

## THE CONCEPT OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY

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**“My fight against untouchability is a fight against the impure in humanity.”**

**“If untouchability lives, humanity must die.” --- M.K.Gandhi**

In the precise sense, untouchability, is the practice of banishing a underground cluster by separating them from the typical by social tradition or legal command. Untouchability is the practice of discriminating various individuals and groups based on their cast and the jobs done by them. Untouchability is practiced for a very long time. It works on the Indian caste system hierarchy. The untouchables typically stand heartless action because they fit to the lower caste. J. B. P. Fule, Shradhananda, Vivekananda, M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar etc. have been the pronounced fighters against the evil and course of untouchability. B. R. Ambedkar, the social improver, who came from a social group that was painstakingly untouchable, theorized that untouchability initiated because of the thoughtful policy of the upper-caste *Brahmanas*. According to him, the *Brahmanas* despised the people who gave up the *Brahmanas* in favour of Buddhism.

Gandhi was the most outspoken and determines prophet who carried on a protected was on the long-surviving fortress of the evil of untouchability. A new screw to the rebellion movement came in September 1932 when Gandhi, who was in Yervada jail, went on a fast as a complaint in contradiction of the separation of the so-called untouchables in the electoral preparation deliberate for the new Indian constitution. Uncharitable detractors labeled the fast as a form of compulsion, a political blackmail. Gandhi was conscious that his fast did exercise a moral burden, but the burden was focused not against those who affected with him, but against those who loved him and supposed in him. The fast documented the issues at palisade; apparently it repressed reason, but in fact it was designed to free reason from that combination of apathy and bias which had allowable the evil of untouchability, which fated millions of Hindus to humiliation, discernment and adversity.

Gandhi believed that upright at the heart of the congenital Hindu ritual, counting its caste system, it was likely to overwhelmed untouchability. In Gandhi's opinion, “untouchability is a blot on humanity and therefore upon Hinduism.” According to the Gandhi, “the caste system is a hindrance, not a sin.”

Further significant than the new electoral preparation was the emotional cleansing finished which the Hindu community had passed. The fast was envisioned by Gandhi “to sting the conscience of the Hindu community into right religious action”. The arguing of distinct electorates was only the commencement of the end of untouchability. Under Gandhi's motivation, while he was still in prison, a new society, *Harijan*. Sevak Sangh was founded to combat untouchability and a new broadsheet paper, the *Harijan*, was started. *Harijan* means “children of God”; it was Gandhi's name for the “untouchables”. Gandhi prearranged lawful preparations. He wrote—“Where there is no danger of violence being done to them, the *Harijans* should exercise their legal right and, where necessary, resort to law courts. Harijan workers must continue agitation among caste Hindus and not rest content only with mere legal rights” (*The Removal of Untouchability*, p 243).

Untouchability as at present practiced is the greatest blot on Hinduism. It is (with apologies to *Sanātanists*) against the *Śāstras*. It is against the fundamental principles of humanity; it is against the dictates of reason that a man should, by mere reason of birth, be forever regarded as an untouchable, even unapproachable. These adjectives do not carry the full meaning of the thing itself. It is a wrongdoing for certain men, women and their children to touch, or to tact within specified distances, or to be seen by those who are called caste-Hindus. The tragedy is that millions of Hindus trust in this institution as if it was ordered by the Hindu religion. Hindu improvers have withdrawn with horror from this practice. They have come to the assumption that it has no support in the Hindu *Śāstra* taken as a whole. Inaccessible texts uncertain from their background and measured by themselves can no doubt be shaped in support of this, practice, as of any evil known to mankind.

Nevertheless the caste Hindus who recognize that untouchability is a blot on Hinduism has to atone for the sin of untouchability. Therefore, *Harijans* wish temple entry or not, caste Hindus have to open their temples to *Harijans*, exactly on the same terms as the other Hindus. For a caste Hindu with any sense of honor, temple

proscription is an incessant opening of the initiate taken at the Bombay meeting of September last. Those, who provided their word to the world and to God that they would have the temples opened for the *Harijans*, have to sacrifice their all, if need be, for abiding the initiate. It may be that they did not represent the Hindu mind. They have, then, to own downfall and do the proper reparation. Temple entry is the one spiritual act that would constitute the message of freedom to the untouchables and promise them that they are not outcasts before God.

Gandhi's historic campaign for the removal of untouchability in all its forms and practices, between November 1933 and August 1934, Ambedkar occasionally took note of it as 'Dalits' today do not rejoice it; and Gandhi biographers neglect it in a few paragraphs. Yet, there is nothing in the records of Indian history to which it can be associated. Untouchability was one of Gandhi's dominant apprehensions. In both words and actions, Gandhi criticized untouchability in ways that were radical for a 'caste Hindu'. Despite being a 'caste Hindu', Gandhi recognized himself with the untouchables.

He said, "As a *svavarna* Hindu, when I see that there are some Hindus called *avarnas*, it offends my sense of justice and truth," and "if I discover that Hindu *Śāstras* really countenance untouchability as it is seen today, I will renounce and denounce Hinduism." He further said, "If it were proved to me that (untouchability) is an essential part of Hinduism, I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself." These were strong words, but the desire behind them leapt from Gandhi's soul's anguish. To live with untouchability, Gandhi said, was "like a cup of poison" to him.

Sometimes the critics of Gandhi by concentrating on a discerning reading of some of Gandhi's early writings reach a conclusion that Gandhi never conclusively rejected his belief in '*chaturvarṇa*' or the system of four *varṇas*. They breathe their thoughtful of Gandhi's concern with caste grounded on these writings and disregard his practice, which were a clear condemnation of untouchability and caste biases. Gandhi, in his personal life rejected untouchability from the very commencement and persistently made labors to eradicate it. Gandhi had held that the Brahmins and the Untouchables were alike in his eyes. He would maintain on his own family circle that no one should reflect work done by a forager as contaminating. He was publicly refusing the notion that there were "high" and "low" castes.

Meaningfully, Gandhi functioned for the ending of the caste system itself, which was responsible for the caste and other socio-economic incapacities of the Untouchables. He observed for the most actual, rapidest and the most innocuous way to destroy caste. In his effort to eliminate the caste system, Gandhi followed his usual approach of looking for the serious and also the feeblest link in the chain. Gandhi's approach over caste, fundamental Dalits have blamed Gandhi for alleged smoothness towards caste Hindus. But according to Gandhi, "Untouchability is the product, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low.... The attack on untouchability is thus an attack on this 'high-and-low' ness. The moment untouchability goes; the caste system itself will be purified...." (Harijan, 11.2.33; 53: 259-61). Light was thrown on Gandhi's thoughtful on caste and untouchability of Nehru. He told in January, 1956, "I spoke to Gandhi repeatedly: why asked don't you hit out at the caste system, directly? He said that he did not believe in the caste system except in some idealized form of occupations and all that; but that the present system was thoroughly bad and must go. I am undermining it completely, he said, by my tackling untouchability. If untouchability goes, the caste system goes. So, I am concentrating on that...." (*Revenge and Reconciliation-Understanding South Asian History*, p 253). So Gandhi made untouchability the one thing on which he focused, which ultimately exaggerated the whole caste system.

Gandhi's beliefs on untouchability were backed by the force of a lifetime of action. At the age of twelve, Gandhi had overlooked his mother's cautions to not touch Uka, an 'Untouchable', who used to spotless latrines in their house. Gandhi had then dared his mother that Hindu religion did not permission untouchability. At age eighteen, Gandhi defied caste limitations to go overseas. Gandhi was disliked for this act but he declined to perform reparation. This forte of mind continued with Gandhi even in South Africa where he permitted persons of all communities, religions, races and castes, with the 'Untouchables', to stay in his house like members of his family. Gandhi would habitually eat with people of different faiths and castes, including the untouchables. He himself never made his bread and butter by following his ancestors' calling. He also permitted his children to choose their own professions, and never pressed them to follow any chase prearranged for their caste. Moreover, Gandhi tried to master many activities that were forbidden for his caste. He himself worked as a forager, a barber, a washerman, a cobbler, a tiller and a tailor – all unclean works. He even forced his family to break pollution taboos by engaging them in shoemaking, leatherwork, cleaning of toilets – works intensely 'polluting' to the 'caste Hindus'. In fact, cleaning toilets persevered all his life. None of Gandhi's ashrams were built on the basic principle of the caste system and none of the caste boundaries were observed in his *āśramas*.

According to Gandhi, the participation of the caste Hindus was essential both for the efficiency of the non-violent mass political movement for freedom from overseas rule and for the success of the movement against untouchability. For him, not keeping in mind the feelings of the majority of the orthodox Hindus would have been hopeless. To bring about a change among the 'caste Hindus' was a critical element of his anti-untouchability programme. After all, it was the caste Hindus who were practicing untouchability. They had to change themselves. Thus, Gandhi was cautious and steady in what he demanded from the Hindu society. He understood that in his fight against untouchability, he wanted to make the caste Hindus believe that his movement was not to destroy Hindu religion but to purify it. As a result, in the early years of his initiation into the national movement, Gandhi commonly insisted on being a *sanātani* Hindu and even appeared to defend both caste and *varṇa*. Gandhi would frequently assert that he will sacrifice this life itself to uphold the *sanātana*dharma. But it is important to note that simultaneously, he defined *sanātana*dharma to be one that did not teach him to disregard or scorn the untouchables. Gandhi proceeded further in his anti-untouchability drive by declaring that "*varṇa* could not be continued or determined merely by birth," because, for him, a combination of natural qualities and natural aptitudes determined one's caste, not birth or heredity.

Thus, in one blow Gandhi forbade the essence of the *varṇa* or the caste system by asserting that it was not determined by birth or heredity. When Ambedkar was strappingly criticizing Gandhi's views on untouchability, Gandhi's final position was that caste had to go. In fact, Gandhi had given up defending caste even before Ambedkar had got '*Annihilation of Caste*' published in 1936. Gandhi gave the title '*Caste Has to Go*' to his article published in *Harijan*, way before Ambedkar's '*Annihilation of Caste*' came out. Gandhi was also highlighting that "the sooner public opinion abolishes (caste), the better." Gandhi became more subtle to the structural roots of caste discrimination when he was at the height of his importance. In his debate with Ambedkar, Gandhi reiterated his refusal of caste, and said that it was "harmful both to the spiritual and to the national growth." Gandhi even openly confirmed his acceptance of, and advocated for, inter-caste dining and marriages. Gandhi's views, once expressed freely, concluded in the announcement in his *Sevagram Ashram*, couples could marry only on the condition that one party was a '*Harijan*'. Gandhi tried to destroy the notion that physical contact with the 'Untouchables' 'polluted' a Hindu from a higher caste.

Gandhi's method and technique were brilliantly understood by the atheist Indian social reformer, G. Ramachandra Rao, popularly known as 'Gora', who dialogued with Gandhi in the 1940s. Gora wrote on Gandhi's approach thus: "When Gandhi first undertook to remove untouchability, the problem of *varṇa dharma* was also there. It was easy to see intellectually, even then, that caste ought to go root and branch if untouchability was to be completely eradicated. But as a practical proposition, caste was not the immediate problem then. The problem was only the removal of untouchability. So, he allowed caste to continue, though personally he observed no caste even then." Gandhi's goal of equality continued the same throughout, though the manner in which it was sought to be performed differed answering to the changing context over time and also of space as seen in the case of South Africa and India.

Untouchability did not create in a social order that an Aryan invasion created. It is not ancient, but stalks from medieval India. Its origins are not racial or ethnic. If Ambedkar's thesis is correct, Untouchability ascended due to an effort of medieval Indian elites to combine their power after the threat of social upheaval and after Brahmans organized political coups. More than a millennium later, Gandhi, to whom many attribute the liberation of India from colonization, appeared to fear the social disorder that Untouchables, later to be known as Dalits, might create if they succeeded in their power struggle. Gandhi, though radical in his philosophy, defended adherence to Caste society, at least according to Ambedkar and authors whom the latter influenced.

During the time India was struggling for independence, minorities in Europe, namely the Jewish population, became victims of the same Aryan invasion theory that Brahmans, prejudiced by colonialism, appealed to justify maltreatment of Untouchables. It appears European Jews were not alone in the darkest hour of their suffering.

According to Gandhi, the first and foremost step in social reform is the elimination of untouchability, because the blind-superstition of untouchability has polluted the Indian social environment for a long time neglecting the original *sūdra*-power and weakening the social power. Untouchability is not mentioned in Indian philosophy, scriptures and *Dharma-Śāstras*, it is created by some opportunity seeker. It is mentioned in *Upanisad* and Vedanta that '*tattamasi*' (you and me are same, there are no difference between us), there is exist only the power of God. According to the Buddha, 'Let everyone be like a flame of fire in everyone is hidden the central power of the Sun.' according to Jainas, everyone has an ability or power to become a 'Jina' or perfect-man (*siddha-purusa*). Clearly the distinction between man and man has not been recognized in Indian culture. The Indian

philosophical system has always sought to unite socialized people and untouchable iniquity has fragmented and wreaked Indian society. What enriches the society is religion and what divides the society is not righteousness. In his non-violence mantra, Gandhi instructed society to practice its religion, but not untouchability.

And following the concept of non-violence according to Gandhi, we cannot differentiate between touchable and untouchable, rich and poor, weak and strong even there will be no more any hostile attitude. In this way, in the state of non-violence communism has come into existence and which will be called following Gandhi id 'Swaraj' or 'Ramrajya'. Gandhi believed in the soul that man or person in the center of all authority and values. This is why he places so much emphasis on the individuality and this believe is especially reflected in his idea of *Sarvodaya*. His dreams of *sarvodaya* society will be established on omnipresent love, compassion and collaboration which is based on classless secular ideal society where everyman is considered as the member of society; there are no discrimination in caste-class-religion, black or white, all are can be treated as equal.

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