

Mahatma Gandhi as a Critique of Caste System

Dr. Braham Parkash

Associate Professor, Department of Pol. Sci
C.R. Kissan College, Jind (HR.)

Abstract: The fact is that Gandhi's influence over the masses was tremendous. The most remarkable feature of his leadership was that he was able to read and direct the movement without holding any position of power of any high office. Moreover, he always had held the high caste Hindus responsible to damage the purity of caste system or Varna system. As our ancient Varna system was based on equality and no one was superior or inferior. Every occupation was considered as equally honorable. But in the guise of religion this Varna system was exploited and damaged. Gandhiji believed that the caste system was based on scientific principles discovered by Hindustan sages after years of research and experiment and was a great monument to Hindu in genuinely and wisdom. The present research paper gives an critical appraisal of caste system by Mahatma Gandhi.

Keywords: Caste System, Varna System, Equality, Shudras, Untouchable.

Introduction: Gandhi believed that Hindu Society during the Vedic times was based on the law of Varna and ashram. According to Gandhi, this was society's predominant characteristics. These implied two things – that dharama or social conduct, according to each class of society and secondly Ashrama is according to four stages in the life of the individual. The former is called Varna dharma and the latter, Ashram Dharma. Gandhi believed that this form of social classification was purely functional and did not have any hierarchical connotations. Each of the Varnas or social classes or caste, was determined by birth and each was assigned a particular hereditary occupation with no implication of superiority or inferiority. Thus Gandhi did not consider Varna to be a man made institution but the law of life universally governing the human family.

Gandhi Ji opined while the Varna is determined by birth and a person has to observe its obligations. One who fails to do so loses his title to that Varna. On the other hand, a person though born in one Varna, but displaying the predominant characteristics of another, is regarded

as belonging to the second Varna. There is ambiguity in this analysis because Gandhi talks of Varna being determined by birth, even as he recognizes the possibility of a person being born in one Varna and belonging to another by virtue of its qualities. It means this Varna system was accurate social structure without the sense of superiority or inferiority. But later, due to the faulty practice this social structure of Varna system got spoiled.

According to Gandhi this Varna system was distorted by rigidity by high class, orthodox Hindus. As a result, the four original Varnas become subdivided into groups called Jatis or castes and people began to represent gradations of high and low. Self control which was the Hallmark of the original law was now replaced by selfishness and exploitation. Gandhi says: "We have made ourselves the laughing stock of the world. No wonder that we are today amongst the Hindus a section, which is bending its energies to destruction of the institution, which spells the reign of the Hindus.

Every Indian a Shudra: Gandhi was of the opinion that in the existing state of Hindu society, there was only one Varna left and that was the Shudra. This was because the Shudras were dependent, upon others. "**India is a dependency**" wrote Gandhi, therefore, every Indian is a Shudra under the British raj, and every Indian is dependent. Therefore, every Indian is Shudra. This is not possible that every Shastriya or Brahmin may have the virtues which the Shastra attribute to his Varna. Thus the superiority complex among the orthodox Hindus decayed or spoiled or corrupted the Varna Dharma. So Gandhi began to advocate reformed caste system. He was still in favor of its basic principles of functional differentiation and heredity occupation. He wanted the society to return to the original Varna system. He proposed that countless cast into which Hindu society divided should be regrouped on the basis of their occupational similar similarities and the old system of four varnas should be reproduced all one should be treated as equal inter dining and in some cases even intermarriage. As he put it, "The Varna system is connected with the way of earning a living. There is no harm if a person belonging to other Varna acquires the knowledge belonging to other Varna but as far as the way of earning is concerned; he must follow the heredity profession of his forefathers.

Difference between Caste System and Untouchability: Untouchability means pollution by touch of certain persons by reason of their birth in a particular family. It corrupts religion. The difference between caste system and untouchability is not one of degree but of kind. An untouchable is outside the pale of the respectable society. He is hardly treated as human being. The difference

between untouchable and Hindu was just like the difference between Heaven and a Hell. Gandhi ji was of the view that untouchability was a sin against God and man and was like a poison slowly eating into very vitals of Hinduism. He wrote: "Untouchability of a healthy kind is undoubtedly to be found in the Shastra and it is universal in all regions. It is a rule of sanitation. That will exist to the end of time; but untouchability as we are observing today in India is a hideous thing. It was degraded both the untouchables and touchables. However, Gandhi did not believe in caste system even as distinguished from Varna Ashram. This Varna Ashram has its limitation but there is nothing sinful about it as there is about untouchability. According to Gandhi it is as wrong to destroy caste because of outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or a crop because of the weeds.

The movement untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified and it will resolve itself into true Varna Dharma, the four division of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to the rest. Gandhi ji was of the view that the removal of untouchability was much more than building a temple of brick.

Untouchability: A Blot on Hinduism: Actually, untouchability is a curse and blot upon Hinduism. It is shameful to consider a single human being as untouchable by birth. Removal of untouchability means not merely touching the Harijans, but also looking up on them as our own kith and kin. It is sent to believe that anyone else is inferior or superior to us. We are all equals. It is a touch of sin that pollutes us. The distinction between high and low is a blot on Hinduism Gandhiji called untouchable as harijans means the children of God.

Gandhi's Movement Against Untouchability: Gandhi ji was an honest follower of non-violence so Gandhiji sought to change the hearts of the high caste Hindus by moral pressure. Gandhi never advocates legal measures. He always felt that all changes must come from the heart. Gandhi wanted to vanish the sin of untouchability with the forces of spirit. He called as harijans that is the children of God he tried to spread awareness against the evil of untouchability by involving the upper caste Hindus. In order to change their mind set through awareness. In his efforts to do so, he started newspaper: 'Harijan' in English, Harijan-Seevak in Hindi and Harijan Banhu in Gujrati.

He also established the Harijan Sewak Sangh devoted to the upliftment of Harijans. He conducted Harijan Tours throughout India to spread the message against untouchability and collected money for their. He lent his support to the Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala which was organized for allowing the use of the road near temple for untouchable. Gandhi's entire life was

dedicated to the cause of Harizans. His efforts were unique. He stuck at the very route of untouchability. As he wrote, "I do want Moksha. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrow, sufferings. I may endeavor to free myself from that miserable condition. If I should die with any of my desire unfulfilled with my service of the untouchable and unfinished. I may be born again amongst the untouchables to bring my Hinduism to fulfillment.

An Appraisal: Thus Mahatma Gandhi was a critique of caste system. But in the contemporary world our politicians do the politics of caste. This practice is called vote bank many political parties in India have openly and deals in caste based vote bank. Many political parties in India have openly indulged in case based vote bank. Caste influences the process of leadership recruitment. This is true in case of some States as Haryana, Bihar, UP, Tamilnadu etc. This caste system has spread just like cancer and if we want to save humanity we have to delete this damage system of caste as our ancient pure Varna system has now converted into an incurable disease which is going on diminished the humanity from this world. What breath is to life, Gandhi is to humanity and Civilization. As long as there is strife, religious unrest, internal conflict and threat to humanity, people will turn to Gandhi.

References:

- G.P. Dhawan, **The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi**, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmdabad, 1962.
- V. Tandon, **The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodya and After Gandhi**, Sarva Seva Sangh, Varanasi, 1965.
- J.B. Kriplani, **Gandhi: His Life and Thought**, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1968.
- J. Bandyopadhyaya, **Social and Political Thought of Gandhi**, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1969.
- V.P. Verma, **The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodya**, Lakshmi Narayan Aggarwal, Agra, 1981.
- R. Roy, **Contemporary Crisis and Gandhi**, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1986.
- Bhikhu Parekh, **Colonialism, Tradition and Reforms: An Analysis of Gandhi 's Political Discourse**, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 1989.

- Ved Mehta, **Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles**, Yale University Press, New Haven Press, 1993.
- A.J. Parel, **Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.
- B. Chakrabarty, **Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi**, Routledge, London, 2006.
- Anil Dutta Mishra, **Reading Gandhi**, Pearson, Delhi, 2012.
-

