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Ambedkar's Arguments on Gandhi's Social and Political Concern for Untouchables

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Abstract:

The main concern of my paper is to focus on Ambedkar's arguments about Gandhi's anxiety to count Untouchables as a part of Hindu fold and unwillingness to concede either political autonomy or agony to the Untouchables. Ramchandra Guha, Scholar and Historian rightly said, "Mahatma Gandhi was not so much the father of the Nation as the mother of all debates regarding its future." All his life he fought in a friendly spirit with compatriots whose views on this or that topic diverged sharply from his. He disagreed with the Communist and the Bhadra lock on the efficacy and morality of violence as a political strategy. He fought with radical Muslims on one side and radical Hindus on the other, both of whom sought to build a state on the theological principles. In some ways the most intense, interesting and the long-running of these debates was between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Gandhi wished to save Hinduism by abolishing untouchability whereas Ambedkar saw a solution for his people outside the fold of Hinduism. Gandhi was a crypto-anarchist who favored non-violent protest while being suspicious of the State; Ambedkar, a steadfast constitutionalist, sought solution to social problems with the aid of the State.

Keywords: Dalit, Hindu, Congress, Muslim League, untouchability.

Introduction

The most telling difference between Gandhi and Ambedkar was in the choice of political instruments. For Gandhi, the Congress represented all the Indians, the Dalits too. However the Congress's claim to represent all India was always under challenge. The Communists said that it was a party of landlords and Capitalists. The Muslims League said that it was a party of the Hindus. Ambedkar then appended a devastating caveat saying that the party did not even represent all Hindus, but only the so-called upper caste Hindus. Not only Ambedkar but many other scholars all over India fought bitterly with Gandhi's ideas about caste and the representation of their community in building a strong and democratic nation. Mangu Ram rejected the Congress and the Arya Samaj to form a new sect, Adi Dharam, which was opposed to both and Namasudras in Bengal, who like Ambedkar and his Mahars, were not convinced that a future Congress government would be sympathetic to their interests. The Movements founded by Periyar also held the same grudges against Gandhi and Congress. The leaders of these Movements and the millions who followed them worked outside the congress and often in opposition to it.

The tragedy from Gandhi's point of view was that his colleagues in the national Movements either did not understand his concern with untouchability or actively deplored it. Shankararcharya thought, Gandhi was going too fast in his challenge to caste and he should take the permission of the Untouchables to take any step concerning them. Communists wondered why he wanted everyone to clean their own latrines when he could be speaking of class struggle and Congress man in general thought Harijan work came in the way of an all-out effort for National freedom.

Gandhi entered Indian Politics in 1919. He made Congress a mass organization and launched a constructive programme of social amelioration known as Bardoli Programme. He started a fund of 1 crore 230 lakhs of rupees known as 'Tilak Swaraj Fund' out of which a sum of 49 and a half lakh was allotted to Bardoli programme which also included the upliftment of the Untouchables. The Congress proposed to start a separate fund of 5 lakh and then reduced it to 2 lakh for this work. Only 2 lakh for 60 million Untouchables! Yet only 43,381 rupees were actually spent.

Seeing that the Congress was not really sincerely interested in this programme Swami Shradhanand Sanyasi resigned and then this task was handed over to Hindu Mahasabha which too had least interest in the programme of uplifting the Untouchables. Ambedkar thus became the severe critique of Gandhi, Congress and all other Hindu dominated organizations. He once quoted "Gandhi is the greatest enemy the Untouchables have ever had in India." All the organizations which worked for the cause of freedom never bothered to take any interest in working for the Untouchables. Ambedkar regarded congress as a body of middle class Hindu supported by the Hindu capitalist whose object is not to make Indians free but to be independent of British control and to occupy places of power now occupied by the British. He further comments that if this kind of freedom which the congress wants is achieved, there is no doubt that the Hindu would do to the Untouchables, exactly what they have been doing in the past.

Ambedkar set forth some demands at the All India Scheduled Caste Conference held in the city of Nagpur on 18th and 19th July 1942 which fall into three categories 1) Political 2) Education and Economic and 3) Social. These demands of the Untouchables have been the subject matter of great controversy between the Untouchables and the Hindus. Ambedkar satirically called Mr. Gandhi the so called friend of Untouchable as "Hindu" stressing on the fact that he alone is the representative of the high-caste dominated society and the Untouchables do not fall under the category of "Hindu". When Ambedkar's political demands were denied by Gandhi and Congress he in his 'Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables' quoted "The Hindus of the Congress describes their scheme as a National Scheme and calls the Scheme put forth by the Untouchables as the Communal Scheme for their own interests." He differentiated between the two by saying that both have same objectives as both stand for a Representative Legislature. The point of difference lies in the method of devising a scheme which will make it a truly Representative Legislature. Communal scheme denies territorial constitution in view of the peculiar social structure of the Indian society as it exists then and to some extent even today. Ambedkar believed that the Hindu therefore in relying upon the territorial constituency is seeking to base the political

structure of India upon found actions which all political architects have declared to be unsound. Ambedkar further claims, “Hindu/ Gandhi prefers the territorial constituency because he knows that it will enable him to collect and concentrate all political power in the hands of the Hindus and who can deny that his calculation is correct?”

Ambedkar was to some extent right in protesting it because the Hindu social system which places communities one above the other is a factor which is bound to have its effects on the result of voting. Later after a long struggle Hindus accepted the view that a purely territorial constituency will not do in a country like India. However, the fact is that although the Hindus accepted the basic argument in favor of Communal Scheme of Representation, they did not accept all what the Untouchables were demanding. A long debate took place when Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for the Untouchables. A separate electorate means an electorate composed exclusively of the Untouchable voters who are to elect an Untouchable as their representative to the Legislature. At which the Hindu agreed that certain number of seats will be reserved for the Untouchables, to be filled only by the Untouchables. The objection to separate electorate made by Gandhi and followers was that it would lead to the fragmentation of the nation. At which Ambedkar objected that there is no nation of India in real sense of the world but it is created by suppressing a community which is not a method of creating nation in true sense and thus Hindu’s arguments against separate electorate is insubstantial and unsupportable. Ambedkar goes on to say that the real objection to separate electorate by the Hindus is different from the objections raised in the name of nation. The real objection is that separate electorate does not permit the Hindus to capture seats reserved for the Untouchables.

The second political demand of the Untouchables is that they must not only be represented in the Legislature but also in the Executive. This demand also was opposed by the Hindu on two forms 1) one was that the Executive must represent the majority of Legislature and 2) the men in the Executive must be competent to hold places in the Executive. Ambedkar bitterly reacted to it as “The stress upon competency is needless. Nobody has said that ignorant people should be made minister simply because they are Untouchables. Given the chance the Untouchable will elect the most competent people amongst them.”

The third demand was that a certain proportion of posts shall be reserved for them subject to the rule of minimum qualification. This demand was also objected by Hindus that the interests of the state require capacity, efficiency and character should be the only consideration and that caste and creed should have no place. The Hindus insist on the fact that public offices should be filled on the basis of competitive examinations open to all castes and creeds. Ambedkar believed that they took such a stand because it serves the purpose of efficiency and does not prohibit the entry of Untouchable in the public service of the country. But Ambedkar sarcastically reminds the Hindus that this fairness can only be possible where Untouchables are given equal educational rights. We can’t ignore the fact that once upon a time their entry to schools and colleges was restricted and that’s why Ambedkar demanded that a minimum qualification should be prescribed for every post in public service and if two persons apply for such a post, the Untouchable having the minimum qualification should be preferred to a Hindu who may have a higher qualification than the Untouchable.

Ambedkar's last demand is to have separate settlements. According to him as long as the present arrangement continues it is impossible for the Untouchable to free themselves from the yoke of the Hindus or to get rid of this untouchability. Ambedkar's reason for demanding separate settlements arise out of the economic position of the Untouchables in the villages. They were landless laborers who are entirely dependent upon such employment as the Hindus may find it profitable to pay. Ambedkar wanted the government to help the depressed classes in the settlement though he was aware of the fact that the transplantation could take a long time. He quotes "Those who have been the bounded slaves of the Hindus for 1000 years may well be happy with the prospect of getting their freedom by the end of 20 years."

In the mid of all these debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar, Gandhi refused to acknowledge Dr. Ambedkar as the true representative of the Untouchables. He said, "I will not bargain away their rights for the kingdom of the whole world." Ambedkar was annoyed with Gandhi to give the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians separate electorates and his secret agreement to give the Muslims all their 14 demands, in return, he wanted them to oppose Dr. Ambedkar's demand at 2nd RTC. When finally they could not arrive at a decision regarding the minority problem they submitted a memorandum decision which Gandhi also signed. But later the PM gave his decision which Gandhi refused to accept and went on fast unto death! Now question arises like could the Dalits love or regard such a Gandhi as their friend or well-wisher?

Gandhi's fast started on 20th September 1932. Dr. B.R Ambedkar issued a statement on the 19th instant. Ambedkar said, "Whether he knows it or not, the Mahatma's act will result in nothing but terrorism by his followers against the depressed classes all over the country. If Mr. Gandhi coolly reflects on the consequences of his act, I very much doubt whether he will find this victory worth having ...the Mahatma is realizing reactionary and uncontrollable forces and is fostering the spirit of hatred between the Hindu Community and Depressed classes." Dr. Ambedkar ended his statement saying that "I am prepared to consider the proposals of the Mahatma. I however trust the Mahatma will not drive me to the necessity of making a choice between his life and the rights of my people. For I can never consent to deliver my people, bound hand and foot to caste Hindu for generation to come." To save Gandhi from sure death, a conference of Hindu leaders was held at the hall of the Indian merchant in Bombay on 19th September 1932 where Ambedkar said "Secure Gandhi's alternative proposal...but one thing is decided. To save Gandhi's life I would not be a party to any proposal that would be against the interest of my people."

Later when Dr. Ambedkar was told that Gandhi had no personal objection to the reservation of seats for the depressed classes he told the conference, "It has fallen to my lot to be the villain of the piece. But I shall not deter from my pious duty and betray the just and legitimate interest of my people even if you hang me on the nearest lamp-post in the street."

63 year Gandhi was without food for three days and the question of duration of primary election and referendum to decide the duration of reserved seats was hanging undecided. Later it was decided to make the agreement without the condition of referendum. Thus the Poona Pact was signed. I would like to quote Ambedkar's reaction here, "No man was placed

in a greater dilemma than I was then. I had to make a choice between two different alternatives. It was before me the duty, which I owed as a part of common Humanity and saved the life of Mr. Gandhi by agreeing to alter the Communal Award in a manner satisfactory to Mr. Gandhi.”

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my paper with Ambedkar’s remark over Gandhi’s political justice to the Untouchables, “Gandhi wanted only 5 years to decide whether to extend or not to extend the period of reserved seats. Could untouchability be eradicated in five years? Now after 75 years the reservation needs still to be Continued whatever Gandhi spoke about untouchability, whatever means he undertook to deal with the problems of his very own depressed country man. Is that what was expected from a Mahatma, a Social leader and the so-called friend of Dalits. Though these questions rose by Ambedkar and his followers remained unanswered then and to some extent even today. Gandhi and Ambedkar though both were equally concerned with the upliftment of the Untouchables, their strategies were different, where Gandhi wanted them to be in Hindu fold and then seek for the solution, Ambedkar fought to provide them with different political identity and was not willing to count them as a part of Hindu fold.

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