

SPECIAL ARTICLE

## From Margin to Centre: Gandhi, Dalit Question and the Limits of Patronage

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**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to critically examine the approach of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, vis-à-vis the Dalit question, i.e., the question of the 'upliftment' of the Dalits or the ex-Untouchables in India. In the first part of the paper, we have critically examined the ideological framework of Gandhi with regard to the question of Dalits who had been the highly marginalized community of the entire south Asian region having been the victim of caste discrimination and untouchability in the sub-continent through the ages. In the second part, we have specifically discussed the policy, strategy and initiatives which Gandhi had come out with for the upliftment of Untouchables. The paper is based on the hypothesis that the religious ideology of Gandhi had largely affected his all movements including the movement for attaining 'Swaraj' (self-rule) and the movement for the uplift of 'Harijans' (i.e., Dalits). His idea of 'Harijan uplift' was based on Varnashrama Dharma. He took the Dalit issue only as a socio-religious problem of the Hindus. He wanted to reconstruct the Hindu society strictly on the basis of the institution of four Varnas and, therefore, wanted to eliminate the Panchama Varna or the fifth caste of the outcast Untouchables. It emphasized that only Hindus, particularly the caste Hindus, could work for the eradication of untouchability. The approach did not insist much on human rights of Dalits and only adhered on charity works on the part of the caste Hindus for the Untouchables. Such an approach, the paper suggests, could be described as a 'paternalistic' approach. With this approach, Gandhi had come out with his policy, strategy and initiatives for the upliftment of Untouchables.*

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, Untouchables, Dalit question/problem, Depressed Classes, marginalized, 'paternalistic' approach, south Asian region, Hinduism, Hindu society, Varnashrama Dharma, institution of caste, untouchability, Swaraj, social amelioration, Dr. Ambedkar, Poona Pact, 'Bhangi Work', Temple Entry Satyagraha, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Harijan Movement*

(1)

Before we discuss the approach of Mahatma Gandhi to Dalits, it is necessary for us to know a little bit about his religious ideology which was actually the very basis of his ideas and strategy concerning Dalits. Gandhi hailed from an orthodox Hindu Bania family. He always called himself a 'Sanatanist (orthodox) Hindu' belonging to the Vaishnava sect. He believed in "all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures", e.g., scriptural purity, idol worship, doctrine of 'Karma' (action), theory of rebirth, cow protection, 'Varnashrama Dharma' (four fold order of society and life) and institution of caste.<sup>1</sup> But at the same time he 'disbelieved' in untouchability. He once argued that India was "indebted" to the Brahmins as they taught that even a Chandala (outcast) or a prostitute could attain Moksha (salvation), if he/she had purified his/her heart.<sup>2</sup> About Manusmriti, the Hindus' text of law which legalized caste as well as untouchability, Gandhi opined, "Manusmrit and the similar treatises put before us seem to be different today from what they were in their original form....What I said about untouchability is that there is no sanction in Shastras (scriptures)."<sup>3</sup>

This religious ideology of Gandhi largely affected his all movements including the movement for attaining 'Swaraj' (self-rule) and the movement for the uplift of 'Harijans' (i.e., Dalits) Just as 'Ramraj' (reign of Rama) inspired his idea of 'Swaraj', his idea of 'Harijan uplift' was based on Varnashrama Dharma. He wanted to reconstruct the Hindu society strictly on the basis of the institution of four Varnas, (i.e., the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra) and, therefore, wanted to eliminate the Panchama Varna or the fifth caste of the outcast Untouchables.<sup>4</sup> The Mahatma suggested that the Untouchables and outcasts should be regarded as touchable and castemen of Shudra status. "A Panchama does the work of Shudra and he, therefore, is naturally classified as such when he ceases to be regarded as Panchama."<sup>5</sup>

When Gandhi returned India from South Africa, he established Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmadabad in 1915 and admitted in it a poor sweeper family of Dudhabhai.<sup>6</sup> Discarding untouchability was one of the eleven vows which every inmate had to take before he was admitted to the Ashram.<sup>7</sup> Hence, Gandhi entered in the Indian National Congress with a Sanatanist ideology and a personal emotional touch with the 'Dheds', 'Bhangis' (sweepers), 'Chamars' (cobblers) etc. In short, the Gandhian approach to the Dalit question had following features:

1. The Dalit problem is basically a 'religious' problem. It is not a political problem at all.
2. The problem is an internal matter of the Hindus and non-Hindus have nothing to do with it.
3. The problem of marginalization of Untouchables in Hindu society could be solved only by the abolition of the notion of untouchability. There is no need of annihilation of Varna or caste for the removal of untouchability.
4. It is the caste Hindus who had to reform themselves by the way of 'change

of their heart' for the Untouchables.

5. The activities of 'sanitation work' etc. among the Depressed Classes are also necessary for their 'moral upliftment.
6. God lives in the poor, they are 'Daridranaryana'. So the caste Hindus should develop among themselves the feelings of 'pity', 'obligation' and 'fellow-feeling' for them.<sup>8</sup>

The above approach was in fact, based on a 'paternalistic approach.' Towards oppressed/lower sections of society including Dalits, Adivasis, women, workers and peasants. The paternalistic approach was a major component of Gandhism.<sup>9</sup> As regards Dalits, it did not recognize political and communitarian aspects of the Dalit question. The approach took the problem only as a socio-religious problem of the Hindus.<sup>10</sup> It emphasized that only Hindus, particularly caste Hindus, could work for the eradication of untouchability.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi convinced the Indian National Congress to follow this paternalistic approach with regard to the problem of Dalits.

The Gandhian approach to the Dalit question basically took its shape in 1920s. It was the time when Gandhi decided to launch a national Non-Co-Operation Movement. He made his position clear on the issue in *Young India* dated 27 October 1920 saying, "Though the Panchama problem is as dear to me as life itself, I rest satisfied with the exclusive attention to national Non-Co-operation, feel sure that the greater includes the lesser."<sup>12</sup> The first resolution of the Congress on untouchability appeared in the last paragraph of its lengthy and historic resolution on Non-Co-operation adopted in the Nagpur annual session held in December 1920. It read:

"...As the Movement of Non-Co-operation can only succeed by complete co-operation, the Hindu delegates of this Congress call upon the leading Hindus to settle all disputes between Brahmins and Non-Brahmins wherever they may be existing, and to make a special effort to rid Hinduism of the reproach of untouchability, and respectfully urge the religious heads to help the growing desire to reform Hinduism in matter of its treatment of the suppressed classes."<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the Dalit problem was now a 'reproach to Hinduism' rather than a 'hardship' to the Untouchables. During the Non-Cooperation Campaign Gandhi specially focused on the 'propaganda work' against untouchability which was an integral part in the Non-Cooperation programme. During the movement Gandhi put forth a programme of 'self purification' comprising of four items of which 'giving up the practice of untouchability' was second.<sup>14</sup> In his speeches he always mentioned the Dalit problem. He normally urged the people to treat the Untouchables as 'touchable Shudras' and often asked them a question, "... (Will you) treat the Antayajas in the same way as you treat the Shudras? Raise your hand in support..."<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi generally mentioned the subjection of the Hindus under the British rule and compared it to the subjection of Dalits by the caste Hindus. He argued

that the Swaraj was impossible unless we would not liberate the 1/5 of our brothers and sisters from socio-religious bondage.<sup>16</sup> He compared the atrocities of the caste Hindus on Dalits with that of 'O. Dyerist' atrocities.<sup>17</sup> While declaring his promise of attaining 'Swaraj within one year', he appealed the people that they would have to eradicate untouchability during this short period of one year and not after attaining Swaraj.<sup>18</sup> His speeches often included a warning to the caste Hindus. For instance, in his speech at Haryana Rural Conference held on 15 February 1921 at Bhiwani, which was presided over by Lala Lajpat Rai, he warned the people that as long as they would treat millions of their countrymen as Untouchables, they also would continue to be treated as 'Chamars' and 'Bhangis' by the British.<sup>19</sup> He called the British rule 'satanic'. Similarly he also called the oppression of the Untouchables by the caste Hindus as 'satanic'.<sup>20</sup> He passionately warned the caste Hindus, 'The groans of innocent Untouchables are sufficient to keep the Swaraj away from us.'<sup>21</sup> Speaking in a public meeting on 18 April 1925, he further said:

"I am only a Bhangi, a Chamar, a farmer and a servant.... Hinduism is not likely to perish even if Khadi and spinning wheel are wholly forgotten....But unless the practice of untouchability is rooted out, we shall perish, Hinduism will perish. How can you accept a person like me, a Bhangi, unless you have given up untouchability?"<sup>22</sup>

When Mahatma Gandhi began his Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, he again reminded the people 'basic conditions of Swaraj' including the 'untouchability work.' During this movement he propagated that the foundations of the Swaraj were being laid by those who regarded communal unity and removal of untouchability as articles of faith.<sup>23</sup> He hoped that under Swaraj public temples, public schools and public wells would be used "equally by Brahmins and Bhangis."<sup>24</sup> He asked the people to celebrate 'national weeks' for the purpose of 'self-purification' and appealed to the caste Hindus to do 'constructive work' especially 'untouchability work' during such celebrations.<sup>25</sup>

By his arguments he continued to propagate that untouchability had no sanction in the Hindu scriptures and, therefore, the Untouchables should be treated as touchable castemen. He was of the view that untouchability was a system which was introduced as an 'Apad Dharma' (urgent duty) during the days of social decay and the 'form' in which it was being practiced currently was to be condemned altogether.<sup>26</sup> He also argued, "The Sanatana Dharma will not be saved by defending every verse printed in the scriptures."<sup>27</sup> He pleaded that the Bhagawad Gita does not justify any difference between a Brahmin and a Chandal.<sup>28</sup> He further argued that untouchability was "not in keeping with the teachings of Vedas" and was "foreign to the principles of Hindus religion."<sup>29</sup> He, therefore, denounced "the sort of untouchability which is being practiced" in the name of Shastras, and described it as "sinful."<sup>30</sup> He observed, "Untouchability is a sin against God and humanity."<sup>31</sup>

Gandhi laid great stress in his propaganda that he took up it "purely out of

the consideration of Dharma<sup>32</sup> and also that he advocated abolition of untouchability for a "purely religious motive."<sup>33</sup> He pointed out that it was his 'conscience' which told him that "untouchability can never be a part of Hinduism."<sup>34</sup> He wrote in *Navjivan* dated 1 May 1921:

"My prayer is this: The only thing dear to me is Moksha (salvation). My whole effort is to attain Moksha at the end of this very life. It is with this aim that I have taken up so seriously a movement of Non-Cooperation. However, if I do not have my aspiration fulfilled at the end of this life and if the sin of untouchability will not have disappeared by then, I would pray that I may have my next birth in an Antayaja family so that I could suffer all that they do rigorous Tapashya (asceticism) to mitigate their sufferings."<sup>35</sup>

Gandhi urged the people that we should have a "fellow feeling" for the "poor, down-trodden and depressed people" as it was the "essence of Varnashrama Dharma."<sup>36</sup> Sometimes, during his earlier days, this 'fellow feeling' of the Mahatma even took the shape of superiority complex. For instance, he wrote in *Navjivan* on 18 September 1921, "Yudhisthra refused to enter the gates of heaven without his dog. Do we hope to get into the temple of Swaraj ourselves leaving our Bhangi (and Chamar) brothers behind and running at top speed towards it?"<sup>37</sup> He repeated the same 'argument' even in 1927 in a public meeting at Mysore.<sup>38</sup> He uttered that Balmiki had written that Ramchandra provided justice even to a dog, and Tulsidas said that Rama made friendship with a Chandal.<sup>39</sup> He further argued that Rama ate berries already savored by Shabri (a low caste woman) and he hugged the king of Nishadas (Dalits).<sup>40</sup>

In addition to his efforts for convincing the caste Hindus against untouchability, Gandhi simultaneously appealed to Dalits that "they should never permit in their mind the thought that they are not Hindus...(as) a person does not leave his family because he is harassed by other members but tries rather to reform them."<sup>41</sup> While speaking at an Antayaja Conference at Sagitra on 16 January 1925, he appealed to Dalits:

"Why should you give up your religion? It is I who has to make atonement. Why should you give up chanting the name of Rama? It is the way of Rama to make his followers and servants suffer and it is thus he tests their devotion."<sup>42</sup>

As regards the inter-caste relations, Gandhi was totally against in earlier days. While giving an interview to a periodical on 23 September 1920, he opined on the issue:

"I am against both (i.e., inter caste dinning and inter-caste marriage) on hygienic and spiritual grounds. Eating is as dirty a business as evacuating, the only difference is evacuation is a matter of relief.... Suppose my son wants to marry my daughter, I will not stand in the way of marriage. But one thing I will do. I will not allow them room under my roof."<sup>43</sup>

He further clarified in *Young India* on 2 February 1922, "When I ask you to eradicate untouchability, I don't mean that you should eat and drink in the company of Antayajas or have marriage ties with them or drink water out of jug used by one of them. The Hindu religion does not compel anyone to use any article from which another has eaten."<sup>44</sup> Similarly, he was also against that "Bhagis, Chamars etc. should give up their vocations."<sup>45</sup> He had, however, to change his views in the matter due to growing criticism by the progressive people as well Dalits. For instance, he was criticized on this issue by his friends like C.F. Andrews and Rabindranath Tagore. When the caste Hindu boycotted and attacked those Dalits in Gujarat who tried to send their children to schools and to give up their hereditary occupations, Gandhi called it a "Swadeshi Dyerism" and opined in *Navjivan* dated 14 December 1924:

"...Other castes have also given up these old occupations.... Today the Chamar's vocation has been taken up by others also. I see no impurity in carrying carcasses to where they belong. However, how could I force others to do that or any other work?"<sup>46</sup>

After some days, the Mahatma also spoke on inter-caste relations in a political conference at Bhavnagar in a changed tone, "I have personally no objection to sharing my meal with him (Untouchable)."<sup>47</sup> Though he also made it clear that, "I am not asking you to inter-dine or inter-marry with him."<sup>48</sup> He gave liberty to the people in this matter saying, "this is a matter of your own choice."<sup>49</sup> He would also not oppose the Chamars, Dheds etc. who had given up their caste occupations; he still ideally regarded the caste occupations as a 'healthy division of work based on birth.'<sup>50</sup>

After 1925 Gandhi included in his propaganda against untouchability the teachings of saints and poets. He stressed upon the element of compassion found in their teachings for the down-trodden. His first favorite saint poet was Akha, a Gujarati Dalit poet of 17th century who, according to Gandhi, described the idea of anyone being defiled by the touch of another human being as a "superfluous limb."<sup>51</sup> He mentioned another Gujarati poet Pritam in his speeches who sang "At sight of the purifying flame of the path of love, people run away in fear." Gandhi argued that the path of love required that "we should not mind touching the so-called Untouchables."<sup>52</sup> He further argued that Vallabhacharya and Chaitanya "lifted up thousands of people who were regarded as Untouchables."<sup>53</sup> But it was Narsinh Mehta, a famous Gujarati saint poet, whom Gandhi admired greatly. He usually sang his famous Bhajan (prayer) in between his speeches which means that 'he is a true Vaishnavite who understands the sufferings of others.'<sup>54</sup>

Though Gandhi quoted scriptures against untouchability, yet, when the orthodoxy refuted him by giving evidences of the existence of untouchability in the Hindu scriptures, he warned that the Shastras would become "death traps" if we were to regulate our conduct according to "every detail given in them or according to that of character therein described."<sup>55</sup> He quoted Bhagwad Gita at

many a time in his anti-untouchability propaganda. To him, the banishment of untouchability meant translating into action the great message of Bhagwad Gita which read, "Treat the Bhangi and the Brahmin alike if you would but know God."<sup>56</sup> He further argued that how could any Hindu practice untouchability when he proclaimed faith in Advaita (the theory of non-duality)?<sup>57</sup>

During the course of time, the tone of Gandhi against untouchability became sharper. In 1930s, he fell heavily on the prejudicial attitude of the caste Hindus towards Dalits.<sup>58</sup> He went on to say that the sufferings of the Untouchables could not be compared with those of any other class in the entire region of south Asia or the world and "even the slavery of Negroes is better than this."<sup>59</sup> He treated all professions as equal and dignified. He spoke in his public meetings that a lawyer, a doctor or a collector did not serve the society "a whit more than a Bhangi or a Chamar"<sup>60</sup> indeed, the "Bhangi's services surely rank much higher than the services of these" because "if the former were to stop serving, what would be the plight of society?"<sup>61</sup> He warned the Hindus, "Assuming that the Bhangis on the bar sinister being not removed refuse to do our scavenging, we must be prepared to do it ourselves."<sup>62</sup> He declared, "It is by way of protest against this arrogation of superiority by one class over another that I delight in calling (myself) a Bhangi, that is sweeper, beyond which so far as I am aware inferiority does not travel."<sup>63</sup>

It is pointed out that in the public meetings the caste Hindus and the Untouchables used to sit separately during the earlier phase of Indian national movement. In order to get them mixed together, Gandhi used to ask them, "Do you want that this wall should disappear and that our Antayaja sisters and brothers should take their seats with us?" In response, many caste Hindus would raise their hands in support. Dalits then came and took seats with the rest.<sup>64</sup> This practice was fruitful. Gandhi also warned, "Let the Antayajas come in or permit me to go and sit in their midst. But remember that it is not proper for you to do anything out of the false regards for me and with the thought in your mind that you will take a bath after returning home."<sup>65</sup> In the public meetings Gandhi would also prefer to be welcomed by Dalit boys and girls. When he saw them being asked to sing from a distance, he uttered, "I can keep quite no longer....If the Antayaja girls are to sing from there, the presentation of the address on behalf of the Congress Committee would be a mere farce."<sup>66</sup> At such occasions he asked the caste Hindus that they were just "merely passing resolutions" and writing slogans on their welcome arches against untouchability which were only "for show."<sup>67</sup> There were occasions when people sitting in his meetings laughed over his touching references for the Untouchables. He would warn then people, "My friends, it is not a matter of laughter, but it is matter of shedding tears of blood."<sup>68</sup> He warned the caste Hindus to stop their atrocities against Dalits, otherwise their 'courage would ebb away."<sup>69</sup> He observed, "If Hinduism will bear untouchability, 22 crores of Hindus will perish which means India will perish."<sup>70</sup> He emphasized that the non-violence was "sole

religion" and if the people believed in it as a "cardinal principle of their faith, they could not possibly face the world with the crime of untouchability on their head."<sup>71</sup>

In 1927 Gandhi had witnessed untouchability in a Buddhist country of south Asia, i.e., Sri Lanka too. He spoke at Colombo on 25 November 1927, "I know that if India may take pride in having sent you Mahendra and the message of Buddha to this land, I had also to accept the humiliation of having sent you the curse of caste distinctions."<sup>72</sup> At Jaffna where Gandhi was welcomed by the Untouchables he said:

"I was delighted to receive two addresses from the Depressed Classes... living in a country over which the spirit of Buddha is brooding... Let us realize that it is a sin to consider a single human being as inferior to ourselves or Untouchable."<sup>73</sup>

## (2)

Having such an ideological framework with regard to the Dalit question, Gandhi came out with his specific initiative for the operation of his strategy of social amelioration of Dalits, particularly their most oppressed sections like Bhangis (scavengers), and Chamars (cobblers/tanners) which was also an important part of his 'Constructive Programme' vis-à-vis the problem of untouchability. His programme for social amelioration of the Untouchables included providing all necessary public and civil amenities, particularly water and education, to Dalits. Interestingly, the issue of temple entry was not included in this programme during the earlier period which, later on, became a prominent part of the 'Harijan work' of Gandhian Congress.

At Bardoli Taluka Conference held on 20 January 1922 Gandhi said :

"If there are separate schools for the Untouchables elsewhere, it may not matter, but here untouchability must positively be considered a sin. You cannot rest satisfied with having separate schools for Antyajjas. It is your duty to persuade the Antyajjas of those villages which have national schools to enroll their children in those schools and you should let them sit with your children."<sup>74</sup>

This speech was delivered in the historic Bardoli Conference. Here resolution on Civil Disobedience was passed which included 'Constructive Programme'.<sup>75</sup> Needless to say that it was Gandhi who made the Congress to take up the issue of social amelioration of the Depressed Classes. The party, however, did not contribute much to the cause except an expenditure of a sum of Rs. 43,381 out of Rs. 49.5 lakhs collected for the 'Telak Swaraj Fund' during 1921 to 1924.<sup>76</sup> In the Belgaum Session held in December 1924 under the chairmanship of Gandhi, the Congress adopted a resolution on the Dalit question saying:

"The Congress notes with satisfaction the progress in Hindu opinion regarding the removal of untouchability but is of opinion that much yet

remains to be done and, therefore, appeals the Hindu members of the Congress...to devote grater attention to the amelioration of the lot of Depressed Classes by ascertaining their wants."<sup>77</sup>

According to the Belgaum resolution, no school could be called 'national' where the Untouchables were refused admission.<sup>78</sup> But Gandhi soon adopted an 'impartial' approach and asked the Congressmen to "start a larger number of schools, especially for Antayaj children."<sup>79</sup> On 7 July 1927 he wrote in *Young India* that there were many schools for Dalit children being run in several provinces under the Congress and with Congress funds.<sup>80</sup> He further subscribed that those schools were also subsidized by the Government. The Congress also built 'Suppressed Class High Schools', particularly in Gujarat.<sup>81</sup>

It was further resolved by the Working Committee of the Congress on 24 March 1924 at Delhi to set up an 'Anti-Untouchability Committee' with M.M. Malviya, a prominent leader of Hindu Mahasabha, as President.<sup>82</sup> He was to be assisted by Jamnalal Bajaj. Malviya appeared to have done very little work for the cause and, as such, Jamnalal Bajaj was left alone to do the work assigned to the Committee. The office of this Committee was opened at 395, Kalbadevi Road, Bombay.<sup>83</sup> The main objectives of this Committee were:

- (i) to get public temples thrown open to the Antayaja;
- (ii) to secure for the Antayajas the use of public wells;
- (iii) to remove the restrictions which Antayaja children were facing in public schools;
- (iv) to improve their conditions in respect of cleanliness; and
- (v) to induce them to give up their habits of eating carrion and taking liquor.<sup>84</sup>

The Committee also expected from "every Hindu to help in educating public opinion for this work."<sup>85</sup> It is pointed out that Gandhi did not take up seriously the issues of wells and schools before 1932.<sup>86</sup> He, however, supported and admired the efforts of A.V. Thakkar who addressed an appeal to the public in March 1930 to donate to a Fund for digging wells for Dalits in Gujarat.<sup>87</sup> It was only after 1932 that Gandhi and party took seriously the issues of wells, schools and temples.<sup>88</sup> As of now, the Secretary of the Committee toured many parts of the country such as Madras, Central Provinces, Rajputana, Sind, Kashmir, Punjab and North West Frontier Province aiming at especially to convince the temple trustees in favour of 'temple reform.'<sup>89</sup> The Committee also organized three conferences in Bombay presidency in May and June 1929 at Bandra, Bombay and Poona.<sup>90</sup> Here workers took pledge to get at least one temple opened in near future by their 'humble efforts.'<sup>91</sup> But when these activities encouraged the Untouchables of Poona to launch a Temple Entry Satyagraha at Parvati temple, the Committee criticized their movement.<sup>92</sup>

It was after 1932 when Mahatma Gandhi did an intensive work for the cause of the Depressed Classes and, as such, made an operation of his approach to the problem on a wider scale. Actually, his clash with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-

1956), the renowned Dalit leader, during 1930-32 over the issue of separate electorate of Dalits made him realize the seriousness of the problem.<sup>93</sup> He even undertook a fast-unto-death on 20 September 1932 against the grant of separate electorate to the Depressed Classes by the British Government.<sup>94</sup> By this act, he forced Dr. Ambedkar to agree to the joint electorate with reserved seats in the historic Poona Pact (24 September 1932)<sup>95</sup> It is, however, pertinent to note that during his fast Gandhi referred to the problem of untouchability and not the issue of separate electorate as a excuse of his fast which, for a short time, lit 'sacrificial fire' among the caste Hindus and made them realize about their 'sins' and prejudicial attitude towards Dalits.<sup>96</sup> It was the only positive outcome of his fast in the interest of the Depressed Classes as they were suddenly treated properly at places. It was witnessed that the Untouchables would no more be marginalized community in Hindu society, as Gandhi desired. Swaroop Rani Nehru, an orthodox Brahmin lady and mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, accepted from the hands of a sweeper.<sup>97</sup> In Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore began 'organized work' against untouchability.<sup>98</sup> Common caste Hindus at many places organized inter-caste dinners. Many temples were thrown open to Dalits at place like Bombay (Vithoba Rukmani temple), Poona (Parviti temple), Madras (Kanhawani temple), Karachi (Jasraj temple), Nagpur, Gauhati etc.<sup>99</sup> After the conclusion of the Poona Pact some more temple were thrown open to Dalits, e.g., 100 year old Rama temple at Bombay, 80 year old Sindhi temple at Karachi and many other temples at Patna, Layallpur, Beawar, Rajwari, Calcutta, Baroda, Kashmir, Kolhapur etc.<sup>100</sup>

Gandhi who felt jubilant over such efforts, especially opening of temples, now decided to lead the Hindus to sustain their spirit of kindness for Dalits. Hence, the idea of 'Harijan Movement' took birth. During the Harijan Movement, Gandhi operated his patronalistic approach to the Dalit question on a massive scale. For operation of movement, a strategy was worked out wherein Gandhi retreated his stand on the issue.<sup>101</sup> He again declared the anti-untouchability work as an internal religious and social matter of the Hindus. He suggested that the caste Hindu 'reformers', whom he named 'Harijan Sevaks' (servants of Dalits), should take "this work as a purely religious work" and it must be "carried in a religious spirit."<sup>102</sup> He emphasized on a 'change of heart' among the caste Hindus towards Dalits by the peaceful means of 'reformers'. He made it clear, "Anti-untouchability movement is, as applied to the masses, for merely changing of heart and changing their (the caste Hindus') attitude towards Harijans, the vast majority of the caste Hindus do not need to interrupt their daily activity in order to serve the Harijans..."<sup>103</sup> He opined, "If reformers are truthful and humble, they can bring about a change of heart in the Sanatanists."<sup>104</sup> Gandhi still regarded Varna and caste as ideal social institutions.<sup>105</sup> Though he allowed the marriage of his adopted Dalit girl Laxmi with a Brahmin boy Maruti in August 1933, yet his opinion in the matter was that "I do not hold this marriage as an example for anybody to follow."<sup>106</sup> He only said that inter-caste

dinning should be left entirely on "individual choice."<sup>107</sup> He promised Dalits that in free India's Constitution, the evil of untouchability would be abolished.<sup>108</sup> In short, Gandhi's position was still almost the same as was in 1920s.

Mahatma Gandhi tried his best to satisfy both Dalits as well as the caste Hindus during the Harijan Movement. He made clear his position on the question in very beautiful words:

"I feel like the wife whom her many husbands profess to reject because the poor woman cannot give satisfaction to all her lords and masters... (though) the faithful wife (is) staunch in her loyalty."<sup>109</sup>

Gandhi said that he had undertaken the Dalit cause not in the 'spirit of patronage' but in the 'spirit of service.'<sup>110</sup> To this, however, Dalits would not agree. Their opinion was that the so-called 'spirit of service' itself indicated the spirit of patronage, as it reflected the feelings of pity, kindness etc. towards Dalits. Further, his 'spirit of service' had nothing to do with the capital issues concerning the problem, i.e., need of land reforms, political and economic empowerment of Dalits etc.<sup>111</sup>

In his statement to press after breaking his fast-unto-death on 25 September 1932, which reflected his future plans for the Depressed Classes, Gandhi said that he had decided to use the word 'Harijan' (people of God) for them saying he would like "henceforth to name them Harijans", and 'assured' his best to work for their cause.<sup>112</sup> After this he began his campaign against untouchability namely 'Harijan movement'. He also began to use the new name on a massive scale, despite the fact that it was disliked by both orthodox Hindus as well as Dalits. To proceed further, Gandhi decided to found an All India Anti-Untouchability League, a non-political organization of the caste Hindus, which was later on renamed as 'Servants of Untouchables Society', and finally 'Harijan Sevak Sangh.'<sup>113</sup> Gandhi started his Harijan movement with undertaking a 'penance fast' from 8th to 21th of May 1933<sup>114</sup> followed by the so-called 'Harijan tour', a most extensive journey in which Gandhi toured various regions of India continuously till nineteen months, i.e., from 7 November 1932 to 21 July 1934.<sup>115</sup> During this tour he made an extensive anti-untouchability propaganda and also collected a 'Harijan Purse Fund' worth Rs. 8 Lakhs which was contributed to the newly formed Harijan Sevak Sangh.<sup>116</sup>

In his fifth Statement on untouchability released on 14 November 1932, Mahatma Gandhi presented his guidelines for the Depressed Classes to the effect that "What Harijans could do in order to help the Movement." He asked the 'Harijan Workers' to devote all their energies to:

- (1) the promotion of cleanliness and hygiene among Harijans, and
- (2) to improve the method of carrying on what are known as unclean occupations, such as, scavenging and tanning.

During the Harijan movement, Gandhi especially emphasized on 'Bhangi work' and asked the scavengers to become "ideal Bhangis."<sup>117</sup> He also suggested village tanners to use "modern scientific methods" for tanning work.<sup>118</sup>

The large part of the 'Harijan propaganda' regarding the Depressed Classes was often related to the 'Bhangi work'. Even the Mahatma did not emphasize so strongly on cobbling or tanning work as he did in the matter of 'Bhangi work.' He was perhaps anxious about the problem of scavenging and sanitation in the caste Hindus' society, which could arise in the situation if the Dalit scavengers would deny doing their dirty work. This situation could cause a serious problem to the caste Hindus, as nobody would agree to work as their substitutes in any condition. That is why; the Mahatma always glorified the 'Bhangi work', and asked repeatedly scavengers to become 'Ideal Bhangis.'

But how was it possible for the scavenger to become an 'Ideal Bhangi', when he was branded by the Hindu Society as a "social pariah?" The Mahatma was equally worried about their conditions and that is why he repeatedly suggested the Municipalities to improve the working conditions of the scavengers. He pointed out that the municipal officials should help the scavengers by giving loans, constructing residential quarters, starting schools, arranging water facilities, and improving living conditions of the scavengers.<sup>119</sup> He also suggested the municipalities and local bodies to provide the sweepers "facilities for becoming clean" after doing their work.<sup>120</sup> These "facilities" included, "bath and change of clothes", which were propagated by Heeralal Shah, a 'Harijan Sevak' and disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>121</sup> Mahatmaji also suggested the municipalities to purchase carts for the sweepers for scavenging the human excreta.<sup>122</sup> He also asked the sweepers to use "strong booklets in place of baskets for the disposal of night soil."<sup>123</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi simultaneously suggested the sweepers to do "proper disposal" and "wise use" of human excreta, as it could contribute "annual gain of 60 crores of rupees to the country."<sup>124</sup> He even supported the arguments of a medical man in favor of human excreta as "good food" for cows and cattle.<sup>125</sup>

So far as the cobblers and tanners were concerned, Mahatma Gandhi also tried his best to convince them to continue in their hereditary occupations. But he was anxious to the problem of eating of carrion and beef by them, and wanted the Chamars to give up this practice at all. In an article entitled, "Disposal of Carcasses" in Harijan dated 18 March 1933, Mahatma Gandhi said:

"There are several sections among Harijans, e.g. Chakkiliyans and Madigas in Southern India, and Chamars in Gujrat, who remove and dispose off dead cattle, and eat their flesh.... We must show them the way out .... The removal (of carcasses) must be made condition as a promise, not to eat the carrion and no one shall be compelled to remove dead cattle.... The carcasses should not be dragged as it presently (done) as it damages the hide and decreases its value.... The way in which dead cattle are disposed... entails a loss of crores of rupees to the country.... They (bones) should be carefully collected and turned scientifically into manure.... The flesh... will be valuable for manufacturing grease for factories.... Municipalities and Local Bodies

and State can immediately undertake the work of training volunteers in scientific skinning and hide carrying."<sup>126</sup>

Though, Mahatma Gandhi used the word "volunteers", it actually meant for the tanners. When Prem Nath Bhargava, a 'Harijan Sevak', who was working in a tannery at Agra, asked him that would not the tanning of un-slaughtered cattle hides on a large scale by "modern scientific methods", helpful to "(a) economic upliftment of Harijan brethren... (b) improvement of living wealth of the country, (c) the creation of a new field of activity for the educated unemployed, and (d) protection of cows," Mahatmaji replied him that, "I have my doubts: home or village tanning is necessary."<sup>127</sup>

In an important article, entitled, "Village Tanning and its Possibilities", which appeared in Harijan dated 7 September 1934, Mahatma Gandhi said:

"It is estimated that Rupees nine crores of raw hide is annually exported from India and that much of it is returned to her in shape of manufactured articles.... If the villagers and the public know the noble service, the tanners render, they will provide easy and simple methods of carrying it, so as to injure the skin at all.... None, not even surgeons, do this work better or more expeditiously, than the village tanner does with his village knife.... There are several tanneries in India doing this work.... The urbanization (however) does little good to the Harijans, much less to the villagers."<sup>128</sup>

In this way like scavenging, the tanning work was equally as important matter of the interest to Mahatma Gandhi. He would like the village tanners to do this work just like doing of scavenging work by the "Bhangis." But as the cobblers and tanners were gradually developing a tendency of giving up their dirty and filthy occupations, the Mahatma soon suggested that all dead cattle "should be declared state property and the cattle should be treated under the supervision of reliable officers and proper remuneration should be given to the Harijans, who may be willing to skill the carcasses..."<sup>129</sup>

It is pointed out that regarding tanning, Mahatmaji promptly suggested the state to take up the tanning work in situation of its giving up by Chamars. But as regards the 'Bhangi Work', he never suggested so and always propagated this work among the common Bhangis as a "sacred work." He also did not care much about other hereditary occupations of the Depressed Classes. It was perhaps so, that the as denouncing of all the occupations by Dalits other than scavenging, could not cause such a big trouble to the caste Hindus, as the denial of scavenging work could be. There was no possibility of adoption of scavenging work by the caste Hindus or even by non-Bhangi Dalits and this would cause a serious crisis to the Hindu society. That is why; Mahatma Gandhi put the idea of 'Bhangi Work', in the center stage of Harijan propaganda for the Depressed Classes. After his Harijan movement, Mahatma limited his 'Harijan activates' only around the 'Bhangi Work.' He even began to live in a 'Bhangi colony' at

New Delhi during his last days, uttering to them "I shall consider my faith among you amply sacred, if you give up all vices.... If you are keen that I should take food prepared by you, you can come here and cook food for me."<sup>130</sup>

During the Harijan movement Gandhi also guided K. Kelappan, a Congressman of Malabar, to launch a Satyagraha for securing entry of Dalits to the Krishna temple of Guruvayur in 1932-33.<sup>131</sup> However, the Guruvayur Satyagraha could not succeed and the temple remained closed to Dalits up to the independence of India.<sup>132</sup> Gandhi just presented a scheme of 'model temple' for "building new temples where necessary" for Dalits.<sup>133</sup>

After the elections of Provincial Assemblies in 1937, the Congress got majority in most of the provinces and formed Ministries.<sup>134</sup> The Congress Ministries made some legislations in the respective provinces for ensuring the access of Dalits to public places, particularly temples.<sup>135</sup> They gave financial aid to the branches of Harijan Sevak Sangh.<sup>136</sup> They also increased government funds for education of Dalits.<sup>137</sup> Especially in Bombay and Madras provinces, the Congress Ministries did a good work for the welfare of the Depressed Classes.

During this period, the most significant thing which appeared now in the approach of Gandhi was that his efforts and ideas all witnessed a revolutionary change.<sup>138</sup> He attacked on the institution of untouchability in a very sharp language. His speeches were full of sincerity, passion and love for the down-trodden. He now even made an attack on caste system and expressed his desire, like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, to abolish it. He also reinterpreted Varnashrama. Said he:

"Today neither the Varnas nor the Ashrams (four stages of life) of my conception are in existence anywhere....The Ashrams have disappeared altogether and Varnas are found in the form of privileges. The claim of being a Brahmin, a Kshtriya, a Vaishya connotes pride. How can there be pride where there is religion? And the Shudras are not taken into consideration at all. Shudras are low and the Ati-Shudras (i.e., Dalits) are the lowest of the low. This is not religion, but negation of it."<sup>139</sup>

He further pointed out, "...If I had the power, I should declare that we are all Hindus, all of the same Varna....I do not know...when shall (we) be able to revive true Varnashrama."<sup>140</sup> He also openly advised inter-caste relations including inter-caste dining and inter-caste-marriages: "So long as there are restrictions regarding inter-dining and inter marriage, untouchability is bound to survive to some extent."<sup>141</sup> He advocated inter-caste marriage in most revolutionary manner:

"If an educated Harijan girl marries a caste Hindu, the couple ought to devote themselves to the service of Harijans....It is certainly desirable that caste Hindu girls should select Harijan husbands....I would agree that at present the marriage of a caste Hindu girl to a Harijan is better than that of a Harijan girl to a caste Hindu."<sup>142</sup>

He also allowed Dalits to select the professions of their choice and not the hereditary ones. When he was asked by a Dalit, "We want the right of true citizenship, equal opportunity, I want my son to have equal liberty to be a Vaqil or Barrister or a Doctor according to his wish", the Mahatma replied, "There is no legal bar...Dr. Ambedkar is a barrister."<sup>143</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi asked repeatedly the 'Harijan Sevak' and the Savarnas (caste Hindus) to work hard to remove all disabilities and difficulties of the Depressed Classes.<sup>144</sup> When the question of finances confronted the Harijan Sevak Sangh after resignation of the Congress Ministries in 1939, Gandhi redoubled his efforts in collecting the donations for it from the people. He followed a practice of charging a price for his autographs for the cause of the down-trodden. He got few hundred of rupees every year by this practice.<sup>145</sup> When Gandhi began his Individual Satyagraha in 1940, he stated that only those Congressmen would be permitted to take part in the Satyagraha camps who worked against untouchability.<sup>146</sup> He waged a powerful struggle against the obnoxious custom.<sup>147</sup>

When the independence came nearer, Dalits began to ask him about their position in free India. They were also worried about the special safeguards they got during the British period for their well being. A Dalit leader asked him pointedly:

Q. : What will be the position of the Harijans in future Constitution to be framed ?

Gandhi : In the Constitution I could influence...the so-called Untouchables would have seats reserved for them in all electoral bodies according to their population within the electoral areas concerned.<sup>149</sup>

And Gandhi agreed to give the Depressed Classes 15 percent reservation of seats in the Central and Provincial Legislature. He came with the same generosity and kindness to Dalits when he, in a prayer meeting at New Delhi on 27 June 1947, declared his desire that he would like to see a Dalit to be the first President of the Indian Republic.<sup>150</sup> Actually, this idea came into his mind on the demise of Chakrayya, a Dalit disciple of Gandhi from Andhra Pradesh, in May 1947.<sup>151</sup> The Mahatma observed on his death, "He certainly did deserve to be the first President of the Indian Republic....If I had my way, I would put a suitable Harijan girl in the presidential chair. In free India. Knowledge of English would not be necessary for the President. She needs not to have knowledge of high politics.<sup>152</sup> All the learned statesmen of the country would help her to carry on the Government."<sup>153</sup> He again said in a prayer meeting at Delhi:

"Who will be the President of Indian Republic?... My answer is that ... (it) will be a chaste and brave Bhangi girl....It is not necessary that President should be highly educated person knowing many languages....By electing a Harijan girl to that office we shall demonstrate our soul force....She should be chaste as Sita and her eyes should redicate light. Sita had such radiance that Ravana could not touch her.

If I can find such a girl, she will be our first President. We shall all salute her and set a new example before the world....This is real moral power."<sup>154</sup>

Such a 'moral power' was, however, yet to develop among the Congressmen and the caste Hindus as nobody among them took the Mahatma's words seriously. Perhaps this old great man of modern India was, to them living in a world of dreams and the old men's illusions (he was 78 then). But this was all said and done by Gandhi, the real Gandhi!

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