



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2015; 1(9): 19-22
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 12-06-2015
Accepted: 15-07-2015

Mamta Rani
Dept. Political Science
D.A.V College, Abohar

Gandhi's Vision for Indian Society

Mamta Rani

Abstract

This paper is concerned with an eighteen month period of Indian history in which Mohandas Gandhi's view on religion, access to temples and the untouchables in Hindu religion expressed through articles, letters and speeches. In this paper, the religious aspect of Gandhi's vision is discussed in an attempt to show how he mobilised Indian society for a common cause. In continuance of above object, this paper will also support the argument that Gandhi mobilised using traditional Hindu rhetoric, which is familiar to Indians. The attempt shows that although Gandhi had mobilised Indians in previous campaigns together with the Indian National Congress, a great part of his mobilisation skills lay in his personal importance and rhetoric. As a continuance of this it is also shown through the information available that Gandhi's methods of mobilisation caused several different responses among the active participants.

Keywords: Gandhi's, Vision, Indian Society.

1. Introduction

1.1 Gandhi's religious vision for India

Religion played a significant role in Gandhi's campaigns. His first Indian campaign was in defense of Indian Muslims in the *Khilafat movement* and his subsequent campaigns in the early 1920 and 1930 are connected to the Hindu religion. Gandhi believed fasting to be a way of showing courage or to suffer pain without retaliation. Gandhi became an ascetic, which he thought would enhance both the body and spiritual power. As part of being an ascetic, Gandhi promoted and encouraged the idea of renunciation, a life in celibacy and self-restraint connected to Hindu revival movements and social reform movements^[1]. Gandhi believed that it was paramount to address the issues within his own religion Hinduism and repair them as he viewed several branches of religion that interconnected in India^[2]. His definition of being a Hindu was "One who believes in God, immortality and transmigration of the soul, *karma* and *moksha*, who tries to practice truth and non-violence and acts according to *varnasharma*, the division of society into distinct groups with their own roles"^[3]. He thereby had a specific notion of what a Hindu was and what his duties were. The well-regarded and powerful renouncer is treated as a man in a high position, ranking higher than Brahmins, who can be both in a powerful position and be wealthy^[4].

Jawaharlal Nehru, commented on Gandhi's use of religion in a political context. The historian Harold Coward explains that Nehru characterized Gandhi as essentially a man of religion. Furthermore, Gandhi referred to himself as a Hindu at the very depths of his being. But Gandhi's conception of religion as well as his Hinduism had nothing to do with any dogma or custom or ritual. Rather, it revolved around his firm belief in the moral law, which he calls the Law of Truth or Love^[5]. He believed that Hinduism had a creed while others did not.

1.2 Religious texts

Gandhi's emphasis on religion was nothing unique to the Indian subcontinent. It had spawned Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism and religious movements such as the *bhakti* or devotional movement, a movement in the 19th century that had inspired Gandhi in his efforts towards the untouchables^[6]. The most important of these were the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita*, which Gandhi followed whole heartedly, is known for being a guide to Hindu theology and for presenting moral guidelines in life^[7]. The ideal devotee is one who prefers solitude, who eats meagre food, who has under perfect control

Correspondence
Mamta Rani
Dept. Political Science
D.A.V College, Abohar

thought, speech and action, who is intent on meditation, who is free always from attachments.⁸ He believed that Hindu Scriptures had to teach and therefore, nothing that is inconsistent with the main theme of the *Gita* is Shastra, no matter where it is found printed inconsistent with the universally accepted first principles of morality has for me the authority of the Shastras. They are designed not to supersede, but to sustain the first principles, and the *Gita* is all-sufficing because it not only conforms to the first principles, but gives you reasons for adherence to them at any cost^[9].

1.3 Untouchability

Gandhi wants to remove untouchability as he saw it as an evil imposed by man, not by any divine authority. There were others working for the abolition of untouchability, among them one is Bhim Rao Ambedkar, who wants reform. Where Gandhi differed from the other abolitionists was the method used to reach this goal. For Gandhi, religion was at the core of the untouchability problem. It was Hinduism that create untouchability, it was the Hindus that act upon these divisions within society and to remove the taint on Hinduism. Gandhi gave the new name to this group, *Harijan*, means children of God, in an attempt to make caste Hindus see that they were all equal under God. Accordingly, temples should not be closed to a section of society, but open to everyone. Gandhi wanted to abolish untouchability, but instead of insisting on abolishing the caste system in which untouchability was created and practiced, Gandhi wanted to incorporate untouchables in the servant or *Shudra* caste. Untouchables themselves would have to be uplifted by clean caste-Hindus, who have a change of heart when Gandhi enlightened them about the wrongs they had committed.¹⁰ Gandhi wants the caste system to *only* consist of the *Shudra* caste. His reason for suggesting this was that while we can all serve and hence be called Shudras, we do not all possess learning nor do we possess divine knowledge. Therefore it would be untruthful to regard ourselves as Brahmins^[11]. This view was contrary to centuries of practice and shows that Gandhi used rhetoric that contained familiar terms but, especially in the case of *varna*, had an inherent different meaning. Although Gandhi gained support for the eradication of untouchability through his campaign, he faced opposition to his interpretations and focus on religion even among his own active participants.

1.4 The Temple

When Gandhi spoke of Hindu worship, he usually spoke of temples. Gandhi believed that the temple was in the core of everyday life for millions of Hindus, whether they be caste Hindus or untouchables. The caste Hindus would see that they had treated the untouchables badly by excluding them and welcome them into a common religious arena, the temple^[12]. Gandhi first mentioned the idea of temple-entry in 1921. It was to be the concrete representation of the idea of abolishing untouchability. Gandhi's goal was equality among Hindus, which wants to take India one step closer to *swaraj*. One way of achieving equality was taking steps that would enable untouchables to become equals. Gandhi did not believe that India was ready for a temple-entry effort in 1921, however, he appealed to people that they should instead focus on opening wells until the time was right^[13]. In the travelling campaign it was not an option to build separate temples for untouchables and Hindus. In Gandhi's view,

would not create religious equality or acceptance. What was acceptable, however, was restricted access inside the temple and restricted hours in which the untouchables could enter. In addition to viewing the temple as the centre for acceptance for Hindus, Gandhi also wrote an article in *The Hindu* of what a perfect temple was. The perfect temple would be one where the priest was a devoted man of God, who had the least of needs and personal ties. The temple would have to be accessible to the untouchables and other poor in clean surroundings and without discrimination.

Gandhi marked his connection to Hindu tradition. He reinvented the traditional Hindu view of courage into *satyagraha*, which he used in all of his campaigns. He also supported issues like cow-protection and the Hindu caste system in an idealised form. The name *Harijan* itself was symbolic by renaming untouchables, Gandhi conveyed that the group had god given rights on the same level as other Hindus, thereby showing his view that Hindus were all on an equal level. By dressing as an untouchable, he communicated that he associated himself as part of the group, which again promoted his view of the caste system and asceticism. Some of Gandhi's views were as a consequence visually apparent to Indian society, but Gandhi's own interpretation of the symbols was not apparent to the same degree. The symbols could, however, help illiterates place Gandhi in a context without having read any of his texts and thereby procuring him more supporters^[14]. In the early 1930, the major change was that the mass media was much more involved in Gandhi's campaigns. Gandhi began publishing his own newspaper in 1933 named *Harijan*, which in contrast to his previous two published newspapers, was wholly focused on unity within India and distributed in English, Hindi and Gujarati^[15]. In addition, texts and interviews were also published in other Indian newspapers such as *The Hindu*, *The Hindustan Times* and *The Bombay Chronicles*. This meant that Gandhi's ideas were spread over a much larger area than previously, making it easier both to understand what Gandhi's views were and to criticise them. The criticisms ranged from Gandhi being too religious to not being religious enough and came from many layers of society. One reservation has to be made, however, the number of illiterates in India at the time of the temple-entry campaign was very high. Although Gandhi had the opportunity to spread his views to more Indians than in earlier campaigns, the scope of Indians was still largely dependent on literate Indians.

1.5 Opposition

A group within orthodox Hindu community called *sanatanists* showed their opposition to Gandhi's religious views through the media and demonstrations. Gandhi defined *sanatanists* as a devoted following of the four holy books of Hinduism and highly regarded in the Hindu community. The *sanatanists* claimed that Gandhi was a renegade influenced by Christianity and Islam and that his actions were more equal to that of an atheist than of a Hindu. *Sanatanists* solemnly warn to don't appear to be acting as a God-fearing Hindu; and although you may succeed in forcing the entry of the untouchables into our temples all honest sanatanists will always regard your act as a sacrilegious deed becoming an atheist. Ironically, Gandhi himself was a self-proclaimed *sanatanist*, with the reservation of only adhering to the message of the *Gita*. The group claimed that Gandhi was distorting Hinduism by promoting his views and

campaigning for the untouchables. In their view, Gandhi was not religious enough. Gandhi, however, insisted that the issue between him and the *sanatanists* was based on a misunderstanding. Those who claim to be *sanatanists* have put themselves in a state of rage as if Gandhi was about to violate all that is good in Hinduism, and they have rendered themselves incapable, first, of understanding Gandhi and then of knowing what they are attacking. Gandhi says that no two letters from among the mass of letters I am receiving from *sanatanists* have agreed about the definition of untouchability. They either swear or enter into argument that has no bearing on the subject. All this cannot be good for *sanatan dharma*. Gandhi thereby pointed out that there were differences among *sanatanists* of what their differences with Gandhi were and how they viewed untouchables. According to other correspondence, however, the *sanatanists* did not deny that untouchables had been wronged. As Gandhi presented it, *sanatanists* just did not want to include untouchables with caste Hindus, nor share temples with them. Almost every letter that Gandhi received from the *sanatanists* makes these startling admissions:

1. We admit that there is much to be done for the amelioration of the condition of the Harijans;
2. We admit that many caste Hindus are ill-treating the Harijans;
3. We admit that their children should receive education and that they should have better quarters to live in;
4. We admit that they should have proper arrangement for bathing and drawing water for them-selves;
5. We admit that they should have full political rights;
6. We admit that they should have ample facilities for worship and
7. We admit that they should have all the civic rights that the others have.

But, say these *Sanatanists*, we must not be compelled to touch them or associate with them, especially whilst they are in their present condition^[16]. *Sanatanists*, according to their correspondence with Gandhi and publications in newspapers, did not oppose the attempt of untouchables to obtain civil rights. From this and other letters, their problem was simply that they did not want themselves or the temples they attended to become impure. Untouchables could, in their opinion, have their own temples and do their worship there without polluting anyone. This was contrary to Gandhi's view of religion, It was the caste-Hindus who had imposed the cruelties and restrictions on the untouchables, and it was therefore they who had to cleanse themselves by accepting untouchables into their temples. A possible solution to the problem of impurity was promoted by Gandhi since untouchables were to be integrated as temple-goers they had to become pure. If untouchables purified themselves by conforming to the rules of the temple a purification ceremony could be held for temple-goers before they entered the temple. By so doing, no one would be untouchable or impure and thereby defile the temple. *Sanatanists* caused trouble Gandhi and his followers in Guruvayur, in the nationwide temple-entry campaign and also later in the anti-untouchability tour of 1933-1934. He did not convince them as a group of his religious vision for the Indian society.

There were other important groups within Indian society that did not understand or opposed Gandhi's religious vision. Many untouchables considered themselves separate from caste Hindus and as a minority together with Muslims, Buddhists and Christians. Before the temple-entry campaign

had begun, Gandhi had single-handedly halted a new law allowing untouchables separate electorates claiming that untouchables should stay as part of the Hindu community, causing uproar among untouchable groups in India^[17]. The electoral right was viewed by untouchables, including Ambedkar, as a step in the process of removing untouchability and gaining rights equal to that of caste-Hindus^[18].

In contrast to Gandhi's view, Ambedkar and his followers believed that untouchability had to be abolished by giving untouchables the same opportunities as caste-Hindus politically, economically and socially. By gaining civil rights, the caste-system could no longer hold the untouchables down – they would be protected by the law. Gandhi's belief, on the other hand, was that having civil rights would mean little if the system by which the untouchables had been downtrodden had not been reformed. In Gandhi's view, it was the caste Hindus who had to abolish untouchability and reinvent themselves because of their cruelty towards the untouchables. Ambedkar questioned Gandhi's intentions towards the untouchables by asking, how can they believe him to be their friend when he wishes to retain caste and abolish untouchability, it being quite clear that untouchability is only an extended form of caste and that therefore without abolition of caste there is no hope of abolition of untouchability? For Ambedkar, Gandhi's religious vision did not include what was best for the untouchables, namely equal civil rights, but sought to retain the caste-system a system Ambedkar believed had to be eradicated. We have already seen that Gandhi wanted to retain the caste-system, yet without the distinctions of high and low. Another important point with Gandhi's view of religion is that he claimed that it was universalistic.

It is not anti-Muslim, anti-Christian or anti-any other religion. But it is pro-Muslim, pro-Christian and pro-every other living faith in the world. Hinduism is but one branch from the same parent trunk, whose roots and whose quality we judge only by the collective strength and quality of the different branches put together. It was of no consequence to him that there were millions of Indians – a large number of them untouchables, who were of other faiths than Hinduism. Every religion was tied together to one universal truth The anthropologist F.G. Bailey explains that Gandhi believed that truth cannot be imposed, it cannot be the product of power and political action, its provenance can only be an inner sense of morality. Everyman must be his own controller – literally so, in the concept of *swaraj*. When Everyman, whatever be his sectarian religion – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian, Jew or whatever else comes freely to know and accept Truth, the problem of violence and disorder has been solved.

2. Conclusion

Gandhi mobilised through using traditional Hindu rhetoric familiar to Indians. Gandhi had mobilised Indians in previous campaigns together with the Indian National Congress, a great part of his mobilisation skills lay in his personal importance and rhetoric. Gandhi believed that the temple was in the core of everyday life for millions of Hindus, whether they be caste Hindus or untouchables. Gandhi believed that the search for truth was a common denominator for all religions. Focusing on the untouchables and their access to temples was not done in an attempt to exclude parts of Indian society, but merely fixing one of the religious branches of

India so that the tree could become whole again. Gandhi thereby attempted to gather Indian society by relating that issues within Hinduism affected other religions as well.

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