a matter of dharma-duty-the hereditary calling of his forefathers, insofar as it is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics. He will earn his livelihood by following that calling. He may not hoard riches, but devote the balance to the good of the people. Gandhi believed that following the law of Verna will bring society to an ideal state. He calls it true socialism. According to Gandhi, *Varnadharma* has nothing to do with numerous castes and sub-castes in Hinduism.

In my view, According to Gandhiji, every man's livelihood will be according to his predetermined occupation of his ancestors, if this happens then many new creations of the society may be stopped, many talents may be lost like a scavenger's son may engage in other profession instead of scavenger and create something new for the society. According to Gandhiji there is no need for reservation in society but I also think that society needs reservation but not on the basis of caste or race, verna, religion, particularly by identifying people who need religious, political, social, financial and educational help more and more. By helping, fraternity societies can be formed.



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