

MAHATMA GANDHI ON VARNA-ASHRAMA SYSTEM

By Krishnan Nandela

Gandhi is widely criticized as a proponent of the Varna-ashrama system. Yes, Gandhi was a proponent of the Varna system and belief in the varna-ashrama system was a cardinal qualification to be a Hindu according to Gandhi. However, Gandhi's Varna system had internal flexibility and the varnas were mutually tradable in the Hindu society. In Gandhi's Varna system, a shudra must perform his hereditary duty and if he is capable of performing priestly duties he must perform them without sacrificing or rejecting his ancestral duties. This flexibility is true for all the varnas in Gandhi's scheme of the Varnashrama system. A Brahmin was free to pick up arms and learn the techniques of warfare or perform the duties of a shudra or for that matter perform the duties of a vaishya but not without performing his ancestral priestly duties. For Gandhi, the 'varna' system was not hierarchical. All the four varnas were equal in status and functional to the society. The four varnas were placed horizontally and mutually replaceable. However, in reality the 'varna' system was hierarchical and there were religious and social disabilities imposed on all the varnas. Failing to follow the rules of social intercourse invited harsh and inhuman punishment in proportion to the status of the 'varna' in the four fold division of the society. Gandhi at a personal level rejected anything that is not appealing to his sense of justice or anything that is unreasonable. To Gandhi, the rigid 'varna' system and the social and religious disabilities imposed by Manusmriti were not acceptable. Gandhi's varnashrama was open to all and therefore the criticism is not valid. The Varnashrama system came into existence in the early Vedic age (2500 BCE to 1500 BCE). It consists of the four Varnas (occupations): Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and the Shudra and the four ashramas or the four stages of life each having 25 years, beginning with the Brahmacharya Ashram in which a person is expected to be celibate and acquire skills and education to be employable. It is followed by the Grihasthram in which a person acquires a house, gets married and begets children. On completion of 50th year of life, a person is expected to enter the Vanaprasthram or live in the forests for the next 25 years. A period during which, a person is expected to meditate and

acquire knowledge and wisdom. The last 25 years of life are to be spent in Sanyasahram. This is the stage in the life of a person where he or she becomes a Sanyasin or a person who has renounced everything and lives the life of a mendicant. The Sanyasin is expected to deliver the knowledge and wisdom acquired to the people. In its original form, there was both vertical and horizontal mobility in the system. It was the Indian version of division of labor and division of life in terms of duties. The Varna-system was akin to the Class system of today. However, the system became closed and rigid and transformed into Caste system during the later Vedic age (1500 BCE to 500 ACE), a period during which Manusmriti or Manavadharmashastra was written.

KP Shankaran in an article titled 'Gandhi and the Varna Question', Indian Express dated 25th February 2019 stated that Gandhi never practiced Varna dharma and his ashrams were free from Varna dharma (free from the rigid caste based Varna dharma). Gandhi's concept of swaraj was also free from religion and caste says Shankaran. However, Gandhi constantly defended the Varnashrama system (as explained earlier) which was non-hierarchical and based on the principle "Let us not want to be what everyone else cannot be" or in my words, 'Let us be what everyone else can be', a principle that was the epitome of Anasakti yoga or 'non-attachment with the consequences of one's actions'. The philosophy of Anasakti yoga is embodied in the Bhagwad Gita. The Mahatma was a follower and an advocate of the philosophy of Anasakti yoga. Gandhi believed that one should not aspire for a profession, instead practice what one is ordained to practice according to the tradition into which one is born. May be Gandhi was afraid to disturb the social equilibrium. However, social dynamism is a product of individual aspirations. Those who do not aspire shall never prosper and stands condemned living in stagnation.

Untouchability as an abhorrent practice which was a part of the degenerated Varna system had no basis either in the Bhagwad Gita or the other scriptures. Gandhi had rejected the practice of untouchability and went on to rechristen the erstwhile untouchables as 'Harijan' or people of the God. By 1933, Gandhi's views on the Varna system underwent a change for the better. Gandhi

accepted the argument that birth alone cannot determine the Varna of a person and quotes the words of Yuddhistira in the Vanaparva of Mahabharata: *“Truth, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, gentleness, austerity and mercy, where these are seen, O King of the Serpents, there is a Brahmin. If these marks exist in a Shudra and are not in a Dvija, the Shudra is not a Shudra, nor the Brahmin a Brahmin.”* Gandhi reformed his belief in the Varna system by saying that “Mere birth counts for nothing. A person must show corresponding works and character to establish his claim by birth.” Gandhi had the habit of evaluating his belief system through time and revised his beliefs based on his evolving convictions. However, the Mahabharata is not consistent on the merit-basis of varnas. In the ‘Draupadi-swayamwar’ episode, Karna was not allowed to participate due to his low place on the Varna hierarchy. The same is true of Eklavya, whose art of archery knew no bounds. Dronacharya, the teacher of the Pandavas was unjust in asking for the thumb finger of Eklavya in the form of Guru-dakshina or payment for the services of a teacher when he actually taught nothing to Eklavya. The Mahabharata’s ambivalence with regard to the Varna system proves the fact that the ancient Indian society recognized only the ascribed status and largely ignored the achieved status of a person who is born low on the hierarchy.

The caste system as it stands today is undoubtedly a discredited and an abhorrent system. It continues to be practiced in an abhorrent manner with impunity and immunity in certain parts of the country and subtly in all walks of Indian life, save exceptions. The Varna-ashrama system in its original form was a piece of classical genius of the yore. People in India need to be shorn off the caste system. The space for caste in identity documents needs to be abrogated and the use of surnames needs to be banished to remove all vestigial traces of the despicable system. A person should only be identified with his/her name followed by mother’s and the father’s name. Affirmative action by the government and non-government agencies should be based on objective criteria such as income which is a quantitative criterion. One may develop qualitative criteria to determine the social backwardness of a person. However, caste should not find a place in the list of such criteria.

DEGRADED HINDUISM AND EVOLVING HINDUISM

Gandhi distinguished between historical Hinduism and the Hinduism of the Gita. Historical Hinduism is characterized by untouchability, superstitious worship of stocks and stones, animal sacrifice etc. The Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads and Patanjali's Yogasutras constitutes the pinnacle of non-violence and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent, formless and imperishable God. Gandhi believed that non-violence or ahimsa was the glorious aspect of Hinduism and it is to be followed by one and all and not only by the Sanyasis. (Harijan, 08.12.46, p. 432 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', p.4). The Bhagwad Gita appears in the Bhishma Parva of the Mahabharata (chapters 23 – 40). Krishna, born Kshatriya, provides counsel to Arjuna, another kshatriya. Krishna is also the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Mahabharata was not secular for the people of Mahabharata. It did not mean, 'Sarva-vyakti Sam-bhava'. It is discriminatory and the Bhagwad Gita is part of a discriminatory epic. Varna-ascription by birth is a blemish of the Hindu social hierarchy and unless this blemish is removed, it will be difficult to offer secularized Hindu texts to the Hindu people who were and are socially discriminated and marginalized. The blemishes of the Hindu religion need to be removed, historical and otherwise, before it is delivered to the people of India.

Hinduism is based and not based on scriptures at the same time and it has multiple sources. The Gita is one such source which shows the way without influencing rituals and customs. Gandhi compares Hinduism with the Ganges which assumes provincial character in the regions in which she flows. Gandhi says that custom and rituals do not constitute religion. The classical texts of Hinduism such as the Shastras, Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and the Itihasas came up in different points of time and hence it can be justly said that Hinduism is not a stagnant but a dynamic religion. Each of these texts came out in response to the challenges faced in their own times and hence they appear to be conflicting with each other. These texts do not lay down the eternal truths afresh but only show the way that these eternal truths were practiced during their times. A practice may be good in a given period of time. However, if people continue to practice in all times, they may become despondent and hopeless. Gandhi says that there is no

sense in upholding or reviving the practice of animal sacrifice, dismembering of law breakers, polyandry, untouchability and child marriages. Knowledge is boundless and truth is ever unfolding. By knowing the self, one may know the universe. The endless pursuit of truth is based on the practice of Yamas (cardinal virtues) and Niyamas (casual virtues). According to Yogashastra, the cardinal virtues are Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (Celibacy), Aparigraha (non-possession) and the casual virtues being Shaucha (bodily purity), Santosha (contentment), Tapas (forbearance), Swadhyaya (study of scriptures) and Ishwara Pranidhana (resignation to the Will of God). The pursuit of truth is not possible without faith and devotion. However, faith and devotion should be used by the human being as tools in the pursuit of truth. A person therefore cannot be faithful to untruth or be devoted to untruth. Gandhi says that a Sanatani (eternal) Hindu is one who can chant the Dwadashamantra from the Bhagvata (Om Namoh Bhagvate Vasudevaya) from the heart. Dwadasha means twelve stots (hymns) which are sung in the praise of Lord Vishnu.

Om' is an eternal, universal sound and is hailed as Shabdha Brahman, the ultimate principle of speech sound. It denotes the supreme spirit. 'Namoh' is a humble salutation. 'Bhagvate' is the supreme divinity, known generally as God. 'Va(a)sudevaya' literally means 'the son of Vasudeva' and refers to Lord Krishna, who was born the son of Vasudeva. 'Vasu' can also mean 'the one, who is the life force of all beings' and 'Devaya' is the Almighty. Hence 'Vasudevaya' can also mean 'the supreme divinity that lives in all lives.' The mantra can thus be elaborated to mean 'Oh Lord Krishna, the son of Vasudeva, the God who dwells in all beings, I bow down to you with all reverence and offer you my humble prayers.'

Gandhi had earlier said that a Hindu need not believe in God and in consonance with that statement, one may or may not chant the mantra and yet be a Sanatani Hindu. What Gandhi meant was that one can always lead a principled life without being a theist. One may also lead a thoroughly unprincipled and debauched life and yet be a practicing theist.

Gandhi believed that Varna-ashrama dharma was a unique contribution of Hinduism to the world. Hinduism has saved the Hindus from *bhaya* or fear. Gandhi distinguishes everyday Hinduism from pure Hinduism. Everyday Hinduism is a parody of pure Hinduism. The physical body of the human being is a limitation of the soul that resides in. Spiritualism ingrained in Hinduism helped the Hindu way of life to outlast all other civilizations born on earth. The Babylonian, the Syrian, the Persian and the Egyptian civilizations were long buried in history and the Hindu civilization survived because it is rooted in spiritualism. Gandhi believed that materialistic civilizations have a short shelf life and spiritual civilizations are lasting as long as humanity continues to prosper on earth. (Young India, 24.11.27, p.396 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', ps. 7-9). Spirit is the advanced form of matter and has no existence without matter. Civilizations cannot be purely materialistic or spiritualistic. They are a combination of both and the distinction lies in the mix. A civilization may be more materialistic and less spiritual and yet another civilization may be more spiritualistic and less material. Yes it is true that civilizations which aimed to conquer others with the brute force of material power were not able to hold on for long and had even perished in the process. The history of humanity is replete with such materially powerful but vanquished civilizations.

Gandhi believed that while being faithful to one's own religion, one has to be watchful of the shortcomings and act to remove the limitations. At the same time, one must not consider other religions as inferior or superior to one's own. Rather, one should look at the beauties (goodness) in other religions and incorporate them in one's own. Gandhi therefore believed religion must evolve and be dynamic. An evolving religion cannot remain stagnant, it will always give and take from others all that is good in itself and all that is good in others. (Harijan, 12.8.33, p. 4 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', p.10).

Gandhi believed that the chief value of Hinduism is that it holds all life as one i.e. all life coming from one universal source. The source may have different names such as Allah, God or Parmeshwara but the source is one. Gandhi believed that God is one and may have many names as enunciated in a Hindu scripture called Vishnusahasranama or the thousand names of Vishnu

(God). One may therefore go on to give many more names as long as God remains one and hence God can be nameless too.

The Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and the epics are the Hindu scriptures and this ocean of scriptures is in a state of everlasting swell as generations and ages go by, they add a few more drops to this ocean. The list of scriptures therefore becomes infinite. Anything that is not appealing to reason must be rejected for unreason cannot be a part of the scriptures, believed Gandhi. The Smritis contain much that cannot be accepted as the word of God and those ideas are not authentic. The Smrities are concerned with eternal truths and must appeal to any conscience. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason. Even the most sanitized version of the scriptures cannot escape interpretation. However, Gandhi does not rely on the interpretation by learned men and women but the experiences of saints and seers and their sayings. However, in the modern world there are no saints and seers in the classical sense of the term. Therefore, the scriptures can only be tested for their validity and utility – material and spiritual, by men and women of intellect and reason.

Gandhi believed that there is no relation between Hinduism and caste. Caste is a custom which has no basis in religion. Gandhi believed that caste is harmful to both spiritual and national growth. Varna and ashrama are not concerned with castes. Varna is the ancestral occupation which each one of us has to follow to earn our bread. Varna assigns duties and not rights. Gandhi believed that the Varna system of occupational distribution was functional to the society. The occupations were not hierarchical according to Gandhi and the fruits of labor were identical irrespective to the Varna or occupation followed by the person. Arrogation of a superior status by any of the Varnas over another is a denial of the law of Varna and the practice of untouchability is unconcerned with the law of Varna. Gandhi's God was one and formless and religion was the vehicle to spiritualism. Gandhi abhorred the despicable practices of degraded Hindus and believed that they do not represent the faith. The caste system is one such practice and must be disowned by all Hindus before claiming to be a Hindu.

LIST OF REFERENCES

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