

**GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE AND STRUGGLE OF DALITS FOR
THEIR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitutes 25% of the total population in India. They have been discriminated on the basis of caste for centuries. The issue of upliftment of the downtrodden section was first raised in the Colonial period. During this period, Gandhi supported Poona Pact which provided reservation to these two most downtrodden sections whereas Dr. Ambedkar opposed Gandhi. The objective behind framing the Poona Pact was that Gandhi wanted these sections to be a part of Hindu religion and therefore, the Poona Pact reserved a few number of seats for these sections within the fold of Hindu population. No doubt, Reservation has brought this section into jobs and education but one cannot deny the fact that Reservation has not succeeded in declining the casteism in Indian society. In contemporary India these downtrodden sections have to undergo severe sufferings. Their participation at workplaces is still proportionately less as compared to the upper-castes. Those who managed to enter the workplaces are still facing the discriminatory attitude of others. Very few of them could manage to secure the higher posts because majority of this section is lagging behind in the strong background, personal contacts and flow of work. Taking into consideration all these factors, the paper presents a descriptive study related to the unending struggle of these particular sections (named as dalits) at workplaces. Focusing on Gandhi's 'Sarvodaya', the paper is also an attempt to analyse Gandhian perspective regarding the upliftment of these sections.

Key Words: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Gandhi, Sarvodaya, Discrimination, Struggle.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt towards understanding the struggle of dalits in achieving their sustainable development. It is important to note that the Father of the Nation Sh. M.K.Gandhi wanted 'Sarvodaya' and rejected the utilitarian view of 'greatest happiness of the greatest number', but, if we look at the competitive market of the present scenario, the upliftment of dalits is still lagging behind. This paper attempts to evaluate the success of Gandhian perspective of 'greatest good of all'. The paper has been divided into three sections.

The first section deals with the struggle of dalits in the caste based feudal society.

The second section will emphasise on the Gandhian perspective especially the 'Sarvodaya'.

The third section deals with the contemporary condition of dalits.

The fourth section will evaluate the existence of Gandhian perspective and links it with struggle of dalits in the present scenario.

Struggle of Dalits in Caste based Feudal society

Caste-system and untouchability in India is not a new phenomenon. In ancient India, the caste played a role of 'Class'. When Aryans invaded the indigenous non-Aryans, the master-slave relationship was started between them. In the later Rig Veda period, the society further divided into four Varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras). The Brahmins knew the Vedas and performed religious ceremonies, Kshatriyas were meant for defending the territories because they knew the art of war and rule. The Vaishyas were traders whereas the Shudras were further divided into clean or anirvasita and unclean or nirvasita. The former category of shudra consisted the peasants, artisans and nomadic whereas the latter category consisted the butchers, hunters, removers, cremators, hangmen, sweepers, drum beating in funerals and festivals, grave digging, making chappals, and scavenging etc.. This latter category of shudras were termed as 'Acchut' or 'Untouchables' and no doubt, they performed a large number of skill oriented duties as compared to other Varnas. The bad-luck of this section (which later known as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes or dalits) was that from the beginning, this section was deprived of the education. The discrimination against them in all fields led to no progress in their upliftment. These people were forced to live

outside the village and their participation in Hindu social life was banned. They had to stay away to prevent incidental contact with other castes and were not allowed to enter a temple, school and any other public place. In 11th and 12th Century when the feudal tendencies reached at its high peak, the caste-system was more strengthened because the practice of land grants to Brahmins was started. The untouchables worked as bonded labourers in the fields of the higher castes feudal lords.

The struggle of dalits was continued during colonial period. The Charter Act of 1813, Wood Dispatch of 1854 and establishment of Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1861, introduced the English education during the colonial period. The benefit of this western education system reached to children from the rich families of both Hindus and Muslims. Very few dalits could reach to the level. This was because they were extremely poor and were discarded by the society since centuries. They worked as the watchmen. In the British army, dalits were not appointed above the rank of foot soldiers whereas the higher-castes on the basis of their education, could manage to reach the Fauzdar (a military officer). In 1849, Indians were employed in the government services as clerks and majority of them were the upper-castes. The circumstances indicated clearly that the upper-castes had managed the education and very soon they reached the higher ranks also whereas the dalits, had to struggle for getting the right to educate and representation. The issue of their representation in services was put before the Miller Committee. Mysore was the first state with seats reserved for dalits in the government services. The reservation for this particular section was opposed by the dominant section of society. Further the issue of their (dalits) representation was raised in Borough Committee and Mudiman Committee. In south, Indian Liberation Federation raised the voice against the discrimination to dalits. Though Government of India Act 1909, 1919 and 1935 favoured the dalit' representation in educational, political and economic field, but many conservative Indian voices again opposed it. When Nehru Report was presented, the Muslim brotherhood rejected the demand of dalit representation, whereas, Gandhi and Tilak supported the *Varnadharma*. The notion of providing representation to dalits through separate electorate was strengthened in the three-Round Table Conferences (RTC). Dr. Ambedkar supported it fully and emerged as 'masiah' for dalits but Gandhi on other hand, went to fast against this notion. As a consequence, Dr. Ambedkar had to give up his demand and a deal called the Poona Pact took place between

Gandhi and Ambedkar in which seats were reserved for the dalits in the jobs and legislature. However, the struggle of dalits for their representation was reduced a little when the forefathers of the Constituent Assembly provided the legal basis to the Affirmative Action and Protective Discrimination to dalits.

‘Sarvodaya’ of Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi ushered a new era in the Indian history. He was an inspired teacher and prophet. He is known as the ‘Father of the Nation’ because he contributed his whole life for the freedom of India and the upliftment of the people. He was a practical thinker and a great *Karam Yogi*. He was a social- scientist who always tried to implement his principles to end-up the inequality and injustice in the society. The core of Gandhi’s philosophy was *Swadeshi* instead of *Videshi*. He rejected the idea that ‘ends justify the means’. For him, if a noble end is achieved by adopting ignoble means, their use would be excused. For fulfilling his dream he adopted the concept of *Sarvodaya*. *Sarvodaya* is a philosophy that begins with the welfare of all and ends with the *Ram Rajya*. The meaning of Sarvodaya lies in the word itself- ‘Sarva’ and ‘Udaya’. The term “*Sarva*” means ‘all’ and “*Udaya*” means ‘uplift’. For Gandhi, ‘*Sarvodaya*’ stands for the liberated life, a *Samaj* where *Ram Rajya* exists. The central idea of *Sarvodaya* is the welfare of others. Since ‘*Sarvodaya*’ meant for the welfare of all, it also demands the commitment, even unto death. The spirit of *Sarvodaya* consists of the universal brotherhood, universal love and service to all. He tried to implement this idea in a society like India where the people were divided into different castes and a feeling of hatredness was existing among them. But in such difficult circumstances, he gave a new outlook to the national problems. This proves that he was a successful man of action. His philosophy demanded the commitment. He raised his voice against the exploitation and set-up a new social order of brotherhood, truth and *Ahimsa*. Though Gandhi was born in Vaisya caste but he also supported the rights and opportunities for dalits. Although his views related to the emancipation of dalits were totally different from Dr. Ambedkar but then also, he got support of the masses. This may be because of his charismatic, inspirational, visionary and value-based unique style. While adopting *Sarvodaya* he stood against the untouchability and raised his voice in bringing the unity and brotherhood in society. According to Gandhi, the caste-system and untouchability was a symbol of degeneration and it was against the spirit of

society. He did not consider the caste-system and untouchability as the part of the Hindu religion. According to him, it was a corroding poison that was eating up the Hindu society. For eroding this evil he favoured the untouchables (dalits) to enter the temples and worship there. He also favoured the inter-caste marriages and suggested to adopt sons and daughters of untouchables as their own, as and when need be. This self-control will also raise their spiritual level. He wanted the Harijans, Tribals and members of lower castes to be provided the Right to Equality and Opportunities. He wanted the Harijans to be uplifted and called them 'Son of God'. However, he favoured *Varnadharma* which, in his opinion was law of life and essential for perfection and growth of society. He wanted the society without class struggle. He stood for the rights of the whole community including women. According to him, the class division is a product of condition in which the physical labour is considered as inferior to the mental labour or leisure. Therefore, the class division has to be abolished and a sense of equality should be built among people by making the 'bread labour' compulsory for all. According to him, every person should have minimum necessities i.e. food, shelter and clothing and this will be possible when all the goods and services produced in the village, made the village self-sufficient Republic. He favoured a society where neither rich and poor nor touchable and untouchable exists. He wanted the upliftment of all. But how this society will come into existence? The welfare of whole community demands money. Then what will be the source of money? He wanted to set-up a society where the rich would offer their riches for the welfare of the poor and for this purpose; he favoured the co-operative federation of village republics. He wanted the panchayats to set-up so that the grass-root development can take place. He looked the grass-root level as a practical field because the poor, downtrodden and exploited people without any facility, are living in the villages. The facilities could not reach to them. He knew that on the name of competition, the western countries are promoting the comfort and self-indulgence with corruption, and conflicts. As a result, the greed and wants of the common men have been increased. Therefore, for making the society self-sustaining, he promoted the cottage industries alongwith *Khadi*. He wanted to bring the economic equality in the society. He also promoted Adult Education. He started *Nai Taleem* (basic education) through which education related to health and hygiene was provided to the common men. Through *Nai Taleem*, Gandhi also promoted the manual work that included spinning, weaving, pottery, basket-making and metal work. Thus, his focus was on building-

up the lifelong character, social character and the holistic character of the common men. One cannot reject the fact that *Sarvodaya* is a holistic term that includes the end of class struggle, promotion of social welfare, social values, prosperity, and spirituality to all. Gandhi wanted that common men should work for the set-up of *Sarvodaya* and tried to adopt the qualities consisting in this principle, throughout his life. Gandhi lived for the people, therefore, Gandhian '*Sarvodaya*' rejected the utilitarian view of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' and favoured 'greatest good of all'.

Contemporary conditions of Dalits

Finally Gandhi's dream of providing rights and opportunities to dalits within the framework of Hinduism was fulfilled when the separate electorate system, offered by Dr. Ambedkar, was rejected and through Poona Pact the Reservation for dalits within the fold of Hinduism was adopted. India is the first country to have the Constitutional provisions for the Reservation (for dalits) in public services. A large number of laws like The Untouchability Offences Act of 1955, Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1976, the laws to prevent the Forced Labour, the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1987 etc. are framed to protect people belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes from centuries' old caste based discrimination.

These laws are framed for these particular sections while taking into consideration the following factors-

- 1) The stigmatized ethnic identity
- 2) The labour market discrimination
- 3) The historical origin
- 4) The material disparities.

But these laws are not proved enough in providing security to dalits. Gandhi's '*Sarvodaya*' has neither influenced the post-independent Indian society nor has the struggle of dalits ended. In spite of these laws, in rural areas, the dalits are still forced to work in the fields of rich higher caste landlords without proper wages and when they demand their wages, they have been beaten-up. The failure of the implementation of laws has resulted in the continuance of the bonded labours. In states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana, the large number of dalits are working as bonded

labourers in the brick kilns, stone quarries, beedi manufacture, carpet weaving, construction projects and sericulture processing industry. The historical impact of caste-system is still visible in shop of barber, tailor, washerman, tea-shops and retail market. In villages, the caste-system is still rigid as compared to the urban cities. The reasons behind the improved conditions of dalits in urban cities are the common dependency on resources, high literacy rate and belief in democratic values. With the spread of technology, the mechanization of agriculture due to Green Revolution, the forced labour and inappropriate wages to workers, dalits have been forced to migrate to cities in search of jobs. In the urban cities, though the caste system is seemed to be declined as the people are working under one roof and have the good communication without bothering the caste of colleagues but all which is visible is not real. Those dalits who have been employed at the hotels in urban cities have to face the caste stigma in one or other way. Although the orthodox approach of the hotel owners of not giving jobs to dalits, has been changed but mostly the dalits are employed as cleaners or with low level jobs. They are forced to hide their castes-identity from their colleagues. Few among dalits who migrated to cities either work as sweepers or housemaids. Even their condition is not very good. In government sector, reservation is the only provision provided to dalits to gain opportunities and represent them in the society. Through reservation, dalits can enter the education, jobs and politics. But the proper implementation of this provision in the respective fields is still an issue of debate. Many studies indicate the non-implementation of this (Reservation) provision. Due to the low-income or centuries' old discrimination, the drop-out rate of dalit children is more as compared to others. As a result, very few dalits have succeeded to attain the education and skill development. Even the National Employment Service (NES) has not succeeded in providing jobs to dalits because various channels have been introduced in the service-sector that prefers effective skills and communication. On the name of efficiency, merit and skills, the dalits are almost kept away from the seats. As a result, in most of the cases, the seats meant for dalits have not been filled-up rather those have been converted to the seats of the general categories. Those who manage to enter the workplaces also face the discriminatory attitude of his colleagues. The upper-caste colleagues call them 'Quotawalas'. The caste based superiority build a stressful relations between them (upper-castes and dalits). Because most of this section is lagging behind in the strong background, personal contacts and flow of work, as a result, very few could manage the

higher posts. Thus the bureaucracy is dominated by the upper castes and they prefer the people of their own caste rather than dalits. Even in politics, the condition of dalits is not very good. Through Reservation, dalits are unfavourably included in politics but they have to work strictly according to the instructions of the leaders belonging to upper-castes. They cannot take their independent decisions. No doubt, through reservation, dalits have been uplifted and have been brought into the common stream, but their appropriate representation is still under a question mark. They feel themselves inferior to the upper castes and try to adopt their (upper-castes) culture, dress and language. This results in the loss of their own identity.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi wanted the classless society. He favoured the equality among people. He was against the caste-system. He believed in the upliftment of all. He wanted the self-sufficient villages where the necessities of people can be fulfilled without any discrimination. According to him, the large scale industries make people lazy and help in the concentration of wealth in hands of few, therefore, he favoured small scale industries. But in present scenario Gandhi's ideas particularly the '*Sarvodaya*' is far away from the reality. With globalization, the penetration of market economy has influenced the rural areas and the people are shifting to urban cities in search of new jobs. But one cannot deny the fact that several dalits are still lagging behind in getting the opportunities. Thus, their socio-economic status is more or less the same as was in pre-modern period. Their literacy rate is still very low as compared to others. Their households have to depend on manual labour for their livelihood. The irony is that the lower castes of Hindu society that are in majority are ruled by the upper-castes which are few in number. The poison of caste division has deeply infected the victim castes. If they raise their voice against the oppression, the efforts have been made by the upper-castes to depress them. The development of Nation can be possible only if human values are created instead of looking at profit. The need is to change the ideology of 'theirs' and 'ours' tradition and provide dalits the opportunities to work with dignity at the par with upper-castes. When all the Ministers, officials, bureaucracy and the people are sensitized to recognize the hard struggle of dalits for their rights, the idea of secularization of India will automatically be fulfilled.

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