GANDHI'S DEFENSE OF CASTE SYSTEM : A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Gandhi's interpretation of Hinduism remains one of the most enigmatic parts of his belief system. The constant interflow of the political and the religious is highlighted in retrospect when Gandhi's religious interests are assessed with respect to his political objectives. Gandhi's caste politics also seems to have emanated from similar convoluted cauldron of his religious beliefs along with the political and social objectives that he continuously stressed upon. Gandhi inherited a society where the social differentiations had grown for the last two thousand years and a vertical hierarchy was rigidly in place. In what can be seen as an extension of the work by other Hindu reformers, Gandhi attempted to persuade caste Hindus to humanize their interpretation of scriptures which were used to justify social exclusion and perennial servitude. This moral suasion of the caste Hindus also extended to incorporate *harijans* or the outcastes into the mainstream Hindu society. While he vehemently opposed the practice of untouchability and its presumed centrality to the Hindu religion, Gandhi believed in an idealized and egalitarian form of *Varnavyastha* which he endorsed to be the Hinduism's scientific contribution to the division of labour for the smooth functioning of any society. This paper attempts to understand this obvious incongruity of Gandhi's caste politics with respect to the fourfold division of the society and his advocation of *varnavyastha* as a central notion which ascertains the Hindu religious belonging.

Varnavyastha as a social construct is grounded into metaphysics of Hindu scriptures. Its social manifestation was followed by a deep adherence to the principle of heredity. Individual occupations were determined hereditarily thus offering little mobility over the course of re-births. It is presumed "to have received divine sanction from the Rig Veda, the first book of

Hindu scriptures. The four varnas-Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras- are said to form part of the Purusa, the Cosmic Being. The organic functioning of the whole society depends on how every individual adheres to the prescribed dharma (divine duty) of his varna" (Gonsalves 124). The Rig Veda, however, maintains that each caste has a different role but is of equal importance to the one body of Purusa which represents the well being of the overall society. Thus equality was promised ontologically and presumed with respect to the stable functioning of the Hindu society. However, the sociological facts tell a completely different story (Gonsalves).

For Gandhi, the primary act of subversion and reformation originated from his abandoning the frameworks of contemporary state of Hinduism. In his frequent invocation of the *Santana Dharma* or the eternal law, there is an evident attempt at transcending the impurities of the contemporary state of Hinduism. The invocation of an original and pristine form of religion allows him to define Hinduism in terms of an eternal law, and a temporally and spatially removed golden age, which removed from his own times, is also free from the impurities. This is evident in his treatment of the scriptures. For him, Vedas stand for the sanctity of Hindu principles. At the same time, Gandhi makes a clear disjunction when he elaborates on the possible textual nature of the other *Dharamshashtras*. He says,

> The stories told in the *Puranas* are some of them most dangerous if we do not know their bearing on the present conditions. The *shastras* would be death-traps if we were to regulate our conduct according to every detail given in them or according to that of the characters therein described. They help us only to define and argue our fundamental principles. If some well-known character in religious books sinned against God or man, is that a warrant for our repeating the sin? It is enough for us to be told, once for all, Truth is the only thing that matters in the world, that Truth is God (Gandhi 84-85).

Here, Gandhi recognizes the elements of interpolation in the *Dharmshastras* over the period of two thousand years. The scriptural truth has to be analyzed from the point of view of the present. The attempt here is to democratize the scriptural truth rather than provide room for legitimizing the corrupted traditions and rituals that have emerged. Gandhi, the pragmatist, also uses this argument to refute the counter-argument made by Dr. Ambedkar in his outright rejection of Hinduism as a religion for the *Dalit* population. For him, Ambedkar like other orthodox Hindus has also fallen into the traps of picking out religious texts of doubtful authenticity and value. The all-encompassing and assimilative picture of Hinduism comes to the forefront in his association with the original form of Hinduism. "I take pride in calling myself a Hindu, because I find the term broad enough not merely to tolerate but to assimilate the teachings of prophets from all the four corners of the earth. I find no warrant for untouchability in this Book of life" (Gandhi 13). Further on, Gandhi takes the opportunity to merge the *Santani* form of Hinduism with the overtones of *Advaita* philosophy and therefore denies any room for the ritualistic aspect of the religion that seems to have been acquired due to the degeneracy of the overall population over the course of time.

For Gandhi, Hinduism then seems to embody what he calls as "the spirit of the Vedas" in form of concepts like truth, purity, humility and forgiveness. "According to Santana Dharma taught by that venerable Mother, life does not consist in outward rites and ceremonial, but it consists in the uttermost inward purification and merging oneself, body, soul and mind, in the

divine essence" (Gandhi 13). In retrospect, this can be seen as a profound reinterpretation of Hinduism in the first half of the twentieth century. Gandhi includes his *seva marg* to other more ritualistic ways of attaining *moksha*. In bringing the individual and personal ethics to the forefront of religious engagement, Gandhi's Hinduism suddenly posed a threat to the traditional upper caste elites whose desperate attempts were to make a successful transition into a modern dominant class. As Ashis Nandy observes, "It is not just Nathuram Godse, who is responsible for Gandhi's death, but the elite that provided the milieu for such hate politics" (Nandy 54). Thus, Gandhi's Hinduism was questioned and distrusted from both within and without. For the Santani brand of Hinduism, he appeared not Hindu enough and for other non-hindu forces, he was too Hindu.

As evident in the first few pages of the anthology "All are equal in the eyes of God", Gandhi's views on caste and untouchability took shape during his childhood. He personally experienced the implications of the caste system and the arbitrariness with which rules were multiplied and enforced to keep its hierarchical structure rigidly in place. He was declared an outcaste by his community chief when he left for England, and was subsequently made to take a holy bathe when he returned in order to regain his caste identity. He also remarks that his own mother who was a very devout *Vaishnavite* followed the Hindu norms of untouchability strictly in educating him: whenever he accidently touched the house sweeper, his mother would ask him to perform ablutions. Gandhi admitted that he obeyed, but 'not without smilingly protesting that "untouchability" was not sanctioned by religion' and that it was impossible to locate its scriptural sources (Gonsalves 136).

Although Gandhi's attack against untouchability was constant, it did not follow in his reaction towards the *Varnavyastha* or the caste system. Gandhi's philosophical thoughts on untouchability made it into a grave sin and can be related to his conviction that the afflictions that India as a nation was suffering, was a direct consequence of the oppression that the upper caste afflicted on the untouchables. For Gandhi, caste was not originally a principle of divisive politics. It did not entertain the differences of "high and low" but in fact, it was a rational principle of unity and respect for all modes of existence. Gandhi argues, "I am a firm believer in Varnashrama. I have not hesitated before now to consider it as a gift of Hinduism to mankind. Acceptance of that Dharma is, do 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" (Gandhi 14). It is against this core belief that Gandhi posits the four varnas as the parts of one Purusa. The varnas are divisions of labour governed by the law of heredity and therefore are seen as essential for the smooth running of the society. He argues, "…I do regard *Varnashrama* as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present ideas of caste are a perversion of the original. There is no question of with me of superiority or inferiority. It is purely a question of duty" (Gandhi 44). It is evident here that Gandhi is not interrogating the fixity of roles that this system demands. Gandhi does little to incorporate the ideas of modernity, individuality and liberty in his proposed return to the ancient system. Here onwards, untouchability becomes an offshoot for Gandhi, as a result of the heinous manipulation of the principle of the caste system in favour of the dominant castes. Gandhi elaborates on this in the 11th Feb, 1933 edition of *Harijan*:

> I do not believe the caste system, even as distinguished from Varnashrama, to be an odious and vicious dogma. It has its limitations and

its 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 as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or a crop because of the weeds (Gandhi 17).

This, as perceptibly observed by Peter Gonsalves, brings us to deliberate on the inconsistency of the principles that he advocates. Gandhi's inability to comprehend the parasitical nature of untouchability perhaps places his caste ideas into a realm far idealistic than a world he himself inhabited (Gonansalves 137). For Gandhi, the concerns raised with the conditions of the lower castes in this world are a direct consequence of "the faulty conception of inequality" (Gandhi 46). Justice is transferred to a domain other than the present context. It is on the spiritual plain that justice will be delivered. Furthermore, in his advocation of the *Varnashrma*, Gandhi surrenders the fate of Hinduism and all concerned into the hands of the "new Brahmana class" who, devoid of world ambitions, will purge Hinduism of its impurities. Gandhi delineates his idea of reform, "What I am aiming at is not every Hindu touching an 'untouchable', but every touchable Hindu driving untouchability from his heart, going through a complete change of heart" (Gandhi 27). The obvious tendency of hegemony to incorporate the elements of discord is evident here in Gandhi's defense of a pure and all-inclusive Hinduism. Radicalism is sacrificed for reformation. More remarkably, he offers the agency of reformation to the dominant caste rather than oppressed ones. The idea of a purified, all-inclusive Hindu identity is central to Gandhi's nationalist thought process. It is for this precise idea of national integrity that Gandhi dismissed the idea of conversion of the outcastes. For him, any opportunity of divisive politics would have compromised with the larger objective of political independence. It is here, Gandhi draws the animosity of Ambedkar who reinterpreted the meaning of equality in terms of some tangible social, political and economic opportunity rather than an equality of castes. The Gandhian solution, for Ambedkar, was not radical enough as it did not address the root of the problem: the caste system (Coward 57).

At the same point of time, his position seems to be driven by far more pragmatic considerations too. In what he sees as a realistic solution, the idea of annihilating an ancient system was more unlikely to be adopted or even considered than seeking improvements in that system. Gandhi perhaps was aware of this when he says:

> The caste system has struck such deep roots in India that I think it will be far more advisable to try to improve it, rather than uproot it. The Hindu caste system is not merely an inert, lifeless institution but a living one and has been functioning according to its own law. Unfortunately, today we find it full of evils like ostentation and hypocrisy, pleasure seeking and quarrels. But this only proves that people lack character; we cannot conclude from it that the system itself is bad (Gonsalves 138).

Politically too, Gandhi was one of the few leaders who realized the importance of the issue of untouchability vis-à-vis national agenda. The campaign launched against untouchability brought the issue in the same light of suffering as the whole nation was undergoing at the hands of the foreign rule. During the Round Table conference, Gandhi learned that Ambedkar and his community were seeking direct intervention as British subjects than Hinduism's outcastes. He

therefore chose to fast in order to convince Ambedkar of the two intertwined projects of independence and removal of untouchability. As Peter Gonsalves observes, Gandhi's insistence on the purification of Hinduism allowed him two immediate ends. The corresponding picture of all assimilating Hinduism which was ready to purge itself of the impurities would emerge as a consequence. Secondly, the dalit population would be secured within the folds of Hinduism and thus prevent any split and weakening of the majority which could have altered the nature of bargain with the British government (Gonsalves 139). Thus, Gandhi was able to blend in plight of the untouchables to the national agenda. It can be seen as an intense political manoeuvre whereby he was able to address his Schmittian enemies of imperialism, untouchability and religious discord together. His most subversive symbol Khadi too was used as a means to translate the political freedom into socio-economic advantages. It is in this movement of economic independence that he found the immediate answers to all the difference in caste, sex and religion.

Towards the independence of India, Gandhi's cynicism with the political structure and leaders was a clear sign of the failure of his two projects. No tangible achievement could be lauded on the removal of untouchability as well as that of the Hindu-Muslim unity. His outright rejection of the verticality that seems to have emanated from the existing hierarchy of the caste system was indeed a revolutionary moment of reinterpretation. At the same time, his attempt at preserving the ancient methodology of social organization was an attempt to purify the Hindu religion. This envisioned cleansing was limited in scope and did not further tangible answers to the questions put forward by leaders like Ambedkar. However, as Ashis Nandy has argued, Gandhi should be recognized of lending the voice to these issues at a time when few political leaders and national parties were even ready to recognize them as problems. He bridged the chasm ever existing chasm between mass politics and social reform movements in India (Nandy 47).

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