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Appropriation of Gandhian Philosophy in Dalit Discourse and Literature

Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi has remained not only a popular, but, also, grossly misread political figure in Indian socio-political scenario. On one hand where his name and images are used as an icon by different political parties and he is venerated as the fore-figure who led India to independence with his innovative ideas like non-violence and truth; at the same time, on the other hand, he was assassinated in his own country of birth! In past few years, he had been a source of criticism for various Dalit ideologues as well. Present paper will outline the Gandhian Philosophy mainly to understand such a complicated position that Indian scenario puts him into. In the light of his philosophical thoughts, the paper will then read how Gandhi is represented/misrepresented in Dalit discourse of recent years.

1. Introduction

Gandhi's immense popularity and his pervading influence, even in abroad, is evinced (and, also, fossilized) by various government and central institutions that are being opened up in his name, various study-courses in Gandhian philosophy, cinematic movies either made on him or reflecting upon his ideas, several Gandhian quotes and witty one-liners entrenched in the walls of public buildings and spaces. Gandhi is, thus, almost everywhere today even after the 70 years of his assassination. He marks the proud name of India. In a survey done in 2006 by *TheHindu*, it was found that 76% of Indian youth find their role model in Mahatma Gandhi. There has been, however, a widespread protest against Gandhism in recent years, especially, in Dalit discourse. Arundhati Roy's stringent criticism of Gandhi came at the top of such disparaging outpour of expressions with her introductory book length essay on *Annihilation of Caste*.

2. Gandhian Philosophy

Gandhian philosophy emerges from a set way of life that Gandhi lived and propagated in socio-political arena. To understand his philosophy in its right context, it is imperative to understand Gandhi as an individual human being. Gandhi, as described in his autobiography, had objections to the title of Mahatma which was fixed upon his name by his loving followers. He, thus, writes: "Often the title has deeply pained me"(13). Gandhi was a person who believed in experiments to know about different aspects or truths. He never claimed any absolute stature for the results of his experiments, as life for him was a continuous journey of experiments until one reaches the final destination/truth which, for Gandhi, was a way to "God or the Absolute Truth or the Eternal Principal". In fact, Gandhi kept telling of his own failings, limitations, and weaknesses. He writes in the autobiography: "If the experiments are really spiritual, then there can be no room for self-praise. They can only add to my humility. The more I reflect and look back on the past, the more vividly do I feel my limitations"(30). Gandhi made it clear at the very introduction to his autobiography that he "never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them". He was his own sharp critic. In this light, Gandhi was very honest, frank and tough upon himself. He rarely allowed his followers to join him in new experiments that he was not sure of and took bold plunge himself alone, but, very humbly and very generously invited everyone to share the fruits of such experiments. His autobiography is a living proof of such way of Gandhi's life. This makes him an introvert personality. Gandhi even kept a sense of being alone which he accepted for himself: "I am of opinion that all exclusive intimacies are to be avoided for man takes in vice far more readily than virtue. And he who would be friends with God must remain alone, or make the whole world his friend" (32).

Gandhi was a person of values and it was very difficult to change him when it came down to his basic moral sense. He, at times, thus appeared very stubborn to an outsider who failed to understand the reasons behind. This strong sense of morals got cultivated in him in his infancy. Once, when his teacher wanted him to cheat in exams, he refused. But rather than blaming his teacher directly, he writes "The teacher tried later to bring this stupidity home to me, but without effect. I never could learn the art of 'copying'" (21).

Right from the very beginning, Gandhi's central force, which was driving him forward through important decisions of his life, was his curiosity to know the truth behind things and to reach towards the Absolute Truth, which for him was self-realization. And Gandhi boldly

put everything in stake for reaching that pivotal point. There was no limitation for him that could stop him in this spiritual journey. Going abroad for study was against the rules of his caste but he didn't mind to overthrow them. One thing, however, that he always cared for was not to hurt other's in any way, or better said, not to infringe the territory of others the way he bravely fought for his own personal territory. From this sensitive spirit he developed the method of non-violence in the later years of his life. He gave their space to his caste members and never questioned their norms of boycott that they applied on him as a result of his going abroad. Gandhi, thus, always firmly took his own space and was bold in carrying out his own individuality, while, at the same time he respected the space of others.

During Gandhi's venture in South Africa, he learned early on to unite different parties, rather than adding to the strife. He, accordingly, writes: "I had learnt the true practice of law. I had learnt to find out the better side of human nature and to enter men's hearts. I realized that the true function of a lawyer was to unite parties riven asunder"(129). This, later on, crystalized as an important aspect of Gandhian philosophy and personality. Uniting different groups was Gandhi's primary motive in all his major political decisions. He writes in his autobiography: "All my life through, the very insistence in truth has taught me to appreciate the beauty of compromise. I saw in later life that this spirit was an essential part of Satyagraha. (141)

Gandhi's faith on religion was not a given aspect of his personality. In fact, faith for him was a dynamic force which was striving to find its true nature. Gandhi did many discussions on religion and attended to the religious groups of Christians, Parsi's and Muslims. He, thus, respected every faith. He also viewed his own religion with critical eyes and his sensible nature refused to accept untouchability as a healthy aspect of Hinduism. "If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or an excrescence". (131). This is the belief that allowed him to admit an untouchable family in his farm amidst opposition from all sides.

Later on, with Gandhi's entry in Indian Congress, various resolutions about "Hindu-Muslim unity, the removal of untouchability and Khadi" were passed (445).

In a nutshell, it can be said then that the prime motive behind Gandhi's action was his over-imposing sense of uniting different parties, his ideals of non-violence and his continuous striving after knowing the truth which did not stop him from accepting his own failures and experimenting with different versions of truth to find the Absoloute one. His journey was the

journey of learning, in which he took special precautions for not offending anyone. He, in fact, tried to take all along by his feelings of love and oneness for everyone.

3. Gandhi in Dalit Discourse and Literature

Dalit politics and literature finds its father mainly in the person of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who was the champion of Dalit rights and honour. Babasaheb struggled all his life to secure safe socio-political rights to the community of untouchables to which he belonged. His life journey was marked by apin-pointed attention to the Dalits and their downtrodden condition. Everything that contributed to this line received welcome from Babasaheb. He was a passionate spokesperson for Dalits and when he realized that all his sincere endeavours are put to nothing but only peripheral advancement, he got completely distrusted in Congress and Hinduism and during the last years of his life, he adopted Buddhism along with his around 50,000 of followers.

Ambedkar repeatedly felt cheated by Congress and Hinduism. He writes in his book *What Congress and Gandhi did to Untouchables* that after the advent of Gandhi in congress, the later completely changed as it became a mass organisation and Gandhi claimed for himself the status of the saviour of untouchables. He writes that the Congress started a programme for social amelioration called Tilak Swaraj Fund. However, the funds were rarely spend upon actual Dalit issues. Another Congress initiative called the Bardoli Programme of social amelioration also failed to actually improve the condition of untouchables. As Ambedkar sheds light, its proceedings and working methodology where Panchayats were given right to settle down the private disputes, largely worked upon the force of public opinion which was already caste biased. (37) In May 1923, Congress passed another resolution to uplift untouchables in which the responsibility was thrown over HimduMahasabha. Ambedkar says that this also proved ineffective. Being a militant Hindu organization, its primary aim was to preserve everything which was “Hindu, religious and cultural” and “its way to maintain social solidarity was not to talk about caste or untouchability” (40)

Gandhi was strictly against the demand of separate electorate for untouchable for which Ambedkar vociferously stood. He made this clear thus, “ I would work from one end of India to the other to tell the Untouchables that separate electorates, and separate reservation is not the way to remove this bar-sinister, which is the shame, not of them, but of orthodox Hinduism” (96). Gandhi wanted unity at every cost. “It will create a division in

Hinduism which I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever. I do not mind Untouchables, if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity. I should tolerate that, but I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. (97) It is a well-known fact, however, that Gandhi kept the ideal of unity at such a prime level that he was deeply pained and affected even with the idea of partition. He stood by Muslims and their rights to ensure their safe future within India. Gandhi's strong moves in this direction are illuminated by his assassinator in *Why I Assassinated Gandhi*. Godse belonged to Hindu Mahasabha. And Gandhi gave his logic with respect to the untouchables: "If they had separate electorates, their lives would be miserable in villages which are the strongholds of Hindu orthodoxy... Do you want the untouchables to remain untouchables for ever? Well, the separate electorates would perpetuate the stigma. (99)"

Gandhi was in a very difficult socio-political situation where he was trying to unite different groups that had already taken very diverse paths and lines of development. The question of uniting Dalits was but his primary agenda and Ambedkar even writes in the above mentioned book that during Round table conference, "Mr. Gandhi planned to buy out the Musalmans by giving to the Musalmans their fourteen demands, which Mr. Gandhi was not in the beginning prepared to agree. ... which the Congress, the Hindu Maha Sabha and even the Simon Commission had rejected" (100-103). And when Muslims refused to be the party with Gandhi, Ambedkar says, Gandhi decided to fast unto death after which Ambedkar felt emotionally forced to accept Gandhi's demands and left the idea of separate electorates.

Ambedkar later on got disillusioned by Gandhi on various other accounts. When Dalits organized their own Satyagraha for temple entry, they expected the moral support of Gandhi as they were using a tool devised by the later, but Gandhi refused. "He stated that satyagraha was to be used only against foreigners; it must not be used against one's own kindered or countrymen. " (322) Ambedkar felt that Gandhi "did not want to annoy and exasperate the Hindus"(322) As Ambedkar explains in his undelivered lecture "Annihilation of Caste", it was Gandhi's firm belief in varnashar madharma philosophy which kept him a slave of caste and Gandhi was not to get over it. Ambedkar's perpetual failures to change the main Hindu society ultimately resulted in his changing the religion.

Debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar is a much talked affair and has been already analysed through various perspectives. What is interesting, however, to see its results in Dalit literature and Gandhi's portrayal in later generation's Dalit discourse. While Narendra Jhadav in his autobiography *The Outcaste* speaks about the positive outcomes of inspiration imbued

in the hearts of Dalits by Babasaheb, it also reflects upon the tensions caused by the change in religion. When Jhadav's family changed to Buddhism, his mother stealthily kept the Hindu idols beneath her bedsheets. She used to weep over them. Gods that people venerate for the large part of their lives do become a part of life and it is always challenging to change and shift from the culture and way of life they have lived so long. Such changes are always accompanied by huge emotional, cultural, spiritual toll and sufferings. Scars of partition that still sound fresh upon the breasts of Hindu's and Muslims' is an evidence.

In more recent Dalit writings, however, there is a direct, negative portrayal of Gandhi. MeenaKandasamy writes in her poem thus: "Your tax-free salt stimulated our wounds, We gonna sue you, you Congress shoe. ... BapuBapu, you big fraud, we hate you". In her book length essay, Arundhati Roy derogatorily calls Gandhi "a saint" while pitting him against Ambedkar. Such portrayal of Gandhi, not only offends his large number of followers, and thereby widens the already existing gap between different communities, it is also a wrong projection of Gandhi's image. While commenting upon Gandhi one must always keep in mind that as a votary of peace, his focus was on no-violence and on uniting every group. He kept changing his viewpoints w.r.t. the viewpoint and expectations of different political groups. Partition is a lesson given by history which proves that separation was never a solution for a country like India. While Gandhi is used by different political parties today, they rarely follow his ideal of unity and peaceful co-existence. Politics on the grounds of religion and caste to secure the vote-banks is a common electoral tactic of political parties.

In his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*, Ambedkar writes that the idea of uniting two nations was impractical as two communities had already taken different paths in different planes. But he still praises Gandhi for standing daringly for uniting the two. Gandhi was an idealist and was most qualified to turn his ideals into reality, but, unfortunately, the land of his birth did not give him much required space and he met his untimely death!

4. Conclusion

In a secular country like India where different religions and communities have essential freedom to carry on their cultures, a unifying force and personality like that of Gandhi is much essential to ensure the peaceful co-existence. For a quite long time period when Gandhi dominated Indian political scenario, he had been not only an active, but also a representative voice for the large section of Indians who were votaries of unity. The harsh lessons that this country learned from partition evince the need for peaceful co-existence of different communities within India. Gandhi was not a separatist. His views on caste kept changing

with time progressively towards giving more space to Dalit ideology. Above everything, Gandhi was a negotiator of different parties and, as such, a votary of peace like him cannot be stable in his view points: the later must change with the changing perspectives of different parties involved. This kind of calibre that Gandhi embodied was a rare thing in itself and his departure has left a wide lacuna which is not filled by anyone else so far!

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