



MAHATMA GANDHI AND DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR ON UNTOUCHABILITY : A PREJUDICE TO BE ERADICATED

Pranab Kalita

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Barama College, Barama Baksa, Assam.

Abstract

Untouchability is a social concept based on class and varna system which increase the sense of hatred and discrimination among the people towards the low ranked people. This has created harmful effects and polluted the minds of the people. The condition of the untouchables was miserable and they were deprived of all the rights and facilities prevalent in the society. Mahatma Gandhi strongly condemned untouchability and stressed that untouchable are integral part of Hindu community. He showed great concern about the status of untouchables as “Harijans” and stated them as “men of God “. Gandhi’s use of the term “Harijans” opened up his deep feelings towards the untouchables or the depressed classes to criticize the so called beliefs of the superior classes of the society. Whereas Dr. B. R. Ambedkar also criticized the dehumanizing acts of people against the untouchables. He advocated the eradication of caste system from the society altogether. In the present paper an attempt has been made to focus on the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on untouchability which have challenged the life of people to lead with dignity and equality in a society.

Key Words:*Untouchability, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Prejudice, Eradication.*

Introduction

“I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn , I should be born as untouchable so that I may lead a continuous struggle against the oppression and indignities that have been heaped upon these classes of people.”

---- **M. K. Gandhi**

Untouchability is a social concept based on class and varna system which increase the sense of hatred and discrimination among the people towards the low ranked people. This has created harmful effects and polluted the minds of the people. The condition of the untouchables was miserable and they were deprived of all the rights and facilities prevalent in the society. Any work accredited to them was measured in terms of their caste and religion. The practice of untouchability which disrupts the sense of equality among castes was prohibited by Indian Constitution in Article 17. The untouchables were regarded downtrodden by virtue of their deeds. They were not allowed to enter any sacred places and they had to fight against this social dogma as they were being considered outcastes.

Mahatma Gandhi strongly condemned untouchability and stressed that untouchable are integral part of Hindu community. He showed great concern about the status of untouchables as “Harijans” and stated them as “men of God “. Gandhi’s use of the term “Harijans” opened up his deep feelings towards the untouchables or the depressed classes to criticize the so called beliefs of the superior classes of the society. Whereas Dr. B. R. Ambedkar also criticized the dehumanizing acts of people against the untouchables. He advocated the eradication of caste system from the society altogether. In the present paper an attempt has been made to focus on the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on untouchability which have challenged the life of people to lead with dignity and equality in a society.



Objectives

The objectives of the paper are highlighted as follows –

- To know the concept of caste system prevalent in a society
- To study the differences of thoughts of Gandhi and Ambedkar
- To study the importance of abolition of untouchability from the society as envisaged by these two thinkers

Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature to achieve the specific target . Only secondary data has been used through Research Journals, Books, Websites etc.

Caste System: A Long Standing Belief

Caste or Varna system is a concept which differentiates social groups on the basis of factors adopted by classes in the society. Four Varnas Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras significantly show the living structure of people in a well defined system. It is believed to have its divine origin in which Brahmins came from Brahma's head took the charge of leading the role of teachers and intellectuals. Other Varnas hierarchically came to serve the purposes as those were already stated for all in a society. As the Varna system highlighted on the division of labour and occupation, people of Vedic period regarded the path respectable and determined themselves to maintain their castes . Every caste was divided into sub-castes and provisions were made available according to their caste or social status.

The arrival of the Aryans in 1500BC marked the beginning of the caste system in India. They came from Southern Europe and Northern Asia and had contact with the Dravidians. Varna Vyavastha of the Aryans made Brahmins leader of the Aryan society and other divisions like Kshatriya and Vaishyas were denied a high social status . Every caste imposed restrictions on its members and they were required to follow and prepared themselves according to their laws. Violation of any kinds of well established customs were opposed and considered unfortunate in their next life. The Dalit Varna who were regarded as untouchables strictly restricted and maintained distance to perform any services in the society. People were considered outcastes and were not allowed to touch the high caste community and totally under suppression from certain privileges around them. Many individuals were against this injustice and raised voice against the brutality of caste system. Many of them converted themselves to Buddhism to relief themselves from the dominance and violence of Hindu society. But when the British East India Company came to existence they encouraged customs and privileges and contributed their support for caste identities. They however did not accept the discrimination showed to the lower castes and provided help to master themselves in some occupations which were based on actions. In the mid 19th Century Jyotirao Phule's anti caste Dalit movement broke the traditional concept of caste system and untouchability. However Dalit leaders advocated separate electorates for the Dalits and stressed strongly on the rights of the Dalits. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar were the leaders who worked whole heartedly to abolish the prevailing caste system and newness in the life of the untouchables.

Mahatma Gandhi & His Thoughts

“I do not believe the caste system even as distinguished from Varnashram to be an odious and vicious dogma. It has its limitations and defects but there is nothing sinful about it , as there is about untouchability and if it is a by product of the caste system , it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body or weeds of a crop . It is wrong to destroy caste because of an



ugly growth in it , or of a crop because of the weeds. The out – casteness in the sense we understand it, it is an excess to be removed if the whole system is not perish.”

--M. K. Gandhi

Believed himself as a “Bhangi” for society Mahatma Gandhi fought for the rights of the untouchables and worked for the upliftment of the Harijans . He founded the Harijan

4

Sevak Sangh in 1932 to provide equality and freedom to Harijans and also to abolish the beliefs of untouchability prevailed in India’s caste system. He wrote in “Young India”

“Temples, public wells and public schools must be open to the untouchables equally with caste Hindus.”

His address to the nations remained a demand for the equal rights of the untouchables. He whole heartedly devoted himself against un touch ability and relentlessly worked for the necessity of abolition of evil beliefs for leading a better life of the untouchables. He strongly asserted that untouchability is a great crime and a sin. He raised his voice for social equality and showed his deep passion to serve the untouchables of the society. According to Gandhi , Swaraj was the liberation of society from slavery and the removal of untouchability was essential condition to attain the success of the movement which had deeply changed the mindset of people for radical reforms. Gandhi believed on the participation of the caste Hindus against untouchability and demanded a practical change in themselves. He initiated a positive fight against untouchability and believed on the purification of the Hindu religion to defend both caste and varna. His strength of mind compelled him to give his efforts to eradicate untouchability which affected the whole caste system. He had great faith in class system . But he opined that without destroying caste system there can be no upliftment of the untouchables. He accepted the idea of Varna but he insisted himself on his defence of caste system against the evil manifestation of untouchability. Being a reformer of social patterns and institutions, his continuous struggle against the untouchability made him Mahatma in Indian life. He made his first public statement on untouchability in 1920 while he was assuming of leadership of the Indian National Congress . His distinction between the caste system and untouchability showed an indelible mark to treat “untouchable” as a human being. In his own words :

“There is one thing more to be remembered about the caste system . For me , it is not the same as Varnashrama . Whilst the caste system is an answer to the social need , Varnashram is based upon the Hindu scriptures. Not so the caste system. While there are innumerable castes (some dying out and new ones coming into being) the varnas are and have always been, four. I am a firm believer in Varnashram. I have not hesitated before or now to consider it is a gift of Hinduism to mankind. Acceptance of that Dharma is , so far as I have been able to see , a condition of spiritual growth . The four divisions are not a vertical section but a horizontal plane on which all stand on a footing of equality , doing the services respectively assigned to them . In the Book of God , the same number of marks are assigned to the Brahmin that has done his task as well as to the Bhangi who has done likewise.”

Gandhi believed on the complete perfection of Hinduism , the justice and righteousness of untouchables into the main Hindu stream. He gave importance on bringing change of outlook and the state of mind of people irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Gandhi tried to strengthen respect for human rights and tended to emphasize the removal of caste based discriminations prevalent in Indian society.



Belief on untouchability remained with him from the early period of his life. In 1881, his reluctance to accept the sayings of his mother to touch an untouchable like “Ulka” provided a light to Gandhi to think for the outcastes. This positive step became a guiding light for Gandhi to allow every person irrespective of any communities, castes, religions, races as member of a family.

In 1915, his encounter with an untouchable family showed his positive feeling to break the barriers of the society. His Satyagraha Ashram became the quarters to the untouchables in Ahmedabad and this act of Gandhi towards the untouchables made the Vaishnavas furious to take any steps for the ashram. Gandhi identified the problems of the untouchables as his own and so realized the keys to emancipate the untouchables in the Indian social life. He even allowed his children to perform any activities which they wanted to do in their own life. He never thought of any caste barriers and provided freeness to his children for what they were meant for. Gandhi’s parental thoughts and ideas could not change the mindset of Gandhi but his sense of curiosity forced him to break the hereditary duty already established in his family. His challenge to perform the acts of untouchables made him more stronger in his strategies and showed love and care for the weakest section of the society as a whole.

DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR & HIS THOUGHTS

“Reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including Mr. Gandhi, do not seem to realize that the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated upon their conduct, until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the Shastras on which their conduct is founded ... It is no use seeking refuge in quibbles. It is no use telling people that the Shastras do not say what they are believed to say, grammatically read or logically interpreted. What matters is how the Shastras have been understood by the people. You must take the stand that Buddha took. You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority as did Buddha and Nanak. You must have courage to tell the Hindus that what is wrong with them is their religion – the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of caste, Will you show that courage?”

----**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar**

A social reformer and a leader of the backward classes Dr. B. R. Ambedkar experienced caste system from his childhood and emphasized strongly on the social quality and discrimination among the classes. He determined himself to break the barriers in the interest of national unity. He however decided to move forward against the caste system and the practice of untouchability so that the people of depressed classes would lead a better life in future. In his famous work “The Annihilation of Caste” he advocated the abolition of the caste system which was considered the prime cause of social injustice in India. He stressed on breaking the barriers on social intercourse and raising the social status of the untouchables. He believed on the rights of the untouchables and encouraged them to achieve the height of success by educating themselves to raise the voices against oppression. He condemned the classic Hindu text “Manusmriti”(Laws of Manu) for its description on caste discrimination and untouchability.

Ambedkar lamented on the evil effects of the caste system imposed on the Hindus and their social life. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution he argued on the banning of caste system and the practice of untouchability in Article 17. He leveled strongly against the destruction caused by the caste system and initiated on the upliftment of the untouchables. Ambedkar believed on social adjustment and in conversion of religion. He was of the view that communal differences and alienation of castes were created by the caste system. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for the untouchables and raised his voice against the problems suffered by the untouchables. He argued to constitute separate



electorate on behalf of the dalits and favoured them in the decision making process. The issue of separate electorates became highlighted as a positive approach to enlighten the untouchables. A leader for the upliftment of the weaker section of the society, he thought deeply on the change of outlook and a society truly democratic in nature. Ambedkar's aim for a new society without caste distinction was a key to solve the problems of untouchability. He called for religious reform and equal opportunity for all however his vision to promote unity and development leveled harsh criticism from others. Ambedkar gave priority to socio-economic emancipation of the untouchables and deeply committed himself to become a part of the problems of untouchables.

Gandhi and Ambedkar's Views: Focus on Reformation

Gandhi and Ambedkar both tried to bring a great change for the development of the masses to create a society totally free from all social bondages and enjoy equality as they were needed for. Gandhi did not want to divide a Hindu society into various sub-castes and opposed any kind of situation which would directly destroy the sense of caste system. However Ambedkar's focus was on the necessity of strengthening equality and the annihilation of caste system. He deeply realized the evil effects of the caste system and its impact on social life. According to Gandhi, "Untouchability to be a moral issue that could be abolished through good will and change of heart among the upper caste Hindus."

Gandhi thought that the approaches of different sub-castes helped to weaken Hindu society and slow down the progress and development of the lower castes. He stressed truth and non-violence for a greater understanding and integration. He emphasized on religion and morality and stood for help and assistance to the unfortunate sections of society. He had initiated several ideas for the improvement of the conditions of the untouchables. Being a revolutionary he sought to foster individual liberties and rights. Gandhi wanted to see a strong united nation without untouchability and the reformation of caste system.

Ambedkar experienced the social stigma of untouchability and believed on the change of all means in the life of the untouchables. He encouraged the Dalits to convert themselves to Buddhism and expressed his protest against the violence acts by upper caste Hindu. He opined, "The subordination of Dalits was primarily economic and political and could only be overcome by changing the social structure through legal, political and educational means." Ambedkar thought that Dalits were worstly victimized people and could not adjust themselves in the main stream of their life. As early as January 1920 he had launched social movements to espouse the cause of the untouchables. He fought against the oppressive practices of Hinduism. He believed on the equal respect to all castes and a greater unification of a goal to reform the untouchables. He stressed strongly on the importance of political power to raise the voice of the untouchables. He also believed on the radical transformation of a society where the life of the untouchables would drastically change by their words and actions. The strategies he committed for the untouchables pointed out Ambedkar's aim of a new society in which notion of caste would be insignificant and a revolutionary action would be responded for removal of untouchability.

Conclusion

The views of these two great thinkers on caste and untouchability have strengthened the depressed population to think for their rights and liberties and live equally with others. Gandhi worked deeply for the social and religious awakening of the Indian masses and inspired people to uphold equality and brotherhood among themselves. A great luminary of India, Ambedkar believed on a society free from slavery and casteism. He opposed strongly on untouchability and struggled for his community's rights.



He urged for social reconstruction and believed on the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity. He advised the people of backward castes to educate themselves for making a part of Indian mainstream and grab the opportunities and aspirations for dignity and identity that are long standing for a great civilization.

References

- 1 Young India, May 4, 1921, p.144.
- 2 Dutt Nripendra Kumar, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India* , Kalpaz Publications , 2017
- 3 Sudhakar Prof. Gopu (Ed) , *Caste system in India Problems and Perspectives* , Raj Publications, 2018.
- 4 Bakshi S. K. *Gandhi and His Social Thought* , Criterion Publication, New Delhi.
- 5 Chopra, P. N., (Ed) , *Religions and Communities of India* , Vision Books ,New Delhi , 1982.
- 6 Sharma, S. R. *Life and Works of B. R. Ambedkar* , Jaipur , Book Enclave , 2006.
- 7 Roy, Ramashray *Gandhi and Ambedkar A Study in Contrast* Shipra Publications , 2019.
- 8 Aghav, D.B. *Ambedkar and Gandhi views of Indian Caste* Chandralok Prakashan, 2016.
- 9 Websites.