

GANDHI'S VIEWS ON *VARṆA-VYAVASTHĀ* IN INDIA: SOME REFLECTIONS

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Introduction:

Indian society is a multi-lingual, multi-ritual, multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society and above all, it is full of multi-layer of castes. The custom of 'caste-culture' is almost as old as the Indian civilization. Once upon a time, the caste system was almost streaming in all the spheres of our society. But its adverse effects have stigmatized the Indian glory of the past. It has resulted in inequality and injustice in our social life. It has also procreated untouchability. Thus, it was eroding the base of Indian society gradually. The caste system exists still in Indian society, but in a different way from the past. Indian society has become more complicated by the various layers of castes, but the seed of the caste system is contained in the deepest form of *varṇa-vyavasthā*. Generally, '*varṇa*' means the division of society into four *varṇas*; *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *śūdras*.¹ But in course of time the *varṇas* were further sub-divided into numerous castes. Once upon a time, *Varṇa* system which was built upon different *guṇas* and *karmas* of the different people became in course of time perverted and it appeared under a new name i.e. caste system. Ancient *varṇa* system which had an organismic and divine-origin approach to social organization appears to have emphasized functions based on *guṇas* and *karmas* rather than heredity, but gradually hereditary rigidity set in, and *varṇa* became identified with a hereditary occupation rather than *guṇas* and *karmas*. A wide variety of factors including the intermixing of the four *varṇas*, religious sub-divisions and separatism, geography and occupational diversity led, in the course of a few centuries, to the growth of a very large number of castes, sub-castes and sub-sub-castes, until about the middle of the nineteenth century, when there was an estimated total of about three thousand castes in India. This system was characterized not only by great complexities and restrictions relating to various forms of endogamy and exogamy, hypergamy and hypogamy but also by serious restrictions regarding inter-dining and various other forms of social intercourse.² Untouchability is the resultant of this caste system. So, naturally, the questions arise: what is *varṇa-vyavasthā* and how does it differ from the caste system? What is untouchability? How did it originate? And lastly, is it possible to eradicate this evil from the society and how? It is very difficult to answer these questions because these questions are full of

ambiguity and complexity. Its complexity has grown over time. M. K. Gandhi has given his views on solving these problems. I shall try to find out the answers to these questions through the path of M. K. Gandhi's perspective.

Gandhi on the *varṇa* system:

Gandhi's advocacy of *Varṇadharmā* was primarily guided by his attachment to the *Gītā*. The *Gītā* stands for an organic, as distinct from an atomistic, conception of society.³ Lord Kṛṣṇa said in the *Gītā*: “*Cāturvarṇyam mayā Sṛṣtam guṇa-Karma vibhāgaśaḥ*”.⁴ It means Kṛṣṇa said, I have created mankind according to their *guṇa* and karma. *Varṇa* means colour like white, red, pita etc. But metaphorically *varṇa* stands for different *guṇas*. ‘*Guṇa*’ stands for the three qualities of human beings i.e. *sattva*, *rajaḥ* and *tamaḥ*. Men used to be treated or classified according to their *guṇa* and karma. For this reason, the variations of *sattvadiguṇas* are present in all men, but it is also true that they are not present equally. These three *guṇas* are present in all men, but not equally. The differences in men are, thus, due to the difference in proportion of *guṇas*. Some *guṇas* are present more in one than in another. The difference of *guṇa-nyunādhikya* accounts for the difference in the different *varṇas*.⁵ Thus in Brāhmaṇa, *sattvagūṇa* seems to be preponderant over the others; in kṣatriya, *rajaḥ* preponderates along with lesser *sattva*; in Vaiśya, *rajaḥ* preponderates along with lesser *tamaḥ*; in Śūdra, *tamaḥ* predominates. *Varṇabheda* is not only due to *guṇabheda*, but also *karmabheda*. The karmas of Brāhmaṇa were *yajna*, *adhyayana*, *adhyapana*, etc., i.e., the performance of sacrificial rites for self and others, reading, teaching, etc., while those of *kṣatriya* is the protection of people from external aggression and internal disturbance, chastising the wicked, etc.; those of *vaiśya* are commerce, agriculture, raising of cattle, etc., and those of *śūdra* is to render service to the upper *varṇas*. They had to do all the manual work. Thus, we find that *varṇabheda* is due to *guṇa* and *karma*. On the contrary, *jātibheda* is due to heredity. *Gītā* emphasizes on *guṇa* and karma of the individuals, but not hereditary recognition.

Gandhi thought the teachings of the *Gītā* to be fundamental, universal and proclaiming the ultimate truth and he saw in the restoration of the true *varṇāśramadharmā* the path of salvation. He took *varṇadharmā* as representing the natural order of society. And the natural was perfect for him. When *Gītā* declares the four-fold division of *varṇa* to be based on *guṇa* and karma, Gandhi admitted the

validity of this claim but maintained that *guṇa* and karma were inherited by birth. He also admitted that “inherited qualities can always be strengthened and new ones cultivated”, and accordingly functions which were not performed by his ancestors may be performed by an individual, but these new functions must not constitute his calling. According to his own words, “If my father is a trader and I exhibit the qualities of a soldier, I may without reward serve my country as a soldier, but must be content to earn my bread by trading.”⁶ It is meant by Gandhi that one may perform any other function in society in an honorary capacity, but must accept the calling of the forefathers for earning one’s living. A *śūdra* has every right to acquire learning like a *brāhmaṇa* and even to become a teacher in an honorary capacity, but he must earn his living through scavenging or whatever similar occupation his forefathers used to have. But “He may not be called a *brāhmaṇa* in this birth. And it is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *varṇa* to which he is not born. It is a sign of true humility.”⁷ He proposed to accept one’s hereditary calling as earning a livelihood. A man who earns his living through any occupation other than the hereditary one becomes a *patita*, i. e. a fallen person.⁸

According to Gandhi, the most salient feature of *varṇa* is that it is based on unchangeable heredity occupations. For him, *Varṇa* means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. The law of *varṇa* is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood... *Varṇa*, therefore, is in a way the law of heredity.”⁹ It means that all of us should follow the “hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in so far as the traditional is not inconsistent with the fundamental ethics, and this only for the purpose of earning one’s livelihood.”¹⁰

Gandhi believes that man is born with some particular traits or characteristics from his ancestors and it helps him or her to express his or her ancestral occupation very easily and skillfully. So, everybody should follow his or her hereditary calling for earning a livelihood. Gandhi says that in the *varṇa-vyavasthā* all *varṇas* are equal and there can be no question of high or low based on the occupation. A scavenger has the same status as the clergyman. He has given an analogy for the understanding of it. The analogy between the limbs of the human body and the four *varṇas* Gandhi regards as very useful, because the limbs of the body cannot be superior or inferior to one another, but perform equally essential functions; and similarly the four *varṇas* perform equally essential functions in the body social and are devoid of any notions

of superiority or inferiority. The *brāhmaṇa*, who has been compared to the mouth of the Creator, is not in any way superior to the *śūdra* who has been compared to the feet. Gandhi observes that the *brāhmaṇa* has the opportunity of “superior service” but has no right to a “superior status”. The four orders merely represent a permanent division of labour, but all labour has the same value.¹¹ The hierarchy and gradation were a subsequent development of this system and gradually hierarchy and gradation of ‘high-low’ were clung to this system. The so-called higher *varṇas* believed that some kinds of works are considered higher than the other types of works. Such as the work of clergyman, professors etc. are considered higher than the work of scavengers, leather-workers etc. They also believed that their occupations are higher than the other *varṇas*. Hence, these lower *varṇas* cannot go forward or follow the higher *varṇa*’s occupation; thence higher *varṇas* enjoined that everyone should follow his or her prescribed occupation as a fundamental duty. So that the lower *varṇas* do not choose the upper *varṇa*’s profession, for this reason, the upper *varṇas* had tightened everyone’s occupation to be followed as determined by the *Śāstras*. Thus, hierarchy and the stratification of *varṇas* were created intensely day by day and the *varṇa-vyavasthā* had deviated from its goal. The caste system is the perverted form of *varṇa-vyavasthā*. Gandhi said very sorrowfully that the present caste system is the antithesis of *varṇāśrama*. *varṇāśrama* of the *Śāstras* is today non-existent in practice. In this context, the question is raised: what is the caste system?

Caste in practice as distinguished from the *varṇa*:

In the later *Vedic* period the caste system was not exclusively rigid; rather it was a mid-way between the laxity of the *R̥gvedic* age and the strong rigidity of the age of the *Sūtras*. The term *varṇa* was now used in the sense of caste not in the sense of colour in this age. In the *Sūtra* period caste system was rigid. Various restrictions were imposed. Restrictions regarding dining and endogamy are the sinister pillars which sustain the caste hierarchy. As a result, almost three thousands of sub-castes were created from only four *varṇas*. And untouchability had begun to creep in. Untouchability is the worst feature of the caste system which is so deeply embedded in the mind of the Hindu society that the entire outlook on life and politics is coloured by it. In the ancient *cāturvarṇya-vyavasthā* there was no rigidity to follow his or her hereditary occupation. Men should follow his or her occupation according to their *guṇa* and *karma*. A time came when one’s family or ancestor’s occupation was

rigidly followed instead of the principle of division based on *guṇa* and *karma*; then some kinds of occupation came to be considered as pure and others were impure. The notion of ritual purity indicated a conceptual foundation for the caste system, by identifying occupations and duties associated with impure objects as being themselves impure. According to the Brāhmaṇa ideology, the brāhmaṇas are the purest and the levels of purity decrease as we come to the other end where we have no purity at all. It has been stated that within caste ranking has been done based on the principle of purity and pollution. Generally, it is supposed that whoever accepts the ideology of caste system must be guided by the principle of purity and pollution. The higher castes are pure in comparison to the lower and the two have to be kept apart to safeguard the purity of the higher. The higher would become impure if they come into contact with the lower. So, to keep up the purity of the blood, inter-caste marriage was strictly prohibited in the four-fold division of the *varṇa-vyavasthā*. This emphasis on purity gave rise to untouchable people on the opposite end of society who were considered to be impure. Between the purest brāhmaṇas and polluted untouchables were the remaining three *varṇas*, ranked according to their level of purity. In this context, the question may be raised: who were the untouchables?

The term 'untouchability' is not defined in the Indian Constitution. But Durga Das Basu, an eminent constitutional expert, has tried to define the term 'untouchability'. In his words: "It has been assumed that the word has a well-known connotation, primarily referring to any social practice which looks down upon certain depressed classes solely on account of their birth and disables them from having any kind of intercourse with people belonging to the so-called higher classes or castes".¹² The theory of the early *Smṛtis* was that there were only four *varṇas* and there was no fifth *varṇa*. But in modern times the so-called untouchables are referred to as the *pañchamas*.¹³ *Pañchamas* mean the fifth caste or outcasts or untouchables. They are 'outcaste' means *pañchamas* had no place in the fourfold division of *varṇa-vyavasthā*. Although Gandhi believed that untouchables are nothing, but the *sūdras*. According to his own words, "a *pañchama* (a member of a supposed fifth *varṇa*, lower than *sūdra*) should be regarded as a *sūdra* because there is no warrant for belief in a fifth caste."¹⁴ Untouchability is largely an outgrowth of the caste system. Hallowed with tradition and sanctified by religion, it continued to exist in all its oppressive facets for centuries. It would consider the mere touch of an untouchable as

a sin. In some parts of India, especially in the south, not only untouchability was practised on a vast scale, but unapproachability and invisibility too. Gandhi believed that untouchability is the greatest blot on humanity and he wanted to eradicate such kind of evil with heart and soul. In this context the question is raised: which method did he follow to wipe out the untouchability?

Gandhi's suggestions for removing untouchability:

Gandhi believed that untouchability was like a weed, but not a part and parcel of Hinduism. According to him, “untouchability is not only not a part and parcel of Hinduism but a plague, which it is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat.”¹⁵ Untouchability conflicts with the fundamental precepts of Hinduism. Gandhi put the entire responsibility for the ‘cancer of untouchability’ on the caste-Hindus and he said that the caste-Hindus have a sacred duty to the so-called untouchables. Here he did not call for revolution against the removal of untouchability, but he wanted to change the outlook of the upper caste Hindus. He says that “untouchability will not be removed by the force even of law. It can only be removed when the majority of Hindus realize that it is a crime against God and men are ashamed of it. In other words, it is a process of conversion, i.e. purification, of the Hindu heart.”¹⁶ Hence, it is the moral responsibility of the upper caste Hindus for the development of the untouchability. For this reason, firstly, Gandhi wanted to change the heart (or outlook) of the caste Hindus by moral pressure. He understood that all changes must come voluntarily from the heart. If the soul of men is purified, then society will change automatically. So, he wanted to stress on the self-realization of men. He understood that society will never be changed until and unless the men are being changed heartily. It is not possible to change society inwardly unless men are being changed inwardly. Inwardly, we are all equal. This equality is obviously of soul, but not of bodies. Hence, men cannot be changed by brutal force or even law. When men will be self-realized, then he will not discriminate and hate the others (untouchables). To Gandhi, the essence of Hinduism is truth and non-violence (*Ahimsā*). The active manifestation of non-violence is love and the absence of any ill will. *Ahimsā* is the only path to change society. He followed this ‘*Ahimsā*’ principle as a tool for removing untouchability. Gandhi said that removal of this great sin of untouchability meant, “love for, and service of, the whole world, and thus merges into *Ahimsā*. Removal of untouchability spells the breaking down of barriers between man

and man between the various orders of being. We find such barriers created everywhere in the world.”¹⁷

On the one hand, Gandhi wanted to give stress on self-realization of the upper caste Hindus for removing the untouchability; on the other hand, he was directly involved in the welfare of the untouchables by organizing *Harijan Sevak Sangha* etc. Gandhi was struggling in his whole life for the upliftment of the untouchables through various social works. In his struggle to improve the status and dignity of the untouchables, he gave them a new name *Harijans*. ‘*Harijan*’ means ‘a man of God’.¹⁸ Gandhi thought that the traditional concept of *varṇa* system can be cleansed of the untouchability, in which untouchables would be ‘*Harijans*’ and their ‘unclean’ work would be accepted as honourable. Gandhi, meanwhile, was extending his *Harijan* movement all over India, in what was known as the ‘*Harijan yatra*’, with considerable success in some regions. For example, after he had toured Mysore State in January 1934 the authorities responded by agreeing to fund the improvement of facilities for untouchables. Branches of the *Harijan Sevak Sangh* were established all over the state, and its workers were encouraged to open schools for *Harijans*. Gandhi launched a major campaign in 1933-34 against the practice of untouchability, touring India in person to put pressure on caste Hindus to open up access for untouchables to public wells, tanks, roads, schools, temples and cremation grounds. In response to Ambedkar, Gandhi had extended his battle for the untouchables into the civil sphere. Previously, his challenge had been restricted to temple entry. In 1936, untouchables were invited for the first time by the Maharaja to participate in the annual *Dashera Darbar*. The state also supported temple entry in principle, though it proved hard to implement in practice.¹⁹

Gandhi did not believe in the caste system in the modern sense for its limitations. To him, the caste system 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. The outcasteness, in the sense we understand it, has, therefore, to be destroyed altogether. It is an abscess to be removed if the whole system is not to perish. Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low

that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is thus an attack upon this 'high' and 'low'-ness. The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to Gandhi's dream, it will resolve itself into true *varṇadharmā*, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other.²⁰ Gandhi said that "the innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion the better."²¹ He also said that "there appears to be no valid reason for ending the system because of its abuse." So, he wanted to abolish its outgrowths like untouchability, high-low division or gradation among men etc. but not the basic structure. Since in practice the caste system represents a social hierarchy based on the idea of high and low, and since, in any case, it is an unnecessary outgrowth of the four *varṇsa* which alone are fundamental and essential to the organization of society, he considers the multiplicity of castes to be undesirable and superfluous. "The division, however, into innumerable castes," he says, "is an unwarranted liberty taken with the doctrine (of *varṇāśrama*). The four divisions are all-sufficing."²²

Some benefits of the *varṇa-vyavasthāas* stated by Gandhi:

The benefits of the *varṇa-vyavasthā* have been glorified by Gandhi in various ways; these are: firstly, according to Gandhi, *varṇa* is not a man-made institution, but the law of life universally governing the human family. Fulfilment of the law would make life livable, would spread peace and content, end all clashes and conflicts, put an end to starvation and pauperization, solve the problem of population and even end disease and suffering.²³

Secondly, according to Gandhi, the law of *varṇa* emphasizes the duties rather than the rights of individuals (and since all labour is of equal value), "it ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth, though it may not be an ideal, i.e. strictly equal, distribution."²⁴

Thirdly, Gandhi was very much impressed by the *varṇa-vyavasthā* for its spiritual progress. According to him, "When I follow my father's profession, I need not even go to school to learn it, and my mental energy is set free for spiritual pursuits because my money or rather a livelihood is ensured. *Varṇa* is the best form of insurance for happiness and for real religious pursuit. When I concentrate my

energy on other pursuits, I sell away my powers of self-realization or sell my soul for a mess of pottage.”²⁵

Fourthly, According to Gandhi, *varṇa* would eliminate economic and occupational competition which he regards as unhealthy, since it “is today robbing life of all its joy and beauty”, and is opposed to peace and harmony since it leads to confusion of *varṇa* and ultimate disruption of society”-a state of affairs which Gandhi considers to be the characteristic of the Western societies.²⁶

Fifthly, Gandhi proposed for the same remuneration for all types of works, because all types of work or occupations are equally important for the all-round development of the society. No work is more high or low than another; they have all same value in his *varṇa* system.

Some objections against the *varṇa-vyavasthā*:

From the above discussion, there are many problems and drawbacks which may be raised against Gandhi’s *varṇa* theory. Here some problems and disputes are being cited: Firstly: It may confuse us when he mentioned that there are only four *varṇas*, all have equal status, and they are determined by birth. It may be changed by a person choosing another profession, but if *varṇas* are not as a rule determined by birth, these tend to lose all meaning. This statement is connected with the caste system a little bit in the sense of determining the particular place of an individual according to his *varṇa*. We find the same process in the caste system where heredity is also a determining factor of a man’s caste. Gandhi’s explanation of *varṇa* system thus leads to an inconsistency.

Secondly: Gandhi’s another argument in favour of the *varṇāśrama* system is unscientific. According to him, acceptance of the law of *varṇāśrama*, will remove competition and would thus prevent the disruption of society. But Gandhi has not shown or stated how intra-*varṇa* economic competition and intra-*varṇa* (as well as inter-*varṇa*) social competition is to be eliminated.

Gandhi’s view seems to be absurd and unscientific on another ground. Because competition is often welcome. It is often thought that competition makes a man sharp and it helps him to flourish. The competition gives a man the opportunity to express his or her intellectual calibre at the utmost level. So, Gandhi’s *varṇa* theory does not match with reality.

Thirdly, another argument of Gandhi is absurd when he expected the same remuneration for all types of works. It is absurd for the reason that if all workers are paid the same remuneration, then no one will be interested to do that particular 'work' where more skill and hard labour are needed. Interest to the work of a man grows his skill and helps him to express his perfection. Undoubtedly, it is true all types of work are equally important for all-round development of the society. But it does not mean, the same remuneration will be provided for all types of work. Although in our society, people pay their respect and honour to the highly paid people. So, it may seem that we cannot deny the connection between wealth and dignity. But this position is difficult to accept. No one can give dignity to anybody, we have to achieve it or we have to become worthy of it. Hence, we cannot say the same remuneration for all types of work will provide same dignity to all the workers. Hence, Gandhi's argument does not appear to be acceptable.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, we may conclude by saying that Gandhi's advocacy of *varṇa* system is unnecessary and futile. It cannot solve social problems; rather it creates another great problem. Today Indian society has become more complicated than the past. Our society has been stratified and classified by the various layers of castes. There is no specific reason behind it; because it has different reasons in the different parts of India. Thus, it has created a critical and complex situation. So, it is very difficult to bring all the castes into the four basic *varṇas*. How this reduction will be possible, Gandhi was silent about this matter. If it is possible to reduce all the castes into four basic *varṇas*, then it will not be possible to remove all the social problems. Until and unless the root cause has been eradicated it will not be possible to solve the problem. The root cause of social problems is contained in its divisive mode or features. If we divide all the people into four *varṇas* (i.e. four *varṇas* named *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*) on any reason, then its consequence will always be negative. It is not desirable for us to divide humanity into four *varṇas*. Hence, we have to see man simply as a man. *Jāti*, *dharma*, *varṇa*, gender or any other issues cannot be the factor of recognition of a human being. These man-made institutions are imposed upon human beings; these are not inseparable traits of a human being. Hence, first of all, we have to come out from any kind of division (it may be the division of *brahmana*, *kshatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra* or any other divisions).

Division procreates hierarchy, gradation, a distinction among the men. So, if we can rise above all kinds of division, hierarchy, gradation, then we will be able to regard all kinds of work as equal and respect all people. Thus, it will be a step to establish equality in society.

Notes and References:

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3. Radhakrishnan, S., *Bhagavad Gitā*, p. 161.
4. *Gitā*, 4/13.
5. Chakrabarti, Tapan Kumar, "In Defence of Varṇa-Vyavasthā: A Rejoinder to Ambedkar", *Jadavpur Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 1: PP.36-7.
6. *Young India*, November 24, 1927.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Young India*, October 20, 1927.
11. *Young India*, October 6, 1921; September 29, 1927.
12. Basu, Durga Das, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, P. 108.
13. N. K. Dutt in *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, vol. 1. P. 105, 1931, speaks of 'Nishadas, Chandalas and Paulkasas as the fifth *varṇa*, which is something against the *Smṛtis* tradition.
14. *Young India*, 23/iv. (Gora, Lavanam and Lindley, Mark, *Gandhi as we have known Him*, P. 142)
15. Bhattacharyya, Buddhadeva, *Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi*, p. 185.
16. *Harijan*, September 23, 1939.
17. Gandhi, M. K., *Removal of Untouchability*, p. 25.
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