

GANDHI'S DALITS: RE-FINDING THE MAHATMA



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Off late the *Dalits* have made them more alert and organised than what they were few decades ago. Not only in political field, but in social life also they have rightfully asserted themselves to be honoured as a powerful social force. It is a matter of great satisfaction. Their struggle is still alive. Surviving against the illogical age-old discriminations, exploitations and countless insults, facing endless insecurities in lives, the *Dalit* society, in some respects, has successfully recovered itself to question its depleted conditions and create its respectable place in mainstream society. The *Dalits* are no more ashamed of their so-called lowly social positions; rather they use it as the adhesive force of their social unity and future political action plans. This has become the most powerful achievement for them to put aside the stigmas and bravely identify with their roots. This showcases one of the most powerful successes they have achieved towards social justice and equality in recent years.

***Dalits* in National Movement**

Dalits constitute nearly 17% of the total Odia population at present (2011) and live in every corner of all the 30 districts. They belong to different castes and also suffer from acute hierarchies in themselves on the basis of untouchability. Some are Christians, but they still considered as *Dalits* by the high caste Hindus of the locality. The British provided a new common identity to all by enlisting them in a Scheduled of Government of India Act-1935. After independence in 1947 they were also kept in the same category and became collectively known as Scheduled Castes. They were given with special benefits as the law makers felt it proper to support them to come out of their utter backwardness. In spite of the fact that most

of them were illiterates, otherised and poor, some of them could participate in the national movement and contributed for the independence of India from colonial clutch. It is found that a large number of them were well-wishers and sympathisers of Gandhian movements from 1920 to 1947. They proved a point that so far as the concepts of patriotism and sacrifice were concerned, they, at any time, were not behind to the people of higher echelons. They underlined the fact that the country also belonged to them. Any mercy to them is a matter of insult. They have the equal status like those of the normal mainstream people to live with dignity and honour. Social dignity and freedom to live without intimidation are their fundamental rights. They are no longer ready to allow anybody to violate it.

Untouchability as a Theme

A lot of discussions have been done in India on the origin, development and types of discriminations of casteism and its complex hierarchy. Foreign scholars also have done commendable works on this typical South Asian unique practice of social discrimination. Almost all of them have condemned the practice. The traditional explanation that their low status is due to the divine wish has no taker now days. Though some upper caste educated still believe that the oppressed are so because they are destined to be so and it gives them the fraudulent logic to feel superior to the oppressed, the idea has lost many of its lustre at present. Casteism or untouchability has very openly been condemned as unscientific and inhuman by majority of the scholars and people of different fields and these have been termed as matters of shame and blot for India. The *Dalits*

have excelled in different fields of life which also has proved a point that to be genius is not *Varna*-based. Anyone can achieve greatness by dint of his or her perseverance in a supportive atmosphere.

Historical Consequences of Untouchability

It is not a fact that the *Dalits* themselves have not started any movement against these inhuman practices in the past. Since the very origin of caste system the oppressed have protested it, the trace of which can be found in Vedas. Even in Puranic age many sages have fought against this injustice on behalf of the oppressed. Buddha and Mahavir have also initiated powerful crusades against this hierarchical society. In medieval period great *Bhakti* saints have organised the most powerful movements against casteism in the history of India till that time. But all became futile. Internecine wars and conquests have never allowed the people of the land to settle the matter once for all by which they could face the invaders unitedly. Social division on the basis of caste never allowed the Indians in the past to fight the enemies as a single force. Those wandering Hindus who went to different places of pilgrimages to get salvation treated their fellow humans with disdain, forgetting the fact that salvation cannot be achieved without seeing the people equally. One must be *Samadarshi* in life to get salvation. If one hated any living being failed to get *Mukti*.

***Dalit* Issue in the National Movement**

It is obvious that the issue of *Dalit* became a matter a great social upheaval in modern times, when the people from them became educated and came across modern democratic ideas. They warned the oppressors that if the latter wanted to live in a democracy they had to accept the idea of democracy in true sense. They could not avoid their responsibilities in a democratic set up. Some people of upper castes also became sympathetic to the cause of the *Dalits*. The era of independence movement provided a perfect backdrop to discuss the problems of the oppressed in an intense manner. Opposite

views were highlighted. Great leaders took the issue of untouchability as their concerns and sincerely wanted to end it. Only in the case of ways of emancipation they differed. It was quite natural. When a national movement was fought on the basis of equality and freedom, the question of casteism and untouchability were attacked. It became a national issue and nobody could avoid it. The consciousness on *Dalits* took two important trajectories-a) when the issue was highlighted by the high caste humanitarians or the liberals, and b) when the issue was nurtured by the *Dalits* themselves. The first was typical in its way which tried to include all contemporary issues including the question of untouchability and casteism into an array of demands to anyhow unite the Indians to strengthen the social base of Indian nationalism, the other was an exclusive one- it, in a straightforward way, called for immediate and prompt action for the *Dalit* liberation. The second did not include the issue of freedom movement as a prime factor in its programmes. They believed that political freedom without social freedom had no worth at all. The first one was from the above, having its own contradictions within and its members wanted to place the whole India behind them against the British. The second from the below-became exclusive and radical. The latter wanted to use the situation created at that time to end their age old discriminations. They had no faith in fairplay and sense of justice of the high castes. This was a new opening for them. They wanted to free their future generations and give them a world of hope and aspirations. Contradictions on any issue in India are not surprising things. The complex social division of the country makes every single issue controversial and fractured. This also happened in the case of *Dalit* issue during the national movement.

Gandhi and Ambedkar

Two important figures appeared in the political scene of India of the time when national movement was at its heydays. They found as well as also confronted them fighting in the same field- for the *Dalits*. One was a saint and the other was a very powerful organiser. One

belonged to higher caste and the other from the oppressed. One was a mystic while the other was pure logical. From 1920 to 1940s, they both became powerful organisers of the oppressed castes and also critics of each other. It was not Gandhi rather Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar who emerged as a bitter critic of Mahatma. No doubt, during the freedom movement, they both placed the issue of *Dalits* in the forefront and demanded the society to solve the issue which needed immediate actions. Gandhi while denouncing untouchability and casteism supported the *Varnashramadharma* as an organic development in a society where work divisions were natural to grow on expertises, Ambedkar squarely blamed the high caste society as the profounder of this system and denounced *Vranashramdharma* as highly artificial which should be finished as soon as possible. But one must think that neither Gandhi was easy with the practice of casteism and untouchability nor Dr. Ambedkar hated upper caste Hindus in denouncing untouchability or caste discriminations. While one believed in the sense of justice of the Hindu majority the other had no such faith. In a colonial situation, when a national movement was going on, the issue naturally became complex. When Gandhi wanted to safeguard unity in Hindus by including *Dalits* in them, Dr. Ambedkar could see the situation to bargain for his castes to get better constitutional rights.

The Good Result of the Discourse

Both Ambedkar and Gandhi placed their points and personal opinions to the public openly and without any bias. It made the debate very interesting and intense. This war of opinions made the issue more prominent and powerful. No-where at any time in the history of India was such intense high volatile discussion made on casteism and oppression. It is a matter of astonishment that such a sensitive and emotional issue could be discussed at every level of national life. It definitely exposed the hypocrisy of the higher caste people, who always were in moods to escape the discussion. The tempo of this discussion was continued even to the decades of post-independence

period. The issue still is alive today.

Gandhi's *Dalits*

Gandhi had the support of a big and well-organised Congress platform on which he could powerfully express his ideas and inculcate his points among the masses. He had lakh of co-workers across the land. He was a votary of non-violence, so he could not go beyond the limits of his movement. He initiated many constructing programmes to ask his fellow workers to enter *Dalit* inhabitations and end their age-old isolation. In many regions, these programmes were implemented in a very successful and intense manner. Hundreds of workers made them available to work for the untouchables. His programme on untouchability was a wholesome affair, taking their ways of life and participations into consideration. Dr. Ambedkar concentrated more on political issues which for him was the most important issue to deal with. For him political empowerment of the oppressed only could enable them to enter other aspects of life successfully. Gandhi asked his workers to train the backward people in spinning, mostly women in *Dalits*, who themselves were experts in traditional spinning and weaving. They were taught with taking care of them during pregnancy and to look after the children after deliveries. An integrated education system known as *Nayi Talim* was purposefully adopted mostly for the poor rural people, in which the *Dalits* constituted a major part, to train them in self-sufficiency and lifelong employment. Had the measures of Gandhiji been introduced perfectly and for a longer period the financial frustrations among the *Dalits* at present could not have been persisted.

After Gandhi

After independence in 1947 and the assassination of Gandhi in 1948, the situation changed. Gandhi came under intense scanning when the so-called Gandhians assuming political power thwarted or disowned the very basic ideals of Gandhi. The Congress became a political party; it did not follow the ideals of its pre-independence era. It was no longer a revolution; it became an organisation of power-

brokers out and out. The top leaders of the Congress made the issue of *Dalits* a matter of very insignificant concern. Some Gandhians of the post-independence time, who did not like power-politics, launched *Sarvodaya* and *Bhoodan* movements to pressurise the government to solve some immediate problems on priority basis. *Bhoodan* in greater way could have solved the landlessness of the *Dalits* had it been supported by the governments at the centre and provinces. Gandhi's *Ramrajya* mission was converted into a fiasco. Political survival of the leaders became prominent issues and the immediate social problems like casteism and untouchability were pushed into background. Many laws were made to declare untouchability illegal. Provisions for stringent punishments were made for the violators. But the degree of untouchability remained same. The society instead of becoming an integrated one was divided into upper and lower castes. Parallel social organisations came forward to safeguard the interests of different caste people. Each wanted the quota of share for their own caste from the powers structure. Caste identities became a matter of pride and also social conflicts. Castes started playing bigger role in politics. Numerically superior castes hijacked the political power in Indian democracy and put the democracy at ransom. Caste leaders ruled as satraps in regional politics. This abysmal situation made Dr. Ambedkar a new national figure when *Dalits* across India accepted him as their most powerful leader and saviour. Gradually Gandhi became a *persona non grata* when the Gandhians in politics tried their level best to sabotage Gandhian movements. *Dalits* in large number did not like to keep faith in Gandhi and his ways of struggle.

Conclusion

In spite of all these developments, one cannot deny the contributions of Gandhi in elevating the oppressed in India. With due respect to the contributions of Dr. Ambedkar, one cannot also avoid Gandhi's concern for the otherised people. One has to accept the disagreement of these two great leaders of Gandhi's or Ambedkar's calibre. It is also fact

that many of Gandhi's opinions in later years on *Dalits* have been amended by Dr. Ambedkar's struggle and gradually many things could have been sorted out in future if both of them were alive for long.

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