

GANDHI'S CRUSADE AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY: A CORNERSTONE OF HIS CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME

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Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against untouchability was a crucial element of his broader Constructive Programme, aimed at transforming Indian society through non-violent means. This article examines Gandhi's approach to eradicating untouchability, which he regarded not merely as a social evil but as a fundamental obstacle to India's moral and spiritual regeneration. Through his Constructive Programme, Gandhi sought to uplift the Harijans (a term he coined for the untouchables, meaning "children of God"¹) by advocating for their social inclusion, education, and access to public facilities. This article explores how Gandhi's commitment to the eradication of untouchability became a cornerstone of his efforts to foster a just and equitable society, highlighting his belief that "untouchability is a sin," and analysing its impact on the Indian independence movement.

Keywords: Untouchability, Constructive Programme, Swaraj, Harijans, Social Reform

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's fight against untouchability was not just a social reform initiative; it was a moral and spiritual mission that formed the bedrock of his Constructive Programme. Gandhi saw untouchability as a profound injustice that contradicted the very principles of equality and non-violence that he cherished. His efforts to eradicate this social evil were integral to his broader vision of an independent India that was not only free from British rule but also from internal divisions and social hierarchies. As Gandhi famously stated, "Swaraj is not possible if we keep millions of our brothers and sisters under the heel of suppression"²

The Origins of Gandhi's Fight Against Untouchability

Gandhi's crusade against untouchability began in earnest during his time in South Africa, where he witnessed firsthand the harsh realities of racial discrimination. His experiences there shaped his understanding of social inequality and fueled his resolve to combat similar injustices in India. Upon his return to India in 1915, Gandhi identified untouchability as one of the most pressing social issues facing the country. He believed that

¹ Parekh, Bhikhu. *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

² Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vols. 68, 74, 82. Publications Division, Government of India, 1962-1994.

the practice of untouchability was not only a blight on Hindu society but also a significant barrier to India's quest for self-rule, or 'swaraj.'

The Constructive Programme and the Removal of Untouchability

Gandhi's Constructive Programme, launched in the 1920s, was a blueprint for social reform that aimed to prepare India for independence by addressing various social, economic, and cultural issues. Among its many components, the removal of untouchability was a cornerstone. Gandhi viewed untouchability as a sin and a crime against humanity, and he argued that true freedom could not be achieved until this practice was abolished. Gandhi's approach to eradicating untouchability was multifaceted. He worked tirelessly to change public attitudes through education and advocacy, emphasizing that "untouchability is a sin" that must be eradicated from the minds of all Indians³. He also promoted the upliftment of the so-called "untouchables," whom he called "Harijans," meaning "children of God." Gandhi believed that by giving Harijan's access to education, public facilities, and employment opportunities, society could begin to break down the barriers of caste and untouchability.

Gandhi's Campaigns for Social Inclusion

One of Gandhi's most significant campaigns against untouchability was the 'Harijan' movement, which he launched in 1932 following the Poona Pact. This agreement, reached with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent leader of the Dalits, provided reserved seats for the depressed classes in the Indian legislature. However, Gandhi's commitment to the cause went beyond political representation; he sought to integrate Harijans into all aspects of social and religious life. Gandhi traveled extensively across India to spread his message, establishing schools and ashrams that welcomed Harijans and organizing campaigns to open temples, wells, and other public places to them. His efforts were met with both support and resistance. While many joined his cause, others, particularly from the orthodox Hindu community, opposed his attempts to dismantle the caste system. Despite this resistance, Gandhi remained steadfast in his belief that "the abolition of untouchability is more important than the attainment of 'swaraj'"⁴

The Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Gandhi's Mission

Gandhi's fight against untouchability was deeply rooted in his spiritual beliefs. He saw the removal of untouchability as not just a social or political necessity, but as a moral imperative that was integral to the spiritual progress of both individuals and the nation. Gandhi believed that "the purification of the soul" was essential for achieving true freedom, and that this purification could not occur in a society that perpetuated untouchability⁵. Gandhi's emphasis on the spiritual aspect of his campaign set him apart from other social

³. Prabhu, R. K., and U. R. Rao, eds. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*. Navajivan Publishing House, 1967.

⁴ Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vols. 68, 74, 82. Publications Division, Government of India, 1962-1994.

⁵ Chatterjee, Margaret. *Gandhi's Religious Thought*. Macmillan Press, 1983.

reformers of his time. He argued that the eradication of untouchability required a change of heart and a commitment to the principles of truth and non-violence. In his view, the struggle against untouchability was a form of self-purification that would lead to the moral and spiritual upliftment of all Indians, regardless of caste.

The Impact of Gandhi's Campaign on the Indian Independence Movement

Gandhi's crusade against untouchability had a profound impact on the Indian independence movement. By linking the fight for social justice with the struggle for political freedom, Gandhi broadened the scope of the independence movement and mobilized a diverse range of supporters. His emphasis on social reform helped to create a more inclusive and egalitarian vision of Indian society, which resonated with many who had previously been marginalized. Moreover, Gandhi's campaigns against untouchability helped to bring the issue to the forefront of national consciousness. His relentless advocacy forced both the British government and Indian society to confront the realities of caste discrimination and its impact on the country's future. As a result, the removal of untouchability became a central goal of the independence movement and was later enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's fight against untouchability was a defining aspect of his Constructive Programme and a crucial component of his vision for an independent and just India. Through his campaigns, Gandhi sought to eradicate untouchability not only as a social evil but as a spiritual and moral blight that hindered India's progress. His efforts to uplift the Harijans and promote social inclusion laid the groundwork for the abolition of untouchability in post-independence India. As Gandhi himself asserted, "No nation can rise to the height of glory unless its women and children, the poor and the downtrodden, are treated with respect and dignity"⁶. Gandhi's crusade against untouchability remains a powerful example of how social reform and political change are inextricably linked to the quest for justice and freedom.

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⁶ Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vols. 68, 74, 82. Publications Division, Government of India, 1962-1994.