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‘Mahatma Gandhi’ Versus ‘Gandhi as a Philosopher’: An Overview of the Contradictions in Gandhi’s Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi played a colossally efficient role in the Indian struggle for freedom from colonial rule in India. For that very reason, Gandhi is often called the Indian saint and the mass leader. But he was more than just an aromatic leader and a formidable enemy of British rule in India. The art of philosophy and putting that philosophy into a visible action has remained much in the central sphere of his life. All the actions that he would do had a whole set of calculations guided by his own principles and methodology that people, even today, follow. But every philosophy needs to be broken down into its units and further understood in every aspect and with the respect possible. Similarly, every philosopher must be given the honour of subjecting his philosophy to critical individual analysis, and so has been done by the author in the following paper with all his knowledge and in all his capacity he has gained after referring to various readings of Gandhi’s writings and other sources like books, review work and scholarly articles. The result of the research is that even Gandhi’s philosophy was not free from the evil of contradictions that most of the other philosophers also exhibited.

Keywords: *satyagraha, philosophy, caste, varna system, Khilafat movement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi is so much of an Indian name and much of India is his, considering what he has given to the nation as a leader, freedom fighter, philosopher and a social worker. The whole series of the struggle for independence in India is undoubtedly incomplete without mentioning the episodes in which he has played his role right from inspiring the masses to fight for their independence, respect and nation to doing that himself. Gandhian views affected independence struggle days by making them weapons in his own hands and in the hands of those whom he was a leader to. The discussion on the relevance of Gandhian principles is not a novel topic. Neither for Indians nor for those who, though, are not from India yet have done their scholarly studies in this field. And still there are many whose countries of birth have witnessed the use of

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Gandhian methods for one or the other political struggles that took place on their lands. His writings are extensively read all across the globe. Critics have their own views on his thoughts and ideas and what he preached throughout his life. ‘Gandhi’s life and his writing—48,000 pages bound into ninety-eight volumes of collected works—have been disaggregated and carried off, event by event, sentence by sentence, until no coherent narrative remains, if indeed there ever was one.’² As the discussion in this paper is critically done on how well he was a philosopher and how he thought, his role in the Indian freedom of struggle is not elaborated and hence, is mentioned briefly for reference.

II. VIEWPOINT ON ‘CASTE SYSTEM’

Caste system, to Gandhi, was a foundation of Indian society and he believed that this caste system is, if not the only, then one of the major reasons why the Indian society has been able to stand stable. As Varna system divided the society into classes based on occupation, Gandhi view caste system as a ‘principle of hereditary occupation’ and this principle of hereditary occupation is given up when people resort to Western means. In *Navajivan*, his Gujarati journal, Mahatma Gandhi, in 1921, wrote:

*I believe that if Hindu Society has been able to stand, it is because it is founded on the caste system... To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. Hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder. I have no use for a Brahmin if I cannot call him a Brahmin for my life. It will be chaos if every day a Brahmin is changed into a Shudra and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahmin.*³

According to Mahatma Gandhi, the element of caste represented the genius of the Indian society. He thought of caste as a potential tool which has the capability to organize the nation in an orderly manner and is a “wonderful” system of organization. In 1916, during a speech at a missionary conference in Madras, he presented his views on caste system as follows:

The vast organisation of caste answered not only the religious wants of the community, but it answered too its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system, and through it they dealt with

² Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

³ Cited in BAWS 9, 276.

*any oppression from the ruling power or powers. It is not possible to deny the organising capability of a nation that was capable of producing the caste system its wonderful power of organisation.*⁴

From the above-mentioned views of Gandhi on caste, it becomes very clear that he admired the caste system. Or at least, that he never opposed it. Despite this, he believed that there should be equality among the castes, thereby, denied any support to the hierarchy of castes in India. Shudras, as a matter of fact, were placed under the varna system in a way to serve other varnas. There is no way that the prevalence of the varna system where Shudras are supposed to serve the other varnas in terms of services and the “no hierarchy” notion of Gandhi could co-exist. There is always a hierarchical scheme in the system where one serves the another. Gandhi failed to recognize the practical impossibility of his idea of “no hierarchy” in the varna system provided the existing state of social ills in the society at his time. He pleaded for bringing all the outcastes or Ati-Shudras into the varna system. But as has been responded to by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, outcastes are but the consequential “bye-products” of the caste system and the only way to position the outcastes in the Indian society is the destruction of the caste system. Ambedkar also points out that to believe in the Hindu shastras and to think of oneself as liberal or moderate is an utter contradiction.

Gandhi took an entire shift in the later years of his life and from a supporter of the caste system, as has been concluded by the author, became a “social reformer”, if that could be an appropriate term. The similar point has been enumerated by Arundhati Roy in her book *The Doctor and The Saint*. The following is a precept from the book:

Towards the end of Gandhi’s life (when his views were just views and did not run the risk of translating into political action), he said that he no longer objected to interdining and intermarriage between castes. Sometimes he said that though he believed in the varna system, a person’s varna ought to be decided by their worth and not their birth (which was also the Arya Samaj position). Ambedkar pointed out the absurdity of this idea: “How are you going to compel people who have acquired a higher status based on birth, without reference to their worth, to vacate that status? How are you going to

⁴ CWMG 15, 160–1. All references to Gandhi’s works, unless otherwise stated, are from The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) (1999). Wherever possible, first publication details are also provided since scholars sometimes refer to an earlier edition of the CWMG

compel people to recognise the status due to a man, in accordance to his worth, who is occupying a lower status based on his birth?”⁵

A precept of his essay called “The Ideal Bhangi” is produced below:

The Brahmin’s duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi’s that of the body of society ... and yet our woebegone Indian society has branded the Bhangi as a social pariah, set him down at the bottom of the scale, held him fit only to receive kicks and abuse, a creature who must subsist on the leavings of the caste people and dwell on the dung heap. If only we had given due recognition to the status of the Bhangi as equal to that of the Brahmin, our villages, no less their inhabitants would have looked a picture of cleanliness and order. I therefore make bold to state without any manner of hesitation or doubt that not till the invidious distinction between Brahmin and Bhangi is removed will our society enjoy health, prosperity and peace and be happy.

Another precept from the same essay provides the educational requirements that an ideal Bhangi should possess according to Gandhi:

What qualities therefore should such an honoured servant of society exemplify in his person? In my opinion an ideal Bhangi should have a thorough knowledge of the principles of sanitation. He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting urine and night soil into manure. But that is not all. My ideal Bhangi would know the quality of night soil and urine. He would keep a close watch on these and give timely warning to the individual concerned...

III. GANDHI’S VIEWS ON LOCAL LEVEL GOVERNANCE

In 1946, he described arcadian paradise in “The Pyramid vs. the Oceanic Circle” as has been given in the quote following the text of this paragraph. He supported local level government and gave primacy to it over the unitary form of government. Yet his writings reflect a diplomatic answer to the question of primacy between the federal and the unitary form of government. Gandhi always opined everything in a conveniently calculated intermediate way. The text is as

^{5 5} Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

follows:

*Independence begins at the bottom. Thus, every village will be a republic or panchayat having full powers. It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs even to the extent of defending itself against the whole world... In this structure composed of innumerable villages there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village... Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.*⁶

He saw villages as basic units of governance and claimed that they are self-sustainable and independent. Again, he does not forget to mention that villages also derive their power from the union government.

Gandhi referred to modern cities as “excrescence” that “served at present moment the evil purpose of draining the life-blood of the villages”. Ambedkar saw the ‘ideal village’ of Gandhi as “a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism”. India at that time was suffering from the plunder of the British and had all the “nothing” the British had left Indians with. As a mass leader, Gandhi should have felt what was needed at the time was the nourishment of the ideas of urbanism, modernism and industrialization. “While Gandhi promoted his village republic, his pragmatism, or what some might call his duality, allowed him to support and be supported by big industry and big dams as well.”⁷ Contradiction lies in the philosophy of Gandhi as broken pieces of glass lie all over the floor after the window of truth is hit with the stones of inconsistently firm views.

IV. GANDHI AND THE ‘KHILAFAT’

Gandhi’s support for the khilafat movement is yet another subject to dive deeper into to find the lost shells of the shore. A big question mark still stands erect before the reason behind why Gandhi supported the Khilafat movement. As Gandhi expressed his solidarity with the pan-Islamic movement and by taking such a stance, he put himself on the thin ice as a subject for the historians who were to write about him next in the blank pages of history books. “Gandhi’s support for Khilafat, however, played straight into the hands of Hindu extremists, who had by

⁶ Parel 1997, 188–9.

⁷ For an analysis of Gandhi’s relationship with Indian capitalists, see Leah Renold (1994)

then begun to claim that Muslims were not ‘true’ Indians because the centre of gravity of Muslim fealty lay outside of India. The Congress party’s alliance with conservative Muslims angered conservative Hindus as well as moderate Muslims.”⁸

What happened in Chauri Chaura, in the United Provinces which we call today, Uttar Pradesh, was another major aspect of Gandhi’s contradiction of himself. In 1922, during the peak of the Non-Cooperation Movement, an uncontrolled situation arose when twenty-two policemen lost their lives after being attacked by a mob who set the police station on fire in Chauri Chaura. Gandhi, realizing that the Indian freedom fighters were yet not transformed fully into true satyagrahis and had yet a lot to learn more about non-violence and compassion, called off the movement “unilaterally”. This was done without consulting any other leaders of the movement. “Since the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Khilafat movement were conjoined, it meant an end to the Khilafat movement too. Infuriated by this arbitrariness, the leaders of the Khilafat movement parted ways with the Congress.”⁹

Ideal principles of Gandhi like peace, non-violence and compassion for others never make a person think less of a saint about him but those who try to understand the actual course of history by walking on his footsteps end up finding themselves in the middle of the pages of books placed in constructively designed chaotic woods and still very far from the true course of history. If he had mindfully extended his support to the Khilafat Movement and linked it with the non-cooperation movement in India, then why he would call off any of the movements that had firm basis for the ideology behind these movements despite one local mishappening in the entire nation where such a situation can generally be expected. After all it was the great India’s struggle for independence and the list of those Indians who have sacrificed their pious lives and devoted souls to this nation is too long to mention.

V. GANDHI AND HIS INCLINATION TOWARDS METHODOLOGY

“Gandhi, the Apostle of Peace and Non-violence, lived to see the movement he thought he led dissolve into a paroxysm of genocidal violence in which half a million people (a million, according to Stanley Wolpert in *A New History of India*) lost their lives and almost twelve million lost their homes, their past and everything they had ever known. Through the horror of partition, Gandhi did all he could to still the madness and bloodlust. He travelled deep into the very heart of the violence. He prayed, he pleaded, he fasted, but the incubus had been unleashed

^{8 8} Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

^{9 9} Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

and could not be recalled. The hatred spilled over and consumed everything that came in its path.”¹⁰ This makes it clear that despite the intensity of brutality and bad that happened to the people was not enough to make Gandhi realize that prayers and fasts are not the requirements when the enemy tries to kill one’s own people, attacks one’s own land and commits a lot of bloodshed and horror that shakes one’s soul with so much force that praying isn’t peaceful and fasts are unable to fight one’s battle.

VI. GANDHIAN ‘STRIKES’

In 1946, Gandhi published the following view on strikes by the sweepers:

*There are certain matters on which strikes would be wrong. Sweepers’ grievances come in this category. My opinion against sweepers’ strikes dates back to about 1897 when I was in Durban. A general strike was mooted there, and the question arose as to whether scavengers should join it. My vote was registered against the proposal. Just as a man cannot live without air, so too he cannot exist for long if his home and surroundings are not clean. One or the other epidemic is bound to break out, especially when modern drainage is put out of action... A Bhangi [scavenger] may not give up his work even for a day. And there are many other ways open to him for securing justice.*¹¹

Gandhi failed to explain the “other” ways of securing justice which he referred to in the above written view of him. To Gandhi, sweepers couldn’t go on strike but other sections of the society could do. Nevertheless, Gandhi did not forget to leave the sweeper brothers of him with the hope that there were still “other” ways of demanding justice and ‘violence’ was surely not one of them.

VII. ‘INTERMEDIATE’ THESIS ON CAPITALISTS AND THE WORKING CLASS

Gandhi set up a labor union called the Majoor Mahajan Sangh or the Textile Labour Union. He joined it as a member of the advisory committee. “According to a worker interviewed by the scholar Jan Breman, Untouchables were not allowed into the common canteen, they had separate drinking water tanks and segregated housing.”¹² There is a famous incident that occurred in 1921. The workers did not work for three days. This angered Gandhi who remarked:

¹⁰ ¹⁰ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

¹¹ Harijan, 21 April 1946; CWMG 90, 255–6.

¹² For an account of this, see Jan Breman’s *The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class* (2004)

*Hindu and Muslim workers have dishonoured and humiliated themselves by abstaining from mills. Labour cannot discount me. I believe no one in India can do so. I am trying to free India from bondage and I refuse to be enslaved by workers.*¹³

Later on, Gandhi tried to create a balance between the capitalists and the working class when he said:

*In the struggle between capital and labour, it may be generally said that more often than not capitalists are in the wrong box. But when labour comes fully to realise its strength, I know it can become more tyrannical than capital. The mill-owners will have to work on the terms dictated by labour, if the latter could command the intelligence of the former. It is clear, however, that labour will never attain to that intelligence... It would be suicidal if the labourers rely upon their numbers or brute-force, i.e., violence. By doing so they would do harm to industries in the country. If on the other hand they take their stand on pure justice and suffer in their person to secure it, not only will they always succeed but they will reform their masters, develop industries, and both masters and men will be as members of one and the same family.*¹⁴

“It’s true that Gandhi often contradicted himself. It’s also true that he was capable of being remarkably consistent.”¹⁵“His refusal to allow working-class people and Untouchables to create their own political organizations and elect their own representatives (which Ambedkar considered to be fundamental to the notion of citizenship) remained consistent too.”¹⁶

VIII. CONCLUSION

History has been very kind to Gandhi. The pages of history first welcomed him and then glorified him for his superficial concepts of non-violence, truthfulness, love and compassion. His radical thought and agonizing insolence have been concealed under the dark ink of history. He was deified by millions of people in his own lifetime. Gandhi’s godliness has become a universal and, so it seems, an eternal phenomenon. ¹⁷The trouble is that Gandhi actually said

¹³ Shankerlal Banker cited in Breman (2004, 47).

¹⁴ Navajivan, 8 February 1920; cited in BAWS 9, 280.

¹⁵ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

¹⁶ See “A Note on the Poona Pact” in Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition* (New York: Verso, 2014), 357–76.

¹⁷ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race, and the Annihilation of Caste: The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017.

everything and its opposite.¹⁸ The very basic feature of Gandhi's opinions is that they sum up all the positives and negatives of the subject academically and very precisely to an extent that he enjoys the support of all of those, either criticizing or favoring the subject in question. This has very well been explained by Arundhati Roy in her book *The Doctor and the Saint* as "To cherry pickers, he offers such a bewildering variety of cherries that you have to wonder if there was something the matter with the tree." Gandhi has written over ninety-eight volumes of his work but has never with firmness and decisive attitude forsaken his acceptance for the "chaturvarna" system. And such a charismatic philosopher he is; he himself found his contradictions pointing at him that he has very convincingly endeavored to paint them with the color of 'evolution' and has imparted the nature of evolution to the lacunas in his philosophy. And says, "My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with the truth as it may present itself to me in a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth"

¹⁸ Ibid