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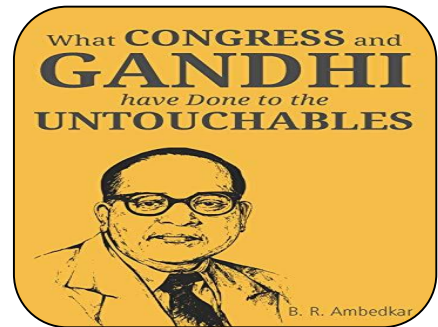
WHAT GANDHI AND CONGRESS HAD DONE TO THE UNTOUCHABLES?

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ABSTRACT:

Till the end of the extremist era and advent of Gandhi on the Indian political scenario and his involvement in the Nationalist Movement, the issues and problems of the untouchables were not considered by the Congress because these issues were of social interest. For a time, the goal of Congress was to obtain constitutional reform and political rights from the ruling British authority. The untouchables were treated as outcastes and the purity of the pollution was observed in the social context. After Gandhi's arrival, he was given prominence in nationalist politics and due to his commitment to the Poona Pact, Gandhi devoted much of his attention to the upliftment of the untouchables on all fronts. His period saw a great transformation in the life of the untouchables whom he called 'Harijans' and respected their invaluable services to society. He also founded the Anti-Untouchable League, later called Harijan Sevak Sangh , which had many branches all over the world including Tamil Nadu. The leaders of this Sangh were prominent national and regional Congress leaders. Gandhi forced members of Congress to serve the oppressed if they did not participate in the Non-Cooperation Movement or Civil Disobedience Movement.



KEY WORDS: Gandhi, Indian National Congress, Untouchables, Depressed Classes, B.R. Ambedkar, Harijan , Poona Pact, Separate Electorate , Temple Entry, Vaikom.

INTRODUCTION: -

From its inception in 1885 until 1917, the Indian National Congress intentionally avoided social issues. Even the more reformist leadership agreed with Daoabhai Naoroji's statement at the second annual session of Congress that Congress was a political body to represent the rulers and political aspirations, not to debate social reforms¹ in the Congress hall, from 1887 to 1895, but even that bond threatened to divide members of Congress. At the Eleventh Annual Session of the Congress in 1895 at Poona, the objections of Tilak and other extremists were so strong that the Social Conference was forced to dissociate itself from the

Congress headquarters altogether. Unity on political affairs was hard enough. Issues of social reform, which at the time, mainly affecting the status of women, was impossible.

The situation in 1917 was very different. The extremists and moderates had merged in the previous year. The Muslim League and Congress agreed on a common platform, and the Congress met in an atmosphere of British promise or eventual self-government. Mass support and mass politicization were now needed, and by 1917 one seventh of India's untouchable population had been recognized as the socially disadvantaged but politically important depressed class.² Edwin Montagu and Viceroy Lord Chelmsford had started their tour in the cold to gather responses to the proposed idea of political reforms. They were inundated with petitions and pleas from various groups, including at least ten from groups that can be identified as the depressed classes, all seeking representation in forthcoming legislative bodies.³

The Depressed Classes identified themselves with non-Brahmin movements in Bombay and Madras provinces. The non-Brahmin movement opposed the Indian National Congress out of fear that high caste elites in the Congress would dominate any Indian representative body.⁴ In Bombay, conferences of Depressed Classes were organised both by Congress and non-Brahman reformers and they brought the issue of Untouchability before Congress in 1917 in such a way that it could hardly be ignored. A conference of the depressed classes, attended by 2,500, met on 11th November 1917 in Bombay under the chairmanship of Justice Sir Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar who was the President of the Congress in 1900, General Secretary of the Indian National Social Conference and president of the Depressed Class Mission Society.⁵ The resolutions called for the right of the depressed classes to elect their own representatives to legislative councils in proportion to their numbers, compulsory free education, and upper caste Hindus to remove the stain of degradation from the depressed classes. The Conference also resolved to uphold the 1916 agreement between Congress and the League on Home Rule, and as if in exchange for their loyalty, asked Congress to pass in its next session an event making a resolution declaring to the people of India the need to eliminate all social and the religious disabilities imposed by religion and custom on the depressed classes because these disabilities being of the most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting the oppressed to various forms of hardship by preventing them from entering public places such as schools, wells, hospitals, courts and public offices. These disabilities, which were social in origin, were equivalent in law and practice to political disabilities and, as such, were legitimately part of the political mission and propaganda of the Indian National Congress.⁶

A week after the conference led by Chandavarkar in November 1917, a conference of 2,000 untouchables chaired by Bapuji Namdeo Bagade, leader of the Non-Brahman Party, denied support for the Congress- Muslim League Scheme, but also demanded representation a per the numbers of the depressed classes. Another non-Brahmin took two politically active Untouchables to visit the Secretary of State for India in December after these conferences, and although one of them spoke no English, Montagu was impressed by their extraordinary intelligence.⁷ The conference continued into the early months of 1918. The Depressed Classes Mission sponsored a second conference, this time chaired by the reformer Gaikwad of Baroda, at which Bal Gangadhar Tilak came and said that if a God was to tolerate untouchability, he would not recognize him as God at all.⁸ Another conference was held in Bombay under the leadership of Subhedar Ganpatrao Govind Rokde, probably of the untouchable caste of Mahars. This group demanded not only representation but also separate electorates (analogous to those afforded to Muslims) in which only the depressed classes could vote for their representatives⁹, a demand which would become a serious matter in 1932.

The British response to all these requests was to nominate one or two members of the depressed class as members of the Legislative Council of each province. The Congressional response was to issue continued statements urging the removal of disabilities from the 'untouchables'. With the rise of Gandhi to power in Congress in 1919, social reform became a legitimate concern in Congress. Gandhi's leadership

ushered in a major shift in the approach to untouchability, however under Gandhi the issue of untouchability was more religious than social.

GANDHI'S APPROACH

The Congress resolutions in the 1920s, its sub-committees on untouchability, and its efforts to address the work of the untouchable caste that most directly influenced its sessions and the bhangi sanitation work, all of them reflected Gandhi's basic approach to problem that dominated Congress from 1920 to independence.

The first untouchability resolution in the Gandhian Congress appeared in the last paragraph of the long and historic Non-Cooperation Resolution of 1920, declaring: Since the non-cooperation movement can only be successful through complete cooperation among people themselves, this Congress calls upon the public associations to promote Hindu-Muslim unity and the Hindu delegates to this Congress call on Hindu leaders to resolve all issues between Brahmins and non-Brahmins wherever they may arise and to make an unusual effort to free Hinduism from the sin of 'untouchability, and politely urges religious leaders to assist the growing desire to reform Hinduism in its treatment of the oppressed classes.¹⁰

The untouchables problem was now a 'curse for Hinduism' instead of a 'trouble' for the untouchables. Requesting religious leaders to help reform Hinduism was an ideology of Gandhi's not found in earlier reform literature. This appeal of Gandhi was valid and the resolution was supported in the Congress session by the Sankaracharya of Sarada who stated that his Guru had taught that the upliftment of the Depressed Classes was in accord with the Shastras.¹¹

In the enthusiasm of the non-cooperation campaign, all this momentum, of course, was secondary to the action of the campaign itself. However, the 1921 Congress Report points to two new tactics: the elevation of the sanitation work of the untouchable Bhangi caste into respectability and the attempt to agree on a policy on the admission of untouchable children to nationalist schools. A third tactic that was being tried for the first and only time was a promise, a required statement of faith. Article 5 of the National Volunteer Corps pledge stated that As a Hindu, I believe in justice and the need to eliminate evil from the untouchables and will seek, on all possible occasions, personal contact and endeavor to render service to the downtrodden. Such a pledge was never required to be a member of Congress, but Congress trusted all people over the age of 18 to join volunteer organizations immediately.¹²

The 1921 innovation of Congress that continued longest was the emphasis on sanitation as honorable work. In the large temporary cities that hosted the Annual Congress sessions, sanitation was planned as carefully as any other part of the programme. At Khadi Nagar, the Congress camp near Ahmedabad, the trenches were maintained by a devoted group of volunteers who, by their choice, undertook to oversee the sanitation of the latrines.¹³ Gandhi reported in *Young India* on 5th January 1922 that the work of guarding the trenches was not done by paid bhangis but by unpaid volunteers belonging to all castes and religions.¹⁴

The untouchable like Bhangi had long been a concept in Gandhi's mind.¹⁵ His approach was to make Bhangi's work acceptable rather than remove Bhangi from the sanitation work. Gandhi knew very well that not all untouchables were bhangis. Countless types of work, from shoe-making to village guardian, were traditional for other untouchable castes. Despite this, he highlighted the symbol of Bhangi, the remover of pollution. Gandhi believed that a Brahmin and a Bhangi should be regarded as equals.¹⁶ Furthermore, Gandhi observed that in his last days he would rejoice at the thought of having a strong-hearted, incorruptible, and pure-hearted sweeper first female president, assisted in carrying out her duties by a person like Pandit Nehru'.¹⁷

The Congress itself embraced the idea of Bhangi's work as a nobleman with sporadic enthusiasm. The 1923 Cooch Bihar Congress passed a resolution thanking municipal sanitary personnel for keeping

latrines and urinals clean. At the 1924 Belgaum Congress there were nearly seventy-five volunteers, mostly Brahmins, who devoted themselves to conservation work in the Congress camp. The municipal Bhangis were indeed taken over, but it was deemed necessary to have volunteers as well. Indeed, health work should be considered as the basis of all voluntary training.¹⁸ Also in Haripura in 1938, in all sessions of the Congress, the garbage collection work was not done by wage workers, but by volunteers.¹⁹

The issue of untouchables and education raised in the 1921 Congress was more complex than that of sanitation. In his welcoming speech as chairman of the welcoming committee, Vallabhbhai Patel said that the Congress had made the greatest progress on the issue of untouchability - in the face of boycotts, national education, Khadi manufacturing and pickets at liquor. The national schools were open to them in theory, so the Senate had an uphill battle. In practice, however, there was not yet the insistent campaign to bring the children of these compatriots into general schools and make them feel that they were in no way inferior to others. He then noted that separate schools for untouchable children should be maintained for some times.²⁰

When the question of education came up again in 1924, there was real division in Congress. The Congress Working Committee recommended to the Subjects' Committee that Congress would not regard any such institution to be national which did not actively encourage Hindu-Muslim unity and which excluded untouchables, which did not make hand spinning and carding compulsory, and where the khaddar was not customarily worn by students and teachers.²¹ In the resolution on national educational institutions passed in the Belgian session that year, the requirement was teaching of an Indian language added, all details on spinning and khaddar were kept, but the restriction on excluding untouchables was relaxed so that any such institution would not be considered national by Congress that does not actively promote the Hindi-Muslim unity, education among the untouchables, and the removal of untouchability.²² No debate on this was recorded in the 1924 Congress report. One wonders who prompted this revealing change. As much as some insisted, requiring national schools to accept untouchable children was beyond the bounds acceptable to others.

In 1922, the Congress Working Committee had appointed a very thoughtful and earnest group of four to formulate plans to improve the condition of the untouchables and awarded them five lakh rupees. In keeping with Gandhi's religious leader idea, Swami Shradhanada was appointed president; Sarojini Naidu and two prominent members of the regional Congress, Indulal Yagnik of Gujarat and G.B. Deshpande of Karnataka, were made members.²³ It did not help. The Swami resigned from the committee and subsequently from the Congress in protest at the failure of the Congress to heed his recommendations.²⁴ After several attempts to help the committee function without its Swami, the 1923 Congress Working Committee asked the more orthodox and conservative Hindu Mahasabha to consider the matter.

The next sub-committee on untouchability was formed in 1929. This one consisted of Pandit Malaviya of the Hindu Mahasabha as chairman and millionaire businessman Marwari Jammalal Bajaj as secretary. Malaviya appeared to have done little. Bajaj had toured many parts of India. In 1928 he opened his own temple in Wardha, the Lakshminarayan Temple, described by all as 'magnificent', and his tour was mainly to get other temple owners and managers to admit the untouchables. Temple entry was now a matter that Congress addressed in sub-committees and was pursued again on a voluntary persuasion basis. There were temple-entry movements in the 1920s, which probably influenced the Congress's emphasis on this issue, with Vaikom and Parvati representing early efforts by the depressed classes to reclaim religious rights.

The members of the Ezhava caste, Syrian Orthodox Christians and some caste Hindus organized the Vaikom Satyagraha in the princely State of Travancore in 1924. The problem revolved around the outer prakara of the Siva temple. Further, roads were denied access to Ezhavas, Pulayas and other non-caste Hindus beyond the prescribed limits where sign boards were placed.²⁵ Gandhi arrived in Travancore for a

month in March 1925 and spent long fruitless discussions with the temple priests on the problem of untouchables and their *karma* - their status as a result of previous actions.²⁶ The satyagraha did not end until the fall of 1925. Some roads were eventually cleared.

This was the only instance where Gandhi collaborated with a satyagraha against a Hindu institution. Some circumstances led him to avoid it so totally after Vaikom. When the Untouchables and others began a non-violent satyagraha on the sacred Parvati Hill in Poona in 1929, a Gandhian committee visited the site and discussed it with the administrators, but found that the satyagraha had created an atmosphere of bitterness and distrust.²⁷ Neither the Parvati satyagraha nor the one initiated by Nasik in 1930 won approval of the Congress. In a conference of the depressed classes of India held in Lahore at the Congress hall on 25th December 1929, Gandhi made his position clear. According to him, those temples from which the depressed classes were excluded, on account of their low birth, had no gods in them and those who entered by force had no mercy within them.²⁸ Although Gandhi and the Congress came to the position that any entry to the temple should be completely without coercion or demonstration. The idea of temple entry for all had been firmly established as a legitimate concern of Congress. The Anti-Untouchability Committee was charged for a number of concerns,²⁹ but the temple entry became the main arena for the next decade.

The issue that was at the core of the 1917 petition to Congress from the Depressed Classes Conference contained admission to public office, public schools, and public wells. But this issue was largely overlooked by Gandhi's religious focus. There was an interesting note from the 1924 Belgaum Congress, of which Gandhi was president. Accordingly, the Hindu members of the Provincial Congress Committee were to determine the needs of the depressed classes as regards wells, places of worship, educational facilities, etc. and ensure that these needs were met.³⁰ This seemed almost a direct response to a resolution passed in 1923 by the Bombay Legislative Council which permitted the untouchables the use of all public watering bodies, wells, schools, dispensaries and other facilities.³¹ The Bombay resolution had no force. As a matter of fact, the district collectors were required to advise local authorities to consider accepting the recommendation. Both actions bore little fruit, but it appeared that of the Bombay Legislative Council was much bolder.

Gandhi did not attend the first Round Table Conference, as his famous 1930 Salt Satyagraha had resulted in a prison sentence. When the second Round Table Conference was convened in 1931, Gandhi presented himself. There difference of opinions and a clash of beliefs arose between Gandhi and Ambedkar in finding a solution to the issue of untouchability.³² The Round Table Conference met with Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians and All Indian Christians were calling for separate electorates to guarantee their political rights. In this context, Ambedkar called for a separate electorate for the untouchables, while Gandhi argued that the untouchables should not be considered a separate group. In 1932 the British Government gave the depressed classes a separate electorate for seventy-eight representatives in the provincial legislatures. Gandhi, again imprisoned, responded by launching a 'fast unto death'.³³ Ambedkar was forced to contemplate Gandhi's death if he continued to push for a separate electorate. To save Gandhi's life, a compromise was reached with Ambedkar (known as the 'Poona Pact') whereby a joint electorate would be maintained for Hindus, but with more seats for the Depressed Classes.³⁴

Pandit Mohan Madan Malaviya, the President of the 1929 Congress Sub-committee on Untouchability and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, convened a conference on 19th September 1932. He aspired to a compromise solution because the Mahatma's health was failing in his prison cell at Yeravada. A large number of caste Hindus and untouchables attended the conference which was held between Bombay and Poona. After five days of negotiations, the Poona Pact was signed. It brought together various political leaders from Malaviya to Ambedkar. Despite losing on the separate electorate issue, the Depressed Class

won 148 reserved seats in the provincial legislatures, instead of the seventy-eight allowed by the Communal Award.

Signed by ninety-seven caste Hindus and Depressed Classes, including Congress supporters such as Rajendra Prasad and C. Rajagopalachari, the Poona Pact was not seen as a victory by either side. Ambedkar lamented the loss of separate electorate. Many Congress leaders, especially from Punjab and Bengal, felt that the number of seats reserved for untouchables far outweighed the actual untouchability problem in those provinces.³⁵ The Government placed untouchables under a Scheduled in every province. From then on, the term 'Scheduled Castes' was applied to the approximately 600 groups of 'Untouchables'. They were qualified for reserved seats in legislatures.

Gandhi became most passionate about removing untouchability after he was released from jail. He christened the name "Harijans" (Children of Lord Hari)³⁶, which was strongly opposed by both orthodox Hindus and Ambedkar. Gandhi changed the name of his newspaper, 'Young India' to 'Harijan'³⁷, and involved in All-India Harijan Tour and established an Anti-Untouchability Committee for the elimination of Untouchability which became the Harijan Sevak Sangh. However, that Committee operated separately, without reference to Congress.³⁸ Indeed, Nehru attached little importance to the *swadeshi* and Harijan movements.³⁹ Gandhi made it clear that only those Congressmen who were too weak to be court arrested and those who had lost faith in civil disobedience were to join the Harijan Movement and to strengthen the political activities of the Congress or its control over the people.⁴⁰

Given Gandhi's emphasis on temple entry and changing attitudes and hearts among caste Hindus, Congress could hardly be expected to enact binding laws on the rights of untouchables. The two provinces that took the Untouchable problem most seriously were Madras and Bombay. The Bombay Harijan Temple Worship (Removal of Disabilities Act, XI of 1939) Act allowed the trustees of any Hindu temple to declare it open to untouchables. It was passed in the presence of Ambedkar. However, the Orthodox meeting raised objections outside the House.⁴¹ In Madras, Premier Rajagopalachari approved four bills. Three were concerned with the temple entry, making it possible for temples to be opened if the majority of caste Hindus in a taluk agreed (Malabar Temple Entry Act, XX 1938) or if the trustees so wished, the provincial government approved (Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Act, XXII of 1939).⁴² The third bill indemnified the reformist officials and trustees. The Removal of Civil Disabilities Act, XXI of 1938, authorized untouchables to enter public office or obtain public facilities. It also indicated that the court or public authority should not recognize customary civil disabilities.⁴³

To conclude, at the onset of independence, India enacted legislation outlawing the practice of untouchability and criminalizing any discrimination against former untouchables. It also instituted the most comprehensive compensatory discrimination system in the world to redress the long-standing disabilities of the untouchables.⁴⁴ Congress's record of dealing with a socially disadvantaged people at the same time, who were seeking independence from Britain, is a study of the politics of nationalism and the politics of social reform. Indeed, Gandhi and Congress rendered an invaluable services to the removal of untouchability and enhancement of the untouchable in India to a large extent. The protest of B.R. Ambedkar shaped the ideology of Gandhi, and Gandhi and Congress came forward to do beneficial measures for the overall progress of the untouchables in the caste-ridden Hindu society.

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