



GANDHIJI'S PERCEPTION OF LIBERATING THE UNTOUCHABLES

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Abstract

In a tradition bound society men do not readily digest the manipulating change as the modern values and institutions offer. The deliberate intervention of modernity by the alien rule for its own sake in the country had not been welcomed by the natives. As such a leader of Indian National Congress Gandhiji had to dilute the earlier dichotomies such as social V/s political reforms and secularism V/s religion so as to organize united front of divergent social interests mobilizing them against the colonial rule. Hence Gandhiji would not follow the line of rationality with regard to the social justice offered by modern values; instead he would follow the line of liberal religious idiom instead of strictly secular to resolve the problem of untouchables by avoiding the path of struggle to be undertaken by them for their own emancipation.



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The early leaders of the Congress, strictly secular in political outlook were having sympathy to the efforts for social reforms. Whereas the social reformers were believed in political and social reforms simultaneously as a path of nationalizing India towards the real end of attainment of freedom in all respect. However, the severe attack on the part of Extremists under the leadership of Tilak caused a severe blow to the efforts for social reforms. Gandhiji has avoided the struggle on social front by reconciling between social and political reforms so as to make decisive assault on Imperial rule. Gandhiji could have succeeded in diluting the earlier controversies like secularism Vs religion and social Vs political reforms. As a part and parcel of his compact socio-political policy, he undertook the programme of liberating the Untouchables so as to bring them into national stream. However, Gandhiji had to work on idealistic premises through the spiritual spirit as the Untouchability was rooted in the heart and mind of the country for centuries.

The position of Untouchables in a traditionbound caste ridden Indian society was at the lowest rung out of the pale of society; whom were denied all civil rights and human prestige by the Touchable caste Hindus. While undertaking the problem Gandhiji started to express to

his views on Varna, Caste and Untouchability since 1916. Gandhiji deeply believed in Hindu religion and its cardinal concept of Varnashrama Dharma and caste system as inherent in human nature.¹ Later on Gandhiji convinced non-association of caste with the Hindu religion and as a part of custom he regarded the caste harmful to the spiritual and national growth;² hence he divorced the caste from Varna to him the revival of Varna would promote national spirit and establish true democracy.³ As a part of unique strategy, Gandhiji wanted the untouchables' problem to be resolved within the Hindu-fold and thus appealed the untouchables to join national movement.⁴ He argued that unless the caste Hindus concede equal rights and human dignity to the untouchables, their claim for Swaraj would carry no weight.⁵ Since the problem of Untouchability was an integral part of Swaraj, Gandhiji urged its eradication on religious and humanitarian grounds. The Varna system defined the classes, not castes, to Gandhiji, which carried equal human dignity to both the Brahmin and Untouchable.⁶ Thus Untouchability has no place either in Varna or Hindu scripture. As such, despite the untouchables lacking to inherent defects Gandhiji accused the Caste Hindus for their degradation.⁷ Hence he urged the untouchables to be absorbed within the varna fold subject to avoiding inequalities that exist among their castes.

Gandhiji regarded the means like legal enactment, use of force and undertaking of satyagraha by the Untouchables to be incapable to resolve the problem of untouchability. The idea of their conversion to other religion has also been rejected by Gandhiji as it is a matter of heart and mind.⁸ and only required them to wait patiently until the hearts of caste Hindus are changed⁹ through arousing their conscience against the untouchability. Such conscience could be generated through the satyagraha to be undertaken by the Caste Hindus. The temple entry would only be the starting point in this regard rather than the materialistic well being of Untouchables.¹⁰ Gandhiji also rejected the idea of intermarrying and inter-dining for the cause and confined it to the individual level to do so.¹¹ Nevertheless, his approach had radically changed in his last phase. Now he strongly pleaded for inter-caste marriages between the Untouchables and Caste Hindus.¹² He visualized perfect equality in all walks of life¹³ and urged the need of special treatment to be given to the Untouchables for their advancement in independent india.¹⁴ His secular state required individual's commitment to the Indian soil as the test of nationality and not his religion.

Obviously as a national leader Gandhiji attached more importance to the political freedom rather than social problem.¹⁵ Since untouchability has deeply rooted in social life,¹⁶ he realized the futility of radical means to be applied for its annihilation.¹⁷ Hence, he followed the only path of arousing the conscience of Caste Hindus. Gandhiji's theory of change of

heart carried one inherent weakness that one cannot be converted into that of moral being against his own interest.¹⁸ Obviously the Caste Hindus were having their interests in the continuation of worst inhuman tradition of untouchability. He never urged the need to examine scientifically his own views, and carried on his unwavering faith in essential virtue in human nature. The Congressmen utilized Gandhian strategy against the Imperial rule as it left the only way, but they never followed Gandhiji on philosophic plane.

As the leader of Indian National Congress, Gandhiji's prime end was to unite all sections of Indian society irrespective their socio-economic differences so as to mobilize these masses against Imperial rule for the attainment of freedom. However, while formulating strategy to do so for achieving the end, Gandhiji had to cope with- i) the divide and rule policy of alien rulers, ii) the Caste ridden adamant outlook of caste Hindus over the problem of Untouchability and iii) Ambedkar's revolt against existing caste order and Untouchability that deeply occupied the Hindu society. Gandhiji was basically a politician and his social strategy was a means to that end. Hence by assuming Untouchables as a part and parcel of Hindu fold he opposed to the separate political representation for them as it was provided for other minority sections of the Indian society. As such, Dr. Ambedkar, the organic leadership of Untouchables had forced for separate electorates for his people which was granted by British rule. This was the major cause of strife between Gandhi and Ambedkar which was avoided by the agreement between Caste Hindus and Untouchables representatives at Poona in 1932. Once freedom of the country was attained, Gandhiji had fully supported Dr. Ambedkar to make constitutional document for reconstructing independent modern India on socio-economic-political plane so as to lead all Indian sections of society towards the formation of national integrity.

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