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MAHATMA GANDHI'S THOUGHT ON DALIT WOMEN IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PARADIGM

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Gandhi was hardly twelve years old when he realized that untouchability was an evil. At first at familial level he opposed the practice of untouchability. In his childhood, teachings of Ram Raksha and Vishnu Punjar deeply influenced him. The texts 'Jale Vishnuh', 'Sthale Vishnuh' (there is the Lord (present) in water, there is the Lord (present) in earth, never went out of his memory. The teachings of Ramayana revealed to his young mind that Rama crossed the Ganges with an 'untouchable', which was contenance to the idea of any human beings, "untouchables" on the ground they were polluted souls. To him the fact that God was addressed as the "purifier of the polluted" and by similar appellations, showed that it was a sin to regard any one born in Hinduism as polluted or untouchable-that it was satanic to do so. This thought crystallised and developed a conviction in him where he narrated these incidents for the information of Vaishnavas and the orthodox Hindus.

In the age of blind orthodoxy Gandhi was aware that untouchability was a sin. Gandhi's abhorrence of untouchability, and his association of such practices with the sweeper caste, appear rooted in childhood experience. Gandhi's reactions to his family's sweeper at the age of twelve are recorded in an article¹ Ukha, the scavenger, remained the symbol for untouchables in Gandhi's mind. Although he was not the first to cry out against untouchability, but was one of the most prominent caste Hindu to proclaim that it was harmful for Hinduism and to make its removal a personal responsibility was what marked him out.

The Constituent Assembly² of Independent India passed a provision legally abolishing untouchability on 29 November, 1948 nine months after the death of Mahatma Gandhi. As the measure was approved, the house resounded with cries of "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai", victory to Mahatma Gandhi - a tribute to- Gandhi's thirty-year effort to remove the practice of untouchability from Indian society.

The question that is often raised is that both Gandhi and Ambedkar are known to different groups as the "saviour of the untouchables". Gandhi publicly put the abolition of untouchability along with Hindu- Muslim unity, as the essential pre-requisite for India's true

independence. He also made popular the term "Harijan" (Children of God) since Gandhi patronized the term.

Despite their common concern, Ambedkar and Gandhi were often at odds in their programmes for the abolition of untouchability. In 1932, Gandhi thwarted Ambedkar's attempt to gain political concessions

from the British, concessions that Ambedkar believed to be essential for the untouchable's progress. Ambedkar retaliated by criticizing Gandhi more harshly than he did the orthodox Hindus who upheld untouchability as a religious essential. Gandhi may be described as a dominant group leader working for a national goal who was concerned, both from a moral standpoint and from a realization of the need for unity, about injustices to a low status group within the nation. In 1920 he made his first strong statement on untouchability "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an Untouchable."³ Gandhi's statements on the evil of untouchability were unequivocal from the first, although his views regarding other caste-based practices changed and grew less orthodox over the years.⁴ Twenty six years later he said "If I had my way I would persuade all caste Hindu girls coming under my influence to select Harijan husbands. Underlying Gandhi's change in attitude towards social practices was an unchanging belief in Varnashramadharma, the divinely ordained division of society into four groups defined according to duty and to Gandhi, "A scavenger has the same status as a Brahmin."⁶

In Gandhi's structure of thought, beliefs and practices, idea of self and transcendence, religion and morality, modernity, reason and action recur constantly and their significance is constantly restated. In the Gandhian paradigm⁷ these aspects have substantive connotations, though they have undergone some changes. Thus Gandhian⁸ cultural nationalism is not just an ideology but an ideological consensus, and that it turns even opposing ideological position like Marxism into variations of its own practices and certainties. It is the caste question that provides the ground for developing this ideological consensus and it arises from the depoliticization of untouchability in such a way that a dalit political subject becomes impossible to imagine. We can see this process of depoliticization in the realist mode of representation in early nationalist cultural production, which is produced by a sexual differentiation. Gandhian cultural nationalism produces an ideological consensus in which ostensible political differences of ideology and practice are neutralised. Implicit in the logic of the Gandhian resolution of caste and untouchability is the annihilation of dalit women, and consequently the annihilation of the dalit as a community.

Since the 1930's, Gandhian ideology has had a great influence on the Indian imagination. Judith Brown argues, "Gandhi's rise did not symbolise a radical restructuring of political life' or emergence of mass politics, rather it signified the rise of western-educated and regional-language-literate elites of backward areas, in place of the western-educated leaders of the Presidency towns. It was the loyalty of these local leaders that enabled Gandhi to extend the constituency of the nationalist politics."⁹

It is possible to trace a Gandhian mode of representation of the caste question in Indian thought literature and films. In literature, for instance, we see the representation of caste equations in India in the Gandhian mode in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938). Even the progressive films of early Indian cinema are saturated with Gandhian approaches and solutions to

various social¹⁰ problems. Later films in order to serve different and not so different historical purposes, also perpetuated a Gandhian ideology. However, common to both the leftist and liberal humanist understanding of the caste question and the problem of untouchability is the cultural paradigm of Gandhian resolution. The genre of social reform cinema draws on Gandhism, especially in the way it poses problems pertaining to social and political minorities like dalits, women and religious groups

Today development of Gandhian philosophy as a framework for the representation of dalits has been adopted by many Subaltern writers. It is therefore equally important to understand Gandhian position on the caste question and dalit initiatives especially of the Dalit women, and their engagement with showing how a Gandhian resolution aims at superseding and foreclosing dalit initiatives for their self-emancipation. Gandhi in his Champaran satyagrah had seen Bihar reeling under disabilities such as purdah, early marriage, widowhood and illiteracy. In young India Gandhi wrote that chastity cannot be protected by surrounding the wall of the purdah. It must grow from within to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation.

Gandhi raised the question of female education-not only of girls but married women. To him the question of breaking down the feminine prejudice is most difficult and could be broken only through education. In Bihar only eight females out of every thousand were literate. According to 1921 census the percentage of literate women was 0.66. Gandhi established Buniyadi schools in Barharwa run by Avantika Bai and Devdas Gandhi. The second school was in Bhitwara run by Kasturba. Dr. Dev Sadashivlakshan Somam- Around eighty students were admitted. The third centre was established at Madhuban which was run by Mani Bai Parikh and Anandibai. In the following years Bihar Vidyapeeth was established. Gandhi's commitment to education for the people belonging to the most deprived section only furthered his cause and concern for Dalit women. The wives of local leaders such as Prabhawati (daughter of Braj Kishore Prasad), Rajbansi Devi (wife of Rajendra Prasad) and Bhagwati Devi (sister of Rajendra Prasad), spearheaded their protests against purdah, illiteracy and untouchability. To Gandhi swaraj was unattainable without the removal of untouchability. To him the question was different and was attainment of real organic swaraj for which Hindu-Muslim unity was important, removal of untouchability was essential and upliftment of women was crucial. To him inward growth must never stop and that swaraj cannot be had so long as walls of prejudice continue to strike that growth. In his tours he would always address women's meetings and admitted that consequently he kept learning new things about women. He talked to them in religious idiom citing examples of Sita and Draupadi, using cultural matrix was also a strategy of Gandhi to reach women. Gandhi's strong resolve inspired many women whose male members were involved in the struggle to come forward. The first phase was led by Sarla Debi of Hazaribagh and Savitri Devi of Patna. In January 1929 the All India Women's Conference was held at Patna and resolution was passed in support of the Sarda Act against the purdah and dowry system and demand was made for measures to increase female education in Bihar. In Bihar unlike Bengal and Maharashtra, there was the entry of small town semi-literate middle class married women into the freedom struggle. Some devoted themselves to the Mahila Charkha Samiti in Patna, an organisation that was concerned with the education of poor girls and home based income generating activities for poor women. After independence some continued to participate in public life. Krishna Desi was elected to the Vidhan Sabha in 1952 and Shakuntla Devi and Shanti Devi were nominated to the Legislative Council.

The Question of the Politicisation of the Domestic Sphere:

Gandhi expected women to contribute to the political cause primarily from within the domestic sphere through their roles as supportive wives and mothers. Did Gandhi go for the politicisation of the domestic sphere brought their roles as supportive wives and mothers. Veena Mazumdar, Devaki Jain, Sujata Patel have provided lucid analysis of Gandhi's opinion on the contribution of women to the movement. Mazumdar argues that Gandhi respected women's personal dignity as individuals without belittling their roles as mothers and wives. Jain argues that Gandhi was 'methodologically' a feminist because for him the means were as important as the ends. He propagated self-reliance while encouraging the discipline of the

mind and body. Patel argues that by introducing the spinning wheel as a political symbol, Gandhi enabled women in the domestic sphere to participate from within the home. In the 1930's in 'Young India' Gandhi wrote- since resistance in Satyagrah is offered through self-suffering, it is a weapon pre- eminently open to women.

In 1938 in 'Harijan' he wrote- she can become the leader in Satyagrah which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith. The communitarian concept of 'dalit' as envisioned by Ambedkar, has dalit women as active participants of a casteless utopia. However, in the Gandhian scheme the dalit women's role in the emancipation of the dalit community is eradicated by attributing models of passivity to dalit women, even as caste Hindu women take on the mantle of reforms. Furthermore, the dalit women is imagined as a victim of the men's violence, without any reference to the caste patriarchy of Hindu society and the state, which is the actual machinery behind exploitation and oppression of all dalits, men, women and children. The Gandhian resolution believes that at its core, the dalit community is divided into passive, submissive women and violent, unreasonable, aggressive men. History bears ample evidence to the continued contribution of dalit women in the various struggles for self-respect that they are involved in their everyday lives, as well as in anti-caste movements. However, in popular cultural contexts they continuously produce narratives, images and metaphors that habitually undermine the dalit community, and dalit women in particular.

Through his long-standing discourse on Hindu-Muslim unity and the abolition of untouchability, Gandhi played the role of negotiator vis-a-vis demands for a share in political power by both the major minority, that is, Muslims and untouchable communities. Gandhi navigated the strong challenges put forth by Ambedkar for securing the right to self-representation for untouchables.

The impact Gandhi had in constructing a common-sensical view of the caste question can be seen in the post-independence India. It is therefore, Important to situato Gandhian Hindu reform in his historical text. Claude Markovits,¹¹ one of Gandhi's biographers, states that Gandhi's method is Individualistic with regard to his propositionos to resolve the problem of untouchability, that is, defining untouchability as a sin committed by caste Hindus, and thereby, placing the burden of uplifting the untouchability as a sin committed by caste Hindus, and thereby, placing the burden of uplifting the untouchables on the caste Hindu themselves. Gandhi views this act as one of self-purification for the upper castes. Gandhi's approach to the problem of untouchability follows a modern, liberal, Hinduistic method which affirms Individual agency by creating conditions of non-untouchability on the part of the untouchables by following the oppressor caste habits and world-view. On the other hand, the upper castes should atone for their sins by taking up constructive programmes in the Harijan Sevak Sangh. This approach thus shifts the epistemic privilege from the dalit to the caste Hindu, and from the realm of the collective to that of the Individual.

Gandhism appears to validate and consolidate the Hinduising impulse of dalits as they fight for access to temple, Vedic knowledge, and many others acts through which they seem to emulate the cultural practices of caste Hindus. However, the crucial difference is that in the Gandhian resolution of the caste question, dalits not only lose out on their discursive preminence in this resolution, but also become passive recipients of caste Hindu paternalism, as the resolution is now premised on the change of heart on the part of the caste Hindu, and his normal responsibility for atoning for the sin of untouchability.

This crucial shift from dalit-centric Hinduising initiatives to caste Hindu-centric Harijanisation is symptomatic of the loss of agency suffered by dalits in their initiatives to emancipate themselves from the shackles of caste discrimination. The Harijanising strategy of the Gandhian reformist project have been used effectively by institutions of popular culture which functions as an ideological apparatus of the casteist state.

It is useful to begin by mapping the harijan vs. dalit politics (espoused by Gandhi and Ambedkar, respectively) to understand the issue of representation of caste in Indian socio-political and cultural history. Gandhi and Ambedkar held opposing views on every point. Gandhi called himself a sanatani Hindu. In Gandhi's imagination, the problem of dalits was an "internal" issue of Hinduism, one that was purely religious and social. This way why he constructed a separate category called "Harijans". In this system, the spiritual regeneration of the upper castes becomes central to the upliftment of the untouchables. As many dalit thinkers agree, it is more a self-glorification exercise on the part of the upper castes than a move for the empowerment of the "untouchables".

Gandhi started a newspaper called "Harijan" to propagate his views about the origins of untouchability. On this occasion Ambedkar emphatically stated that the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system, There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcastes except the destruction of caste system.¹³

Following Ambedkar, dalits rejected the label 'Harijan'. They began calling themselves Adi Hindus by the 1920's and 1930's as Kalekuri Prasad, a dalit writer observes, Dalit inspired to be treated on par with Hindus by imitating the life style and habits of caste Hindus.

Opposing Gandhi's spiritualist position, Ambedkar maintained that the problem of untouchability was political. At the second Round Table Conference in 1932, he said, it is very necessary that the political reins should come in the hands of untouchables. Untouchability in India will not be eradicated so long as the untouchables do not control the political strings." Further, Ambedkar told Gandhi that for the upliftment of the Untouchables, "The Caste Hindus must assist the Depressed Classes people to work out their own salvation and not attempt to uplift them by inducing them to follow the ideals of the caste Hindu in every way."¹⁴

However, Gandhi protested the "Communal Award" that the British government declared in 1932 at the second Round Table Conference, which made provision for separate electorates for the depressed classes, and even went on a fast unto death opposing it. Ambedkar was forced to settle for joint electorates according to the Poona Pact that he had signed. This resulted in Harijans in the Congress Party, rather than candidates from dalit-centric parties, occupying the reserved seats. Gandhian Harijan reform was considered insincere by Ambedkar. In fact, the idea of inter-caste marriage as a weapon that could be used to destroy the caste system is not Gandhi's; it is Ambedkar who maintained such an opinion. "The real method of breaking up the caste system was not to bring about inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages but to destroy the religious notions on which caste was founded."¹⁵

However, it is important in this regard to refer to Gandhi's own changed position on the question of caste, and inter-caste marriages between harijans and caste Hindus. As Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph observe, "Gandhi changed his view of caste considerably between 1921, when he considered vama distinctions helpful to retaining striving and Intemperate ambition" and 1932, when he declared his ashram would not help arrange marriages between members of the same sub-caste. In 1946, he declared himself in favour of marriages between caste-Hindus and untouchables and subsequently said he would attend only marriages of such a kind.

Thus Gandhian cultural nationalism is not just an ideology but an ideological consensus, and that it turns even opposing ideological position like Marxism into variations of its own practices and certainties. It is the caste question that provides the ground for developing this ideological consensus.

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