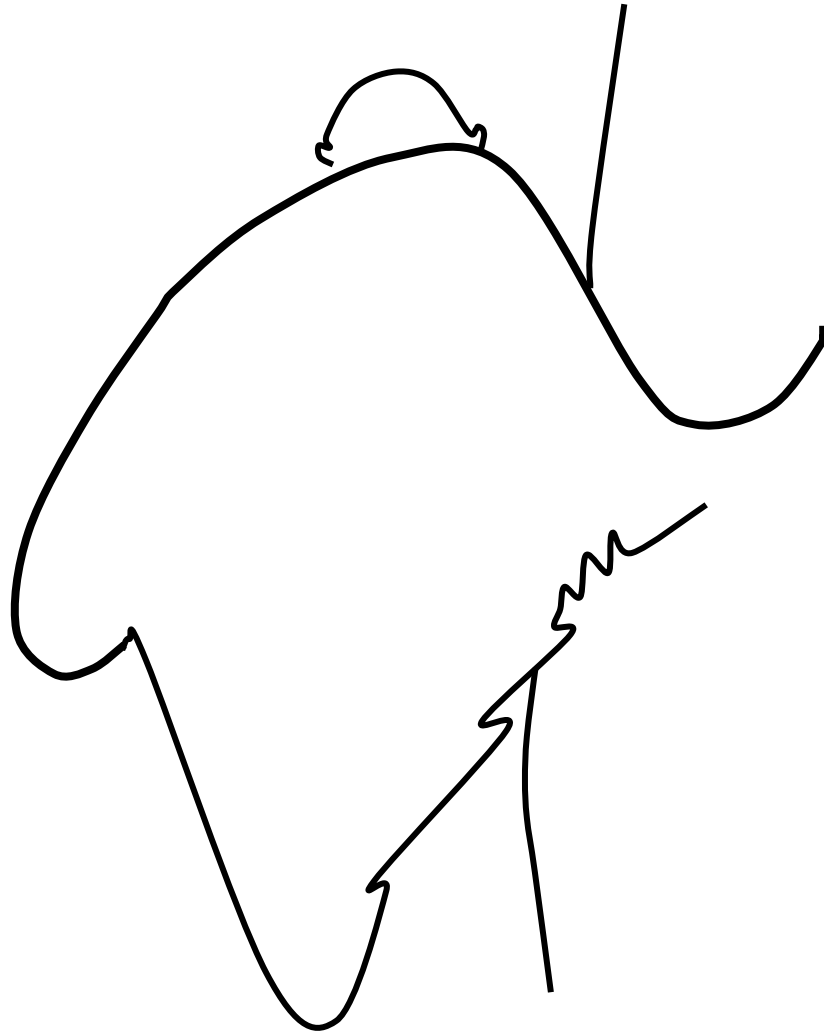


*Dialogues on Gandhi and Ecology: August-December 2008*



**Organized by Global Gandhi Forum**

**South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy/CSDS**

**Reported By Sayantoni Datta**

## ***Gandhi and Untouchability***

***9<sup>th</sup> August 2008***

### ***Gandhi Peace Foundation***

The dialogue revealed that it becomes pertinent to discuss issues of untouchability in relation to *ecological swaraj*. The essential services of waste management, waste disposal, services of public hygiene and health have become crucial in ecological debates, particularly in large urban societies. Who deals with the mountains of waste generated by our homes in large cities, and now in villages?

Looking at traditions in Indian society and village systems, each of these functions were performed by specified caste groups, which was rigid allowing no occupational mobility by birth. In spite of the fact that many a Dalit person will tell you that the escape to cities is for the anonymous identity it gives them, some occupations have continued to be associated by caste groups even in the big cities in India, even though some field experiences have shown a few exceptions to this age old norm. The essential services of ensuring public health and hygiene though crucial have been attached with purity principles of Hindu ritualistic practices. So while on the one hand there are deep rooted psycho-social dimensions of oppression with these areas of work, making it an undignified existence in the Hindu and cultural mindset in India that needs to be addressed, on the other hand the very process of waste disposal, waste management, and public hygiene becomes a neglected field in public discourse in Indian society by virtue of the status of caste groups engaged in the same. What new thought could thus a dialogue on ‘untouchability practices’ and the history on campaigns against untouchability in India reveal to us?

**Omkar Mittal** preferring to discuss the current crisis on public cleanliness and the crisis of the *safai karmacharis* (workers engaged in the same) shared that he was not very clear on the topic assigned to him which was ‘Gandhi and untouchability’. In Delhi, we are acquainted with issues of cleanliness, however those living in elite neighborhoods or suburbs are not aware of the massive amounts of waste generated by the city, and nor do they have a first hand experience of it. Slum communities living near these areas are aware of it and witness this every day. As a society we have become immune to garbage and the mountains of waste that we see around us. Everywhere one is witness to this colonization of garbage whether in the form of plastics, cocoa cola cans, dumping in seas. My main question to society is why do we have so much garbage in our country, and why are we becoming so used to it?

When taking this question to various sections of society one found that maximum blame and most attacks by society at large are made on *safai karmacharis*. They are assumed to be lackadaisical or those shirking work, and are also those who bear the brunt of the blame of bribes taken by Municipal Corporation. It is not true that only the well off sections of society are blaming this section of workers, in fact there are people belonging to this same section of society who are engaged in similar criticisms. In a recent meeting where the Secretary of the *Safai Karmachari Aayog* was present, it was shocking to find him saying that among the 50000 *safai karmacharis*, more than half their salaries is tied to the corruption system of the municipalities. Though he admitted later that this was an exaggeration of the real situation, it is worrying that decision makers are least worried about placing credible facts while speaking.

On the one hand very few of us really worry about waste or garbage, how we manage it and control it. Very few individuals are looking at their own role in the same. On the other hand by just witnessing the situation of the *Safai Karmachari* one will understand their status, however people whether they are *Babus*<sup>1</sup> in the Government Office earning rupees 15000 - 20000 a month or other sections of society, seem to have an issue with the fact that *safai karmacharis* are getting a salary of rupees 7000-8000 a month. Their main grouse being that the entire family engaged in this work, the total family income is much higher, unlike in their own cases of the individual income representing the family income.

The biggest battle for the *safai karmacharis* today is against privatization. In various parts of the country one can see a new trend of public private partnerships, the same trend has entered municipal corporations and in Delhi it will be initiated in 3 zones. In this case, it has been decided that this entire work from collection of waste, to its disposal and recycling will be handed over to private companies.

Since Gandhi has been referred to in the topic, in Panchkuia in Bapu slum, among the Valmiki community cites a popular historical anecdote, where Gandhi refused to eat in their houses when he spent time with them. I don't know if this is false or true, but this is what Vijay Prasad, influenced by Marxist thought, has also shared in his book in great detail.

Gandhi for a major part of his life continued to follow the practices of the caste system and within that, his expectation from the *safai karmachari samaaj* was that they continue their work with full devotion. However till such time that these British municipal corporations were not made, the different caste groups in society, the *safai karmachari* group was an

---

<sup>1</sup> Used for officials engaged in clerical work

independent one. The *jajmani* relationships that they had with the rest of society has been based on these inter personal relationships, it had its own regulations. When the British instituted municipal corporations then this independence went and they became slaves of the Babu at the Municipality. During the British period there was also a lot of discussion that these roles were social roles and decided by society, it was not a regulated by the state. This shift of this section of society from being an independent one to that which became slaves of the British municipality system has found little intellectual reflection post independence. Post independence, in 1956 in majority NDMC areas, *safai karmachari's*, demands were declined by the government, the Congress at that time. Many died and were injured during this movement and simultaneously the 'Essential Services Maintenance Act' got issued where *safai karmacharis* were not allowed to go on strike. Though there has been some changes, the issues of *safai karmacharis* and issues related to their work is very different from other *Dalit* communities. Many of them are engaged in cleaning of sewers by entering into these sewers and it is very important to understand the hazards related to such occupations, 30-40% of people belonging to this section and with whom I have personally interacted are like 'living dead bodies'. They work like machines, have no voice, no dignity and their children have no future and are willing to work in the private sector for Rs.1500 to 2000 a month. This policy of privatization will slowly take away the benefits given to the formal *safai karmacharis* working in the municipalities as well, specifically given my experiences in North India. In Independent India very little empathy, and discussion takes place for this society and for many of us working with them.

Shri Devdutt spoke of “Gandhi’s Campaign on Untouchability” and shared that the issue of *safai karmacharis* is separate from the issues of Dalits. *Safai karmacharis* were not a community but a section of workers.

Shri Devdutt cited anecdotes contrary to the popular belief, where a *Harijan/Dalit* woman would cook food at the Sabarmati Ashram and Gandhi would also consume this food. Moving further to discuss Gandhi’s campaign against Untouchability, Shri Devdutt shared that Gandhi held this campaign closer than the nationalist struggle. After which he presented the main ideas from his paper attached below.

Placing his thoughts based on the historical facts cited in his paper he shared some opinions specifically on reservations. After 1947, once the Constitution was formed, Scheduled Castes were given reservation, they believed that ‘untouchability’ is a social disease where social reform is needed and reservation would bring about that social reform. Reservations have changed the situation of many Dalits over two to three generations, and this was needed. However this has also created a polarization, untouchability has given an identity, which has been debilitating to social reform or change. In 1934, the very Hindu religious leaders who agreed with Gandhi’s campaign and opened their temple doors to this change shut it when Gandhi left. The kind of treatment that Dalits have experienced over generations no other civilization or tradition has exhibited this form of inhumanity, the Hindustan society needs to repent (*prayaschit*) this as well. The reservations could be seen as this repentance. However while the first generation had agreed, the second generation is asking why? A strange sense of enmity seems to have emerged among the Hindus and Dalits, such is the competition and enmity that in campuses there is segregation in hostels. On the other hand Dalits have got an identity consciousness where they share

that we are not a section of society but a race, and today there is also an attempt to genetically prove it. Making pain a source of identity, may become a problem, suffering cannot be the source of identification but rather build the need to look at the future. How do you look at future, Gandhi is irrelevant in this.

## **Gandhiji Campaign against Untouchability<sup>2</sup>**

**(1933-34)**

**Devdutt**

**(1)**

### **Introduction**

The book<sup>3</sup> under review is in two parts. Part one is the introduction entitled, "Gandhi's Campaign Against Untouchability" by the author, Mr. Baran Ray; it gives Gandhi's perception of a historic campaign during 1933-34 against untouchability in India. Mr. Ray analyses the response of masses as well as all major political parties in India to Gandhi's campaign. He also gives Gandhi's own assessment of the movement.

The second part of the book has documents covering two hundred pages.<sup>4</sup> There are three reports contained in a secret file No. 10R/469IL/P&J/7/595 in India Office Library, London:

---

<sup>2</sup> Review Article for 'Vasudev Kuttumbakam' (Munirka, New Delhi).

<sup>3</sup> Baran Ray, "Gandhi's Campaign Against Untouchability, 1933-34. An Account From the Ray's Secret Political Reports, New Delhi, 1966, Pages 254.

<sup>4</sup> Extracts attached (Annex.)

1. British Official Reports of Gandhi's "Speaking Tour" (p. 49-237) November 5, 1933- August 2, 1934." These were prepared by Chief Secretary of the Provinces.
2. Minutes by white Hall Officers (p. 238-244) in London, from December 1933 to February 23, 1934.
3. The last document covers "Why Gandhi Was Not Permitted to Go to Midnapore."

The British intelligence agencies had prepared these reports and appreciation of the developments in India during 1933-34 when Gandhi undertook the campaign against untouchability.

The white Hall was keen to know whether Gandhi had started this campaign with any political motive or was it only his social concern. It issued a general order asking for the most detailed reports of Gandhi campaign and its assessment. It requested the Viceroy and the Governors to make sure that this was done as ably and efficiently as possible.

The reports were "notably comprehensive," mostly finalized by Chief Secretary of the Province-concerned. Other more detailed reports were by the Dy. Commissioners or Superintendent of Police of the district concerned and vetted by Home Department. The reports were week by week for ten months of the campaign.

(ii)

### **After Mac Donald Award**

After Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Mahatma Gandhi attended the Second Round Table Conference (RTC) which was convened by the British government to discuss the future set-up of governance under the Crown.

The deliberations of RTC revealed many deep fissures and divisions in Indian society represented by the Indian delegations at the RTC. The British government played one section against the other. "This converted RTC into a scramble for imperial favours. The British were hell bent to again confront the Congress on the war path going back on Gandhi-Irwin Pact after Dandi March.<sup>1</sup>"

The British government announced MacDonald Communal Award, which included separated electorate to the Scheduled Caste (SC) population. It aimed at enabling the SCs to elect their representatives to the council and assemblies (soon to be created proportionate to their population).

It may be recalled, separate electorates were not a new move in British India, Muslims were granted in 1909, the Sikhs were granted in 1919. Now it was the turn of the Scheduled Castes at the 2<sup>nd</sup> RTC. But Gandhi put up firm resistance to the proposal regarding reservation to SC's. He argued, no doubt Muslims, Sikhs, Christians as separate communalities will remain for all times, but should Scheduled Castes be recognized as a community and thus render untouchability in perpetuity. It is true that Gandhi accepted the need for adequate concessions to SC's, even representation to ameliorate the conditions of SC and even reservation to ensure representation in Councils and other elected bodies. But he stubbornly opposed separate electorate to SC's. Gandhi warned that if the British took this step, "he would fight with life." Nevertheless, the British government announced the Communal Award which granted separate electoral to SC's.

At that time Gandhi was in prison. He announced his decision to under take a fast unto death, unless the provision was changed. Gandhi's principal concern was that the Communal Award would on one hand perpetuate the inhuman odium of the practice of untouchability which cried for immediate abolition and it will hinder reforms in Hindu society. Gandhi said that it should not be used by the colonial power to disrupt society.

On August 17, 1933 the Communal Award was announced. The scheme, which was for twenty years only. It fixed the number of seats in the provincial legislatures at

approximately double the number in the Council. The Depressed Classes were recognized as minorities, entitled to separate electorate. While creating especially reserved constituencies for Depressed Classes, it gave them additional right to contest seats in General Constituencies.

On August 18, 1933 Gandhi conveyed to the British Government his decision to "resort to a perpetual fast unto death" from September 20, 1933. It may be recalled that his was not a sudden decision. Earlier he has warned by the British Govt. "my contemplated fast is not a method, it is a call of conscience."

The British Government informed Gandhi on September 8, 1937 that the decision can not be changed. The Prime Minister of Britain in his letter to Gandhi said:

"Your purpose to adopt the extreme course of starving yourself to death.... solely to prevent the depressed classes...from being able to secure a limited number of representatives of their own choosing to speak on their behalf in the legislature which will have a dominating influence over their future."

Gandhi replied on September 9, 1937. One of the significant points he made in that letter to Prime Minister of Britain was:

The mere fact of Depressed Classes having double votes does not protect them or Hindu Society in general from being disrupted. In the establishment of separate electorate for Depressed Classes, it is the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism and to do no good whatsoever to the Depressed Class. \*"

Gandhi argued further:

"...I should not be against - even over representation of the Depressed Classes. What I am against is their statutory separation even in a limited

form from Hindu fold, so long as they choose to belong to it. Do you realize that if your decision stands and the Constitution comes into being, you arrest the marvelous growth of the work of Hindu reformers who have dedicated themselves to the uplift of their suppressed brethren in every walk of life.\*"

The British government on September,1933 finally declared that no government could possibly let its action be influenced by methods of this kind.

As soon as Gandhi began his fast, it was declared that he would be removed from jail to a suitable place of private residence. Gandhi refused to accept any condition and asked to be left in jail, where upon the government decided to allow him all facilities for private interview inside prison and unrestricted correspondence.

(iii)

### **Fast and Parley**

The fast began in September 20, 1933.

The public and the leaders were in panic. It bestirred them into action at various levels. Tagore telegraphically said, "it is worth sacrificing precious life for the sake of India's unity and her social integrity." Leaders of public opinion like Tej Bahadur Sapru made some suggestions for compromise he approached those who endorsed them. They approached C.R. Rajagopalachari, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who had described the fast a "political stunt".

Ambedkar and his followers had discussions with Gandhi in the prison... Dr. Ambedkar fought every inch of ground for five days. Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar supported by his colleagues had protracted parleys - during which it is said, "Ambedkar did most of the talking while Gandhi lay weak and still in his bed."

During these parleys Dr. Ambedkar made it clear that he does not want to have his pound of flesh at any cost. He admitted, "Mahatmaji I am interested in your life" and at the same time he wanted adequate price and compensation" before he agreed to forgo what he had secured as per McDonald Award.

Several senior leaders, specially, C.R. Rajagopalachari, mediated between Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar. Ultimately on the basis of give and take two leaders sorted out ticklish issues and reached an agreement.

Both wings of the Depressed Classes led by Dr. Ambedkar and Mr. M.C. Rajah were willing parties and gave it the assent. Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya and other prominent liberal leaders signed the Yervada Pact and gave their full support.

Gandhi did not formally sign it himself, although practically all Congressmen present on the spot signed it. On September 25, 1933 a full conference at Poona adopted the following resolution drafted by Gandhi.

In conclusion, the resolution drafted by Gandhi was adopted. It reads as follows:

"This conference resolves that henceforth, amongst Hindus, no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth, and those who have been so regarded hitherto, will have the same right as other Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, public schools, public roads and other public institutions. This right will have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest acts of the swaraj parliament, if it shall not have received such recognition before to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so-called untouchable classes, including the bar in respect of admission to temples."

Gandhi sent a telegram on September 25, 1933 to C.F. Andrew in London stating that he would break the fast if the British Cabinet accepted the settlement in *toto*. The British government finally agreed upon the terms of the statement, announcing the substitution of the government's decision by corresponding provisions of Yervada Pact.

Gandhi ultimately gave up the fast but he demanded he should be allowed to carry the anti-untouchability campaign while in prison. He said, if all the restrictions are re-imposed on him, "it will interrupt the work of reform that has begun. I would, therefore, expect that all facilities necessary for carrying on of my untouchability work to continue if I am to remain here (prison)."

(iv)

### **Movement when in jail**

In the meanwhile, outside prison a campaign was launched. The Untouchability Week was observed from September 27 to October 2, 1933. In public meetings the Yervada Pact was explained and appeals were made to abolish untouchability. All India Anti-Untouchability League with a network of provincial boards were set up with HQ at Delhi....." Mr. G.D. Birla was Chairman and Thakkar Bappa as Secretary of the League. In February, 1933 Gandhi started publishing "Harijan" to promote the Campaign and to stir the conscience of his co-religionists.

Gandhi undertook one more fast in May 1937 in order to give a jolt to Hindus, conscience about the evil of untouchability. He said:

" The fast is intended to remove bitterness to purify the heart and make it clean, so that the movement is wholly moral, to be prosecuted by wholly moral persons."

Gandhi educated the people on the need and urgency of anti-untouchability work. In fact, a nationwide debate among the intelligentsia was initiated.

### **The movement outside**

The all-India anti-untouchability campaign was launched on November 7, 1933, while the civil disobedience movement, started earlier was still going on.

Handicapped by some limitations, the *yatra* lasted for ten months. It covered 1250 miles in Sindh, Panjab, Orissa, Assam, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Bihar and U.P. The itinerary of the *yatra* was zig-zag and rushed - a fact which rendered the tour less effective. The Congress party in the states was solely responsible for arranging and conducting Gandhi's *yatra* in the provinces. The divisions within the Congress party units in the province adversely affected the campaign<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the campaign rested on less than half of the full strength of the Congress. Gandhi could not educate the people commensurate with the historic importance of the campaign.

During the *yatra* Gandhi spoke at length against the mind-set of untouchability to millions of common people, specially women, who flocked to attend meetings and rallies in remote areas. On a few occasions Gandhi entered into open public debate with the orthodox sections of society who opposed him. He was attacked by gangs of opponents-at one place a bomb was thrown at his car. The orthodox sections tried to provoke these workers to violence so that the *yatra* turned out to be the massive process of education of masses against the mind-set of untouchability. He collected eight lakh rupees during the campaign out of which 25% was collected in the South.

Here below is Gandhi assessment of the *yatra*.

*"Untouchability is on its last legs. Millions who attended the meetings were not at all utterly ignorant of all I had to say. They were certainly not indifferent....Attendance of the multitude was not a complaint to me... Yet all of them were not ready to translate their belief into practice. It is a tremendous gain that Masses has begun to believe in the truth of the messages. There is demonstrable awakening among Harijan."*

This means, the people of India were basically against untouchability. What was required was to strengthen their will to end untouchability.

1. *Gandhi fell out with his colleagues in the Congress. The senior Congress leaders who kept aloof from the campaign were engaged in looking after political activities. Moreover, Gandhi had decided to exclude politics from this tour. His fundamental philosophy was different from them. For more of them, pure politics which meant displacement of the British by a national government was more important. For example, many senior Congress leaders had reservations about the anti-untouchability campaign in principle. They had also good reasons not to support the anti-untouchability campaign because the Civil Disobedience was still going on. A large section of Congressmen were either in double mind or preferred political fight for freedom to social reform.*

### **Intelligence Reports on the Campaign**

But the report\* of the intelligence agencies submitted to the British government gives a different impression. As mentioned earlier, it was only for a limited purpose that the White Hall in London sought from Govt. of India reports on Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaigns, viz., to know whether Gandhi has a political motive in launching the campaign. Consequently, the data in the intelligence reports was selective; it is confined to only a few aspects of the tour.

First, the attitude of the depressed classes and their response to the campaign as well as the message of Gandhi. It seems the depressed classes on the whole, but the followers of Ambedkar in particular dissociated from the tour. And whenever they attended the meetings addressed by Gandhi, it was to satisfy their sense of curiosity to see the great the man.

It is noteworthy, that the response of depressed classes in the southern states was less negative than that in the north, in fact, a cross-section of the depressed responded positively.

The reports refer to the active opposition and resistance of the Hindu orthodox social focus throughout the tour in general, in particular in many places in the north India in Bihar, Orissa and Maharashtra. The local leaders of the orthodox Hindu demonstrated against Gandhi, they challenged him to enter into a debate with them, they put up hurdles

in the conduct of the public meetings and disturbed the meetings, they tried to dissuade people from cooperatives with the organizers, Gandhi's meeting.

Above all, the orthodox Hindus resorted to violence in Bihar and in Orissa, where he had to cut short his visits. They threw bombs on Gandhi in Pune on June 25, 1934. But Gandhi was not hit<sup>5</sup>.

The reports give an impression that Gandhi was more concerned about fund collections for Harijan work than educating the people against untouchability. It gives very patchy information about the contents of Gandhi's public speeches. It seems that Gandhi did not emphasise the key items of the agenda of his tour, viz., and temple entry: He talked about evils of untouchability; he said it was not sanctioned by Hindu scripture, including Bhagwat Gita. He exhorted the castes to consider it their duty to shun untouchability.

The report also gives an impression that Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaign did not arouse genuine enthusiasm among the local Congress workers and state level leaders. There were sharp diverges of opinion with the Congress. It seems, the Congress leaders in the states were less concerned with the civil of untouchability but more will be getting credit for mobilizing public support for the cause.

The reports are not of any value by way of providing any definitive text of Gandhi's discourse in the campaign. They represent how different segments of the society reacted with great ardour, or passion, indifference or suspicion, for and against Gandhi's "unconventional and radical proposal". They show how the campaign revealed as it were, the unfriendly and certainly "unfraternal inter-face between the various segments".

These documents were full of disbelief, as to the practicality of the therapeutic prescription suggested by the Mahatma as far as reforming Hindu society was concerned. These documents reveal the internal contradictions and fragmentation on account of

---

<sup>5</sup> See Annex (Extracts), Gandhi expressed deep sympathy for the bomb throwers. He said "I am not activating for martyrdom. But if it comes my way....I shall have well-earned it. (J&Kp.155)

which the campaign lay fractured by the wayside.' Mr. Ray concludes regretfully 'a broad united front did not get formed under Gandhi's campaign against untouchability.'

We take this opportunity to make a general point about their attitude of either indifference, or disagreement or even opposition of the top Congress leadership and the Leftists Congress leaders of public opinion on Gandhi and the importance Gandhi attached to anti-untouchability campaign. For example, it is noteworthy that full nine months after Gandhi had launched the campaigns; a deputation of Congress led by Acharya Narendra Dev met Gandhi on July 27, 1934. They presented Gandhi with a draft programme for the party for his comment. There were glaring omissions once the issue of removal of untouchability and communal harmony. It seems the radical modernist section of liberation movement not only failed to respect to Gandhi but also failed to respond to his ideas.

For example, Gandhi's decision was not palatable to many Congress leaders from their retreat in Europe. Subhash Chandra Bose and Vithalbai Patel denounced it. 'The latest act of Mahatma Gandhi in suspending civil disobedience is a confession of failure...the Mahatma as a political leader has failed.'

Further, for many other Congressmen, the suspension of the movement in favour of Harijan world came as a shock... they regarded removal of untouchability as a subsidiary to the main struggle...(pg 205).

(vii)

Mr. Polak, a close associate of Gandhiji in South Africa is of the view that the anti-untouchability campaign of 1933-34 deserves to be included in the list of major movements against untouchability and caste-system in the history of India.

The anti-untouchability campaign (1933-34) in isolation as such, doesn't entitle it to be 'historic'. However, the praxis and lexis of Gandhi in respect of untouchability is certainly

quite an ingenuous contribution to the entire praxis and lexis against casteism and untouchability.

Gandhi's perception of untouchability has four aspects: first, is the religious, second psychological and third that since it is embedded in the very structure of Indian polity, it can be eradicated by a total transformation of this polity. It is noteworthy that Gandhi did not think caste-system is not the cause of untouchability.

Let us briefly describe each of them.

### **Religious**

Gandhi believed:

"This is the biggest religious movement in India, if not the world, involving as it does the well-being of forty millions human of beings Living in serfdom... let the orthodox section which disapproves and who do not appreciate the religious character of the movement, retire from it".\*

He admitted:

"It may have political consequences, but it is a movement for the purification of Hinduism".\*

He was convinced that untouchability is not sanctioned by Hindu scriptures. He emphasized: "I find no warrant for untouchability in the Book of Life (Bhagwat Gita) which Gandhi believed "if all scriptures were reduced to ashes the seven hundred verses of this imperishable book are quiet enough to tell us to what Hinduism is and how one can live up to it.

He also said:

"The more I study Hindu scriptures.. the more I feel convinced that Untouchability is the greatest blot upon Hinduism"... Any way, in battling against untouchability...I have no less ambition to see a full regeneration of humanity...It may be more a dream...it is not so far me while the dream lasts."

## **Social**

The social reform movements launched in nineteenth and in the twentieth century against caste-system held that cast system is responsible to untouchability. Dr. Ambedkar, his followers and others inspired by him also asserted that, untouchability was a social problem. Dr. Ambedkar said that casteism is responsible for the evil of untouchability. The outcaste is a by product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the out caste except destruction of caste system.

*Baran Ray*

But Gandhi had a different view. He said:\*

"I do not believe the caste system, even as distinguished from Varnashram, to be an 'odious and vicious dogma". It has its limitations and 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 totally. It is an excess to be removed, if the whole system is not to perish.

The moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true *Varna Dharma*, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other. How it can be and what the *Varnashram* is, it is not necessary to examine here. But, such being my faith, I have always differed from those distinguished countrymen, Dr. Ambedkar among them, who have held that the untouchability will not go without the destruction of *Varnashram Dharma*. They have made no

distinction between caste and varna. But that is another story. At present, it is the untouchable, the outcast, with whom the Hindu reformers, whether they believe in *Varnashram Dharma* or not, have agreed to deal. The opposition to untouchability is common to both. Therefore, the present joint fight is restricted to the removal of untouchability, and I would invite Dr. Ambedkar and those who think with him to throw themselves, heart and soul, into the campaign against the monster of untouchability."

It is true, that at every stage of evolution all societies in the world have their slaves and helots and Negroes and Jews. India too had its untouchables. But in India, untouchability was qualitatively different from the problems of other weaker and exploited sections of humanity. Untouchability represented a unique variety of degradation, determinisation, injustice and exploitation. Not only Hindu upper castes are responsible for it, but in India it cuts across all religions.

### **Psychic**

It is well known that Christian and Muslims settled in India for centuries practice untouchability. The untouchables themselves are split into hundred of castes and sub-castes (about 1100 in different states) which are not equal in status. So much so that "untouchability is practiced within the untouchable community. One group would not eat together, or accept water from other untouchable group nor are inter-marriages allowed among groups; Even there are regional distinctions; for example, untouchables of UP consider untouchables of UP lower. Gandhi, thought untouchability like war, is born in the collective mind of Indian people regardless of religion. Untouchability is very much stored in the collective psyche of the Indian- regardless of religion, caste and creed. It expresses itself in day to day conversation and discourse.

It is a sinister manifestation of the idea of ritually pure and ritually impure. For example, "a woman is untouchable to her husband during the monthlies, a family mourning, and is not allowed to enter a temple in your religious ceremonies with in a format period of mourning. The kitchen of widows is taboo to others in the temple.

He said:

“We are too near the scene of tragedy to realize that the canker of untouchability had traveled far beyond its prescribed limits and has sapped the very foundation of the whole nation. The touch me not spirit pervades the atmosphere. If this white out is not locked at its sources, we will soon forget the differences with regard to caste and caste and religion and religious to believe that Hindus are one indivisible, so are Muslims, Sikhs, Parsee, Jews and Christians.”

Even in recent times it has been shown that casteism is not confined to the social structure in India. Dr. Ambedkar made this point when he said. “Wherever a Hindu goes, he will take the caste system with him. Even in the year 2007 in an advanced country like the UK 25% of 1.3 million Indians migrant do not want to marry into a lower caste. Those who belong to lower caste prefer to meet some one of the same background because they know they may be victimized because they are a lower caste. The rest of them scour marriage bureau listings and adverts in the Indian press for the appropriate Ravidasia, Ramgarhia, *Lohar, Mochi, Mistry Shah/Vania* or *Tank/Shatria* spouse for their sons and daughter.<sup>6</sup>

This confirms Gandhi’s understanding that “casteism” is a part of Indian psyche.<sup>7</sup>

### **Social Transformation**

Finally, according to Gandhi untouchability is not a product distinction of “high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it. The attack on untouchability is an attack upon this high-and-lowness”. In other words, since it is embedded in the system, what is needed is the transformation of the system in which casteism is only a symptom.

---

<sup>1</sup> Written by Rena Dipti Annabil or Reena Bhatoo. A play entitled Fifth Production of Caste way Art Midland. Times of India (*The Shame of being untouchable in Britain, My Times, My Voice*)

<sup>2</sup> Even anti-Gandhi dalit opinion leaders in post-independence India now admit that the problem of dalits is not a social problem, it is a psychological problem. (*Chandra Bhan Prasad, ‘Casteist Lyrics’, Pioneer, December 9, 2007*)

## **Structure**

Therefore, Gandhi presented a vision of new civilization based on non violent economy, non violent politics and non-violent society. He presented a picture of “Indian Home Rule”. He said a system based on principle of bread labour centralization and trusteeship and economy of permanence (an economy of conservation and limited wants), will be free from this evil.

(viii)

## **Strategy and Tactic**

Gandhi was a practical idealist and not a utopian thinker. He experimented with his ‘ideals’(which he described as ‘Truth’). Besides basic perceptions, he offered strategy and tactics for anti-untouchability movement of which there are two features.

First he disapproved of three popular programmes aimed at removing untouchability -(a) inter dining (b) inter marriage; (c) an exclusively upper caste movement against untouchability.

He cautioned hasty reformers on the question of inter-dining and inter-marriage. He did not make these issues a part of an all India reform, which would be a breach with faith with the masses to call upon them suddenly to view removal of untouchability in a light different from what have been taught to be believed.

He thought the main plank of untouchability campaign was temple entry...He differed from Dr. Ambedkar's opinion that temple entry was not worth risking life. But Gandhi believed that nothing will strike the imagination of Hindu mass mind; including *Harijans*, as the throwing open of public temples to them.

As regards the responsibility for eradicating untouchability, Gandhi thought that it is only the moral responsibility of the upper castes alone for the wrong they have done to the

depressed. The upper castes in a spirit of penitence should under go "*Hridaya Parivartan*" (change of heart). It is only in a spirit of penitence that they should volunteer to call themselves sudras and shun untouchability and serve the depressed and embrace their suppressed brethren and sister as their own.

The depressed communities suffer from many social economic and cultural evils e.g. untouchability, casteism, inequality etc. The life style and certain vocations of the depressed community also needs to be reformed; e.g. eating the meat of dead animals, lifting and skinning dead animals, gambling alcoholism; etc. Therefore, the depressed should look within and reforms themselves as community. They should educate the women and children. They should imbibe a sense of sanitation and cleanliness and abounded hereditary profession and explore new avenues of employment, e.g. adopt new craft such as *bhatty*, poultry, fishery, khadi etc.\*

Second, he offered a programme of action aimed at preparing ground for transformation of the system. He evolved progrmmes of action for civil society as a whole and for upper castes and untouchables in particular. First, he said, it is the duty of Hindu upper caste to eradicate untouchability as an act of atonement for the sins against untouchable in the past. He said Hindus are responsible for what ever bad habits to be observed among the Harijans. The second, since untouchability afflicts the untouchables as a community the untouchables must reform their communities in India. A close look at the item in the Constuctive Programme reveals that it has the potential to pave the ground for transformation for the present polity.

(ix)

### **Concluding observations**

Gandhi's perception and prescriptions to eradicate the evil of untouchability differ from that of the great historic anti-caste and anti-untouchability movement in the past and in the contemporary times.

It is true that Gandhi's idiom of communication and action may sound dated, but it is still relevant. It is comprehensive and inclusive and participatory- civil society can still use it

today. A Mahatma Gandhi is not required for this movement. Any sincere Mohan Das can do it.

As social problem in its gross form, untouchability as it prevailed in the remote past and in the recent past in India, has been mitigated substantially on account of several factors e.g. the policies affirmative action, modernization of life style, urbanization and industrialization.

But untouchability as a psychic problem still afflicts the mind of India. In fact, it has been reinforced by the unintended consequences of limited success of affirmative actions and partial economic and political empowerment of the depressed.

For instance, parliamentary politics have institutionalized it as a distinct political constituency enjoying special benefits which provokes primordial sense of jealousies which often are expressed violently Gandhi's approach to untouchability and the strategies he devised should help us to deal with those jealousies.

Finally, untouchability is embedded in the present Indian polity, it needs total transformation. Gandhi offers an approach and strategy and tactics for this task viz., constructive programme combined with civil obedience.

During the period 1915-45, Gandhi was able to formulate a programme described as the Constructive Programme. In its final form in 1945, it covered the following items.

1. Communal Unity
2. Removal of untouchability
3. Prohibition
4. Khadi
5. Other village industries
6. Village sanitation
7. New or Basic education
8. Adult education
9. Women
10. Education in Health and Hygiene
11. Provincial language
12. National language
13. Economic equality

14. Kisans (peasants)
15. Labour
16. Adivasis (tribals)
17. Leprosy
18. Students
19. Improvement of Cattle
20. Nature cure

Gandhi was convinced that constructive Programme “is the truthful and non-violent way of *Poorna Swaraj* (complete independence)”.

Gandhi believed that Civil Disobedience, mass or individual, is an aid to constructive effort and is a full substitute for armed revolt. He said that training is necessary as well for civil disobedience as for armed revolt. Only the ways are different. Action in either case takes place only when occasion demands. Training for military revolt means learning the use of arms ending perhaps in atomic bomb. For civil disobedience, it is Constructive Programme which provides training.

In other words, the constructive Programme, as perceived by Gandhiji, is more than social action or social service. The Constructive Programme in it's entirety is to enable the masses to emerge out of un-freedom into freedom and out of economic and social deprivation into self reliance and out of state of alienation into creative cooperative living.<sup>2</sup>

It could also be said that Gandhiji organized Constructive Programme as an alternative to western socialism through this programme he explored the possibilities of building a stateless non-authoritarian non-exploitative society.

We should point out one more negative factor in India today against anti-untouchability campaign, if and when launched. In pre-independent India, the upper castes and orthodox forces opposed anti-untouchability campaign. In contemporary India a section of *dalits* oppose anti-untouchability campaign as Gandhi perceived it.

It may be recalled that Gandhi's basic argument was that nothing should be done so that like Muslims, Sikhs, Christians as separate communities Scheduled Castes should not be recognized as community....in perpetuity. But a section of Dalit intellectuals and intelligentsia today (who having been emancipated from the handicaps and humiliations

in the past have been “de-dalitized”) are in the vanguard of a move to establish that the term Dalit denotes a category of community at par with other ethnic identities such as race. They talk of "Dalit Consciousness", "Dalit Culture", “Dalit Art and Aesthetics”, ‘Dalit Economy.’ Serious efforts have been made to have “Dalits” recognized as a “race”. “Dalits” are presented as if they are culturally well-defined identity at par with other collectivities. Consequently, a few de-dalitized intellectuals and researchers assert that the entire Indian school system should be recognized from the point of view of the needs and culture of Dalits. Some of them are bold enough to declare that in the new system the Dalit child would go to school with a sense of pride and non Dalit children would go to school with the sense of “diffidence” and “shame”!

This preposterous assertion remains un-challenged. True, Dalithood is a product of centuries of exploitation. But exploitation does not create an identity or a culture. Since the exploited Dalits and exploiting castes in India continue to share a common world view, common attitude towards life but Dalit in India may have been converted into a “political constituency” by some political parties, but they are not social “entity”. Therefore, anti- untouchability campaign in modern India will involve tackling the de-dalitized *dalit* who argue that *dalits* are a “community” with a culture of its own.

In a critique to the presentation made by Shri Devdutt, Ashok Bharti shared that he was relieved to see that Shri Devdutt had accepted the idea of a ‘*Dalit consciousness*’. Questioning the effectiveness of Gandhi’s campaign on untouchability, Ashok Bharti, highlighted that there continues to be numerous cases of untouchability being registered, and many among these don’t even get registered. Supporting his own argument that Gandhi’s ideas related to untouchability is irrelevant to Dalit struggles today, he shared that the terminology of Scheduled Castes came only in 1935 and “Depressed Classes” had a different meaning and connotation in Gandhi’s time. Picking from anecdotes in history, he highlighted that it was in 1995 in a seminar in

Delhi School of Social Work, that the term '*Dalit consciousness*' was recognized in academic circles.

Untouchability is not a new or contemporary issue, but a mindset which has been drilled into people's head for generations and is part and parcel of the '*hindu mind*' which Gandhi praised or eulogized. In fact the Hindu religion is fettered with dualities. The *Hindu mindset* governs almost all the political parties in India and they would only prefer it if this mindset does not change.

Gandhi may have been a social reformer, but he never envisioned total transformation of society and hence change in the situation of Dalits. We need to understand why Dr. Ambedkar who was a member of *Harijan Sevak Sangh* resigned later. The Harijan Sevak Sangh spoke only of the upliftment of the Harijans and not their transformation. Dr. Ambedkar spoke of "annihilation of caste" which Gandhi did not. How could Gandhi, who had blind faith in Hinduism, who did *prayaschit*(*repentance*) for having defied purity principles of crossing the seven seas, even think of transforming the caste system, which is intrinsic to the Hindu religion Dr. Ambedkar demanded for a separate electorate, if Gandhi ji was denying this, it was from the *Hindu mind*, he shared agreeing with Devdutt on what is mentioned in the paper and added that this did not hint at social change, however.

Though one can accept Gandhi as a social reformer, a social reformer in society never brings about total transformation. This is why he has seldom mentioned caste related issues. Gandhi supported inter caste marriages and shared that he would only attend inter caste marriages, but he did not mention the complete "annihilation of caste" as Ambedkar did.

It is not just anguish which creates the Dalit consciousness, it is a deep rooted psychological feeling through which religion and other systems of

power become even more powerful. The Indian Law is not able to address these issues and powerful political leaders and decision makers in our country like Indira Gandhi have not been able to address it, taking the side of the law, such is the deep rooted ness of the Hindu mindset. If a Dalit wears white clothes or stands with his head held high in his village, people torture him. Why is it that it had to be a Dalit intellectual who had to come up with a study of the different dimensions of untouchability? There have been many high caste intellectuals but why is it that very few of them have attempted to study practices of untouchability. Three to four years ago Action Aid noted 150 types of untouchability. For that too, a Dalit had to go forward to do the study. They are the poorest in the country but very few theses are related to their situation. They stay along the banks of the Ganga and Yamuna but there is nothing on how they live. They are an important source of our cultural history, artists, singers, painters, involved in stone work and various arts in the country. Has anyone written anything about them? Why? This is deliberate negligence.

In 1989 when VP Singh initiated the Mandal Commission, the media of those countries silently decided to black out VP Singh from the media and they killed him. Recently when there was a debate in Sansad about bringing the government, the third force which was against the Hindutva forces and against the Manmohan Singh's government which was nothing but America's slaves, the government was saved. However in a media analysis after that it shows that there is very little of what the Left is saying. He ended by saying that there is nothing wrong in pain being a part of identity, across the world, wherever pain has been a part of identity, it has brought about fundamental transformation. Dalits have identified this pain and the Brahminical structures, and are moving towards resolving issues of religious

conflict, poverty and inequality in this country. Their main call is “Saamta Maitri Bhaichaara” (Equality, Friendship and Brotherhood)!

M P Rana shared that there were some points which had become clearer from the dialogue. Firstly, that the Dalit identity, is separate from the Hindu identity, it was never part of the Hindu system. Dalits were called *panchama*, they had been brought forcedly into the Hindu system. The second point I learn from all of you is the need to redefine Hinduism, it needs to be reread and analysed, and its flaws understood on how to get rid of it on the one hand and the third is ‘rereading Gandhism’.

The independence struggle before 1930, was a true ‘nationalist’ struggle, but post 1933 we need to look at why the struggle took on an ‘anti nationalist’ turn and elaborate on Jinnah. There have also been detailed discussions on the Civil Disobedience Movement, but we need to understand why Gandhi suddenly made the call of withdrawing from the civil disobedience movement. The book I am referring to is Tara Chand’s fourth volume, ‘Freedom Struggle’. We need to understand Dalit cultures separately, before and after independence. The Dalit society was a parallel society which the Hindu religion never accepted. Why do we accept Tulsi Das and reject Shankar Ravi Das, ‘*nahi manenge kyunki dimaag baitha hua ki mooh se paida hue hai, jab tak Hindu parampara isko chhor de aur sabhi maan le ke sabhi ma ke pet se janam liye hai, yeh biological process se paida hota hai, to aadhi samasya khatam ho jaayenge.*’<sup>8</sup>

In 2001, in America at the ‘World Conference Against Racism’, the Indian State was a betrayer of people, Yashwant Singh the then foreign secretary refused to send a delegation from India on the matter. Why was

---

<sup>8</sup> Brahminical belief systems associate different parts of the body to represent different caste groups. While Brahmins are associated with the head, Dalits are associated with the feet.

there so much fear about Durban, it is a Hindu space. There too it was shocking that there are half page editorials on how the caste system in India, is more deep rooted and alarming than racism, but there is no sign of such news in newspapers in India. Gandhi worked a lot with the *Valmiki* groups he shared, agreeing with Shri Devdutt on the matter, however, in the *Harijan Patrika*, in 1937, Gandhi was in Durban and in Durban there was a strike where the entire community had gathered but in that Gandhi himself has been quoted in sharing that since the Valmiki society was engaged with essential services they should not participate in the strike, since the entire city will be left dirty and unclean. This is why the Dalit society rejects Gandhi. Therefore there is a need to accept our mistakes and only then can there be some shift in society, other wise we can continue with parallel discussions.

There are 300 million people who have been victimized due to their caste background in which 240 million are in India. Even today 3 lakh families in the country are engaged in scavenging where they dispose waste by carrying the same on their heads. How many among these 3 lakhs are Brahmins after 60 years of independence? 38000 families in UP continue as scavengers where *Behenji* (Mayawati) is in charge. It is clear that these families are being used for political benefit and caste system will not be annihilated

No one has pain for the Valmikis every morning I see this person sweep the streets, I don't think of his children and family's dreams and needs, my job is simply to dirty the streets. What of Gnahdi's dreams are we actually realizing when we have agreed that within Indian society there will be one half of the country dirtying it, while the other half will be cleaning it.

There will be a greater movement, Dalits are ready to discuss the issue with Brahmins, and Brahmins have to be ready to sweep the streets with them.

**Dr Dinesh Ram** shared that he had done a translation of the book referred here. Baran Ray has tried to defend Gandhi on the untouchability issue and discussions. If Gandhi's evaluation is made on the basis of Dalit intellectual consciousness then we will find him irrelevant, however if we look at Gandhi as a progressive Hindu intellectual and evaluate him from that angle, then we can say that Gandhi was indeed a progressive Hindu intellectual.

Dr. Ambedkar, is known for bringing about the constitutional right for *Dalit*. His even bigger move was to reject Hinduism and adopt Buddhism as a religion. He viewed Hinduism as a major barrier which encourages a culture which is against the very *culture of humanity*, and therefore decided to reject this religion. He had also openly shared that the work of Hindu social reform is not possible and will not be possible even in the future which is why I leave this religion and this was his opinion on the Hindu Code Bill was as well.

Gandhi when staying in Sabarmati Ashram with Kasturba Gandhi, Kasturba Gandhi would be helping this person to clean the toilets. Kasturba did not want to do it, and Gandhi and Kasturba had a fight over it. The Hindu sanskriti or culture is the barrier against *shram (human effort or labour)*. A person cannot be human until a person is not engaged in labour himself. Why are people dependent on others to clean their toilets? This is a *shram virodhi (anti labour)* culture. The Dalit view has its own culture and philosophy.

KK Vaid recounted different insights and personal experiences. A son of sweeper, he shared that he is the Secretary of the *Rashtriya Safai*

*Kaamgaar Manch*. His father had taken him to Mumbai to study and when he had completed Class Five he was sent back to his village in Gulawati, Uttar Pradesh. Unaware of practices related to ‘untouchability’ he shared his first experiences of atrocities he had faced where he was beaten a group of higher caste women when he tried to access a public well.

In 1969 the Shankar Acharya in Puri went completely against the constitutional values of this country when he announced that in our religious doctrines there are ‘untouchable practices’ present and will remain. A memorandum was sent by all of us from Mumbai, requesting Indira Gandhi to arrest Shankar Acharya. When we reached Delhi, even the Valmiki samaaj did not accept us, but we protested in front of Parliament. Shri Bhadoria from Samaajwadi party came to meet us, and R D Bhandare Deputy Leader, Congress also met us, after which we were arrested. R D Bhandare asked what we wanted and we shared our demand that the Shankar Acharya be arrested for violating the basic values of the Constitution and making atrocities against Dalits a non cognizable offence. Surendra Mohan supported us fully. We asked to speak to the PM who has taken oath to protect the constitutional values of the country, and agreed to the second but I cannot do the first, it will create a lot of conflict across the country. Vaid questioned the role of Brahmins in accepting the basic values of the Constitution. He appealed that till the Brahmin does not reject these *shastras*, India will not survive. Unless Dalits don’t give their blood they will not get independence.

In 1945 the Industrial Disputes Act was drafted, however sweepers were not given the right to strike. We went on strike for three and a half months the whole of Mumbai was left dirty. In 1949 this was institutionalized for the sweepers as well by B R Ambedkar. Most pf

Gandhi's ideas have not worked, whether it is the Trusteeship principle, or the work of the Harijan Sevak Sangh or his untouchability campaign. If this country has to be saved, then it is the Brahmin only who can save it.

**Bhupen** shared that he is left with some questions after the discussions. I feel that in the case of a religion, where a religion has propagated a practice where they consider the urine of an animal pure and do not drink water from the hands of people, we should understand the relevance of the religion and how we should look at it. At a rally in Lucknow today Mayawati shared that the heir to her political kingdom will be a *chamar*. Is the means to the struggle of Dalits adopted by Mayawati, correct? How does an oppressed person move beyond the initial reaction of anger to a conscious move towards change? So far the discussions have not given a clear idea on how this change will happen.

**Kawaljeet** who shared that resides in Old Delhi and shared experiences from a programme which he held with *safai karmachari unions*. He shared his concern on how unions were being divided and he felt the need to bring together all these groups under a common umbrella. Speaking about the Valmiki society, he shared that they have approached Sheila Dikshit with their demands, but she gave a small hint that privatization will not happen now, but this means that it will happen later. He shared that the Valmik society is currently very concerned with the impact that privatization will have in their lives. Very few among us will look at life ahead, and very few among us will actually look at issues ahead. Most cannot see beyond this occupation. With the recent privatization threat most fear what will happen to their children, they see no leaders who can keep the issues of the society in front of the government and their issues can be resolved. It is not true that we are not oppressed in cities; the mindset in the city is like the

villages which he substantiated with some cases of atrocities that he has witnessed in Delhi. He also gave instances of how unnecessary blame was put on the heads of *safai karmacharis*, when some careless shopkeepers/citizens have thrown garbage in the area after it has been cleaned by them.

**Prem Sundarial** shared that in most of what is being discussed, most of the thoughts and discussions have been relegated to ‘irrelevance’ and therefore he is left wondering, what is ‘relevant’? Is the discussion only about issues of Dalit communities, or is it a discussion on the abolition of the caste system. Dalit communities are not homogenous either, is there no ‘untouchability’ within Dalit communities?

**Thansingh Josh** shared that Gandhi became irrelevant for Dalits when he signed on the Poona Pact. After 60 years people said this earlier but today it is being voiced openly. What Sundarial shared is also a bare fact today that among Dalits too there are Brahmins. The last person in their society they are not willing look towards and instead prefer to walk arm in arm with their Brahmin brothers. They need to be responsible for the rest who still remain there instead of just attacking the Brahmin. Brahmin is the enemy, Gandhi too, but you need to be the friend.

**Devdutt ji** concluded the session that he does not want to defend Gandhi and is glad that his question has enabled a rich discussion. Reflecting on the evening’s dialogues he shared that it is very clear that the wound is deep, and even after there to four generations the pain of the wound is still there, and though one was aware of this, the discussions clarified it even more. Critiquing an earlier comment that ‘pain can bring about total transformation’, he shared that pain can give rise to poetry, pain can give rise to literature, bring about circumstances of social transformation, it

creates conditions for the same, but it cannot bring about transformative change. Pain gives rise to thought, history teaches us, but after that we rise above history, and it is that thought that helps to bring about social change. You have got stuck with the essence of pain, but what is the thought, besides the fact that Gandhi was wrong, how do you move ahead? Give me one instance of thought towards change. You are stuck with pain. What is the Dalit consciousness and what is your vision of change?

*The dialogue continued.....*

*Centenary Dialogues on ‘Hind Swaraj’*

*23<sup>rd</sup> August 2008*

*Gandhi Peace Foundation*

On the occasion of the centenary dialogues on Hind Swaraj, Gandhi’s ideas on life, ecology, modernity elucidated in the above book, becomes extremely relevant. The two lectures by Onkar Mittal, and Satish Jain revealed the relevance of Gandhi’s ideas and the alternatives he had proposed, in the context of modernism today.

.....

**Hind Swaraj Samvad**

*An invitation for collective exploration in the praxis of non-violence*

Presented by Shri Omkar Mittal

**Introduction**

The human soul, struggling against the onslaught of the satanic forces of globalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is restlessly looking for a philosophy to inspire and praxis for action, in its quest for God. The new military-industrial technologies developed by the ‘sovereign’ nation states of the Western Civilization have been used by them for the destruction of their native societies as well as for the destruction of the traditional societies all over the globe. The mankind is not ready to be deluded anymore with the promise made by this ‘civilization’ of the universal progress and peace. In this hour of despair, equipped with hindsight wisdom, we need to re-examine the emergence of the leviathan called the nation-state, as it was evolved and established during the last 300-500 years of Western Civilization.

Mahatma Gandhi – had proposed an alternative philosophy, rather program, of ‘non-violence’ as the basis of organizing life and society. His ideas were rejected declaring such faith in non-violence as bordering on lunacy. Almost all Gandhi’s contemporaries, no matter what political thought they represented, were not only naïve about the real nature of capitalism-imperialism, but they were also enticed by it. Their

main complaint against the British rule in India was that they were too slow in pushing scientism and industrialism in India. The above satanic illusion laid the ground for the partition of India and our current trap in the militarism and globalization with continued impoverishment.

Today, once again, we have the opportunity to consider the Gandhian alternative based on the dialectical dynamics of natural unities as opposed to the dialectics of antagonisms. Despite the contemporary fashion in some circles to minimize his gigantic contribution to the Indian independence and the anti-colonial struggles of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the same time trivialize his thoughts as mere idiosyncrasies, he remains perhaps our sole inspiration today to re-explore and reassert our humanity and soul. It is perhaps an enigma why Gandhi has emerged as larger than life figure of the twentieth century and as we enter into the twenty first century, the interest in his name and ideas continues to enlarge and grow. One possible reason could be that he gave a pious hope of fighting the most violent monster of capitalistic imperialism by its antithesis –truth and non violence.

‘Hind Swaraj’ is his manifesto for India written in 1908. Gandhi’s own inspirations and methods were wholly and solely inspired by Hind Swaraj and it was his personal manifesto, whether others believed in it or not. Therefore the centenary year of publication of Hind Swaraj should be an occasion to review not only the book but his whole life and struggle in light of his manifesto – the Hind Swaraj. ‘Hind Swaraj’ the manifesto has never been systematically debated. We feel a fundamental debate around this work will help those who are opposed to present system of oppression.

## **Political Life of Gandhi and Hind Swaraj**

### Political Life

For any discussion on Gandhi, it will be important to recall how he emerged as the tallest leader on the Indian political scene and the one of the most important reference point for the liberation movements all over the world. That he was an extraordinary phenomenon is a euphemism only perhaps. The active spiritual/ political life of Gandhi may be divided into two phases, the first phase is from childhood through South Africa days to 1919 when he is trying to seek equality for the Indians within the British Empire

and the second phase beginning with non-cooperation movement in 1920 when he calls himself a 'rebel' and declares his intention to make a fight to the finish with the British Imperialism.

In the first phase, Gandhi is professing faith that British institutions will grant justice and self rule to India and the Indians will have to prepare themselves to become worthy of it. During the First World War, to get more co-operations from India, the British had promised important reforms and gradual introduction of 'self-rule'. After the first World War, in the year 1919, the Indians received declaration from the British of their intentions of bringing in some of the promised political reforms, coupled with Rowlett Act, betrayal of British promise to Muslims on the preservation of Khilafat and massacre of Jalianwala Bagh. The whole national leadership of Congress and Muslim league felt the humiliation of betrayal by the British, but they were defenseless against it. After all, the Indians had been disarmed after 1857 and they were left with no possibility of opposing the British with force of arms. What could they do but to accept the national humiliation?

Gandhi's had continued to profess faith in the British institutions and British justice even during the First World War, Rowlett act and Jalianwala Bagh. Only when the Hunter Commission report on the Jalianwala Bagh massacre is published and British refuse to give justice to Indian and punish the perpetrators of the crime, that he loses faith and declares himself a rebel. It was in this situation that Gandhi called for non-violent non-cooperation against the British. This changed the entire atmosphere in the country and whole country rose in rebellion against the British. This was the first step in laying the foundation of the Indian Independence. This new national awakening earned him the title of 'mahatma'. He was called the 'soul of India'. Some of the important events after that are withdrawal of the Mass Civil Disobedience, Council Entry, Simon Commission, the framing of constitution by the Motilal Nehru Committee, failure of Congress and Muslim league to reach an agreement, the Salt Satyagraha, the second Round Table Conference and Civil Disobedience Movement after that, fast against Separate Electorate for SC and Poona pact with Dr. Ambedkar, withdrawal of Civil Disobedience in 1934, Council Entry, 1935 GOI act, 1937 elections and formation of provincial governments, resignations of the congress governments in 1939, failure of

Cripps Mission and the quit India movement in 1942, Gandhi -Jinnah talks in 1944, agreement on partition by Congress and Muslim league in 1947, Indian independence and communal riots and death of Gandhi in 1948.

It will be important to emphasize that throughout this second phase Gandhi was most consistent non-violent non-cooperator and was not in favor of Council Entry and formation of provincial governments by the Congress. He wanted the country and the congress to follow the policy of **non-violent non-cooperation** till the British are forced to concede the Indian demand for independence. However the congress leadership was not in favor of this policy. This was one of the reasons for Gandhi to resign from Congress in 1934. However, the Congress always came back to Gandhi when it was not able to get its way with the British. This paradoxical relationship is responsible for many of the accusations made against Gandhi about his hypocrisy, double talk and his responsibility in accepting the partition of the country. Everyone has a right to have one's own views on that, but one will have to keep this context in mind while formulating a judgment. These are some very important events of our recent national life. Unfortunately, these have not been discussed and debated sufficiently for the generations born in independent India.

'Hind Swaraj'

In our methodology, we are not limiting ourselves to the textual analysis of Hind Swaraj. We see an inner consistency in Gandhi's life and works, despite some seeming inconsistencies. For us his two autobiographies, Mangal Prabhat and Ekadash Vrata, his major speeches and letters, his constructive programme, and other commentaries on his life and works are equally important sources to understand 'Hind Swaraj'. *By this method, we are trying to understand Gandhi's life and message with 'Hind Swaraj' as the central theme.* There are others who have dismissed 'Hind Swaraj' as unimportant or idiosyncratic work and yet, made a *atimanav* or *avatar* or *super-human* person of Gandhi. This is not our approach.

Gandhiji called the western civilization as satanic civilization. He warned Indian against following this path. His mantra of fighting this satanic civilization was non-violent non-cooperation with it. The *Satyagraha* was a profound notion. The non-cooperation and civil disobedience may be considered its negative side. The positive side

was the constructive program. Since 1921, Gandhi tried to pursue these two efforts consistently with all his might, till his death. Unfortunately, very few of his political colleagues believed in it. They were all suffering from the satanic illusion of the progress linked with this civilization and wanted more of it and at even a faster rate than the British.

One of the dimension of this illusion was that the educated class in India was enamored by the ideas of European enlightenment and had great faith in the European institutions evolved under those ideas. It was much later between first and second world war that some of the great Indian intellectuals could overcome that illusion and were able to see the European institutions in their naked satanic reality. It goes to the credit of Gandhi that he showed the ability to see the Indian institutions of village republic in their own right and beauty and did not link the idea of Indian progress to the European enlightenment. It should be kept in mind that European enlightenment was on the one hand a reaction and rebellion against the European Christianity, its dogmas and its rigid control over the society. India had to face the problem of the onslaught of Christianity in a different way and therefore there was no need for it to borrow from the European enlightenment for its progress. On the other hand the European enlightenment became the class ideology of the emerging capitalist class and managed to hide all its oppression and untruth under the garb of its ideas. Another important dimension of this illusion was the mirage of the Marxist thought and promise of liberation under the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Indian socialist and Marxist became the junior agents of another arm of European enlightenment in the Russian revolution.

The beauty of 'Hind Swaraj' is that its author was able to see through all this and was not enamored by these illusions. This is the prophetic insight which needs to be appreciated in 'Hind Swaraj'. Unfortunately, the post independence generation has had very little encounters with these debates, as after gaining independence, it was able to gain its objective of becoming junior partners in the imperialist order and gave up the objectives and ideals of the Indian independence movement under the leadership of Gandhi.

While we are not making a vad out of Gandhi, we do think that Gandhi stands on his own and cannot be fitted into any of the other established doctrine e.g. alternative modernity. In Gandhi's own words he is a votary of Gita. He believes in eternal struggle

of the forces of good and evil and he is not looking for a final solution in this battle, since this battle is eternal. He is willing to depend on God as his first and last refuge in this battle and not bothered about the results. Therefore he is not providing any panacea or solution in the modern sense of the term. However his faith in God also makes him assert that humanity is gradually evolving and hope is essential to faith- this seems a contradiction with his scathing critique of contemporary western civilization. However he is not keeping the final judgment in his own hand but leaving it on God. His central concern is the spiritual growth and moral action.

What is unique to Gandhi is that while he is inspiring us with highest ideals, he is at the same time a pragmatist and realist and wanting us to take a very pragmatic approach. This is the central paradigm of Gandhism. He wants the soul to make utmost effort but at the same time he realizes that with body, there is imperfection and we have to live with this. Perhaps, for him, the life does not end with body and the journey with body is only an opportunity for the evolution of soul, so he wants us to be patient and also look beyond body and beyond this life. This also makes him fearless, which is the basis of truth and non-violent action.

### **The ‘Hind Swaraj’ Today**

Human to human relationship is the first casualty of modern society, whatever we understand by modernism. The ethos of ahimsa, first of all should be fraternity, human dignity, and socio-economic equality. By ignoring the people in our neighborhood, we are laying a foundation for violence. Therefore the first challenge is to challenge the orientation towards selfishness and violence being inculcated within the family and other societal institutions today.

In the contemporary context, the logic of western civilization has been summed up as the logic of Auschwitz – the destruction of Jews by Germany and Manhattan project – the creation of atom bomb and its dropping on Hiroshima. It has been argued that the European Modernity can only do nothing better than these acts and can only do worse.

The generations borne after these acts have continued to believe in this satanic illusion of progress under the Western Civilization, its science, technology & political and economic institutions. The post eighty revolutions of communication sciences and ICT and biotechnology has only strengthened these illusions. Our generation had some hesitations about the unrestrained dehwad (cult of the body) but the newer generations have no such qualms. To talk of sexual morality is considered inappropriate and against the human rights of the others. The contemporary ethos is not only to believe in the dehwad but to promise it to those who do not have the means to enjoy it. There is also a faith that the neo-liberal dispensation can deliver the same to more and more numbers of human beings, in a short time.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent the global consensus to present a human face of globalization, for the majority who will be deprived of any hope of dignified survival on this earth. The MDGs make a promise of reducing worst forms of poverty and prevention of environmental destruction. These are silent on the need to restrain the unbridled consumerism of the western societies, at the cost of the rest of the world. These goals say very little on the social and economic inequalities and building social and cultural conviviality. It is totally silent on the destruction of other forms of life and whole dehwad and unaesthetic form of the contemporary life. The religiosity and quest for God has no place in it (this is partly due to Europe's nightmarish experience of Christianity in their history).

Given the above, it is considered an anachronism to even discuss Hind Swaraj. However there are sound reasons to question these illusions and making a conscious effort to overcome these illusions:

### ***Globally***

- The Western Civilization is continuing to be plagued with wars. After the first and second world wars, the saga has continued with Korean and Vietnamese wars and African wars and after the collapse of Soviet Union with wars in the Balkans, followed by the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan.

- The free movement of the global capital is causing economic catastrophes and devastations across the subcontinents.
- The rising costs of health care and long term care are reaching beyond the means of the most developed countries. In the richest country of the world, the USA, forty to fifty million people are denied any access to health care and social security. The long term care of the chronically sick, disabled and old persons is even a bigger challenge.
- There is increasing destruction of the environment and specter of depletion of energy and mineral resources.
- The marriage of scientific and technical establishment with the greed, profit and capital has emerged as an independent force and increasingly driving the global production, as if the robots created by the modern technology have taken over the world. The logic of the capitalist production system is increasingly driven by the technology of obsolescence, which is required to be changed every five years for the survival of the capitalist system.
- The specter of newer epidemics is haunting the World. These fears are either artificial creations or actual new epidemics are the results of the social and economic devastations of the forces of capitalist exploitation and globalization.
- The individual has lost its soul and society has lost its conviviality. The soul is rebelling against its enslavement but does not know the path to liberation.

### **In the Indian context**

- The displacement of six million people in the last sixty years is inevitable cost of development and justified by the logic of collateral damage
- The increasing communal violence, sub-national wars ( North -East, Kashmir, tribal land and naxalites)
- Increasing agrarian crisis and mass suicides by peasants
- Nearly two third of population continues to live below poverty line. Denial of access to health and education to vast masses.
- Destruction of the rivers and environment

- Lack of social reforms and failure to achieve social equality and harmony in social relationships.
- Increasing centralization, militarization, and police powers, lack of effective devolution of power to the people.

The above should be sufficient to make us realize the fundamental malaise of the civilization that we are living in overcome the illusion of possibility of progress that we are suffering from.

The Hind Swaraj and Gandhi's life is a reminder to us that we should not feel despondent. The first step that we need is an internal journey. We need to shed our illusion. We need to realize that the science, the tools and the institutions of the modern civilization cannot help the mankind. The first step in the rebellion needs to be internal rebellion and a vow not to cooperate with the present system. It is only after this that we can start seeing, what opportunities are there for us to offer civil resistance and conceive and implement a constructive program for the regeneration of ourselves mankind and mother earth.

It may perhaps be true to say that the possibility of a village based self contained society and republic is even more remote today that it could possibly have been when India regained its independence. A lot has happened since which has led to destruction of the traditional agriculture and traditional crafts and the inner organic relationships of the Indian society. Therefore the Gandhian alternative is lost forever and we are eternally trapped and cursed..

It should be kept in mind that it is not the responsibility of an individual or a group of individual to devise a solution in their minds and then offer it to humanity for implementation. The solution is a process of making ethical choices by individuals, society and nation and there cannot be a blue print for it. As Gandhi said, one step is enough for me, we have to make our first steps and look for the next one.

### **Invitation for a Dialogue on Hind Swaraj**

Our central inspiration is **ahimsa** which we have learnt from Gandhi. However many of his key opponents also claim to have ahimsa as their creed but they would not like to take inspiration from Gandhi. The purpose of this work is to present a case for

ahimsa as can be learnt from Gandhi. However that should not hinder a process of cooperation between all who believe in ahimsa, despite their different views on Gandhi and other thinkers.

**We plan to make this work as an open ended process and others are welcome to join and contribute their ideas in this endeavor.**

**We present the main ideas contained in Hind Swaraj in seven sections: ( work in progress)**

1. **Truth and God:** For Gandhi, Truth is God. Gandhi says that his inspiration is Gita. So his understanding of truth is as expounded in Gita.
2. **Western civilization or dehwad** –according to Gandhi, brahmcharya follows from the truth. Therefore he opposes the western civilization because of its dehwad. He does not want Hind to follow dehwad as it is against its national swadharma.
3. **Swadeshi-swarajya-** He wants India to have faith in its own institutions and warns that the temptation to follow west will force India to choose the path of imperialism which cannot be the goal of hind swaraj. The central Indian institution is village society which is based on cooperation and not of blind competition. At the same time he is for reform of Indian institutions and is willing to learn from the west
4. **Sarva dharma sambhav:** He has faith that Hindus and Islam have been able to live in peace in the past and can do so in the future also.
5. **Modern technology and charkha**– He warns against getting enticed by the modern technology and asserts that technology cannot be allowed to become an instrument of human enslavement
6. **Swasthya:** He is opponent of allopathic medicine and considers it anti-human.

7. **Ahimsa:** He wants Hind to use soul force/love/ahimsa to oppose and fight western civilization and attain swaraj. – *satyagraha/law of suffering/shahadat*

Shri Arun Kumar – Pani Baba , Shri Babulal Sharma, Shri Than Singh Josh , Shri Ajay Sahay , Dr. Onkar Mittal

Prof. Satish Jain discussed issues on nature and humanity and the relevance of Hind Swaraj in relation to it.

The basic structure of Hind Swaraj is very deceptive he said. Written in a dialogue form of the reader and editor, it includes discussions on doctors, lawyers, Hindu-Muslims, a diverse set of issues. The way in which this has been written, the true meaning is difficult to assess, unless one has seriously thought about the nature of modernity. It is one of the most remarkable books of the twentieth century. Unless we try to understand this message the future could be extremely bleak.

In order to initiate the discussion one could begin with an example he explained. When the Europeans reached America, then there was the Passenger Pigeon, which had a huge population in America at that time. The Passenger Pigeon was hunted not only for its meat but for its feathers, and different types of industrial uses. In around 1814, John Godwin,( a very big ecological society has been named after him), was traveling through the cities of America, and noted in his diary that a flock of Passenger Pigeons required ten days to cross over from one destination to the next. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there were many Passenger Pigeons in America. The last bird died in 1914, this bird is extinct today. It is amazing that millions and millions of these kinds of birds existed at one time and today not even one of them exist. There were no homes, no villages where one did not see a *guraiya chidiya* in India. Today where does one get to see them? This is just

about one or two species of birds. This is nothing, scientist are saying that in the next 10 years 25% of these crores of species will be destroyed, some are saying 70%. It is extraordinary to see a civilization which is 'killing', not any one but the entire species. The power of this civilization cannot be denied, for how can you be so destructive without this power. Gandhi realized this, and the best way to look at Hind Swaraj is to view it as an allegory, like Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

What does this Hind Swaraj actually mean? There is this very beautiful dialogue when he discusses the railways. The proponent of modernity says look at the advantage of modern science, the advantages of the railways. You can travel anywhere. Gandhi speaks of the negative aspects, he mentions our holy places. Earlier who would go to these remote holy places in the mountains, they were devotees, who would certainly not defile these places. The serenity of these places could not be disturbed. He was talking in 1908 when plastic was not there, imagine the scenario today in 2008. In any densely populated part of the world, if you dig up to 10 feet you will find plastic. This is the degree of toxification of the entire earth.

This is the fundamental essence on which he was rejecting modernity. He uses the word 'violence' as a metaphor and not the literal sense. What he means to say is that modernity is 'anti-life', whatever comes in its way it will destroy.

Look at the pace at which languages get extinct. We believe that Hindi as a language will not be destroyed who knows that in the future even this language may go extinct. This is the nature of a killer civilization. Hind Swaraj was more an inspirational work in that sense providing alternatives to this *killer civilisation*.