



## Impact of Religion on Gandhi's Social Thought

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**ABSTRACT :** *Man is a gregarious animal and so the life of an individual is inconceivable apart from a society. The primary aim of human existence according to Mahatma Gandhi is self-realization, and a society to Gandhi should be such as to promote the qualities of human personality to realize its final goal. The present Indian social setup is closely related with the past traditions and movements in the society. The advent of Gandhi on the social science marks a turning point to the history of social development. The varnasrama system of ancient India, according to Gandhi, tried to maintain the relation between the individual and the society in an ideal way. He tried to initiate important social reforms which have changed the very face of Indian society.*

**Keywords:** *Harijans, Individual and society, Society, Untouchability, Varnasrama.*

### I. Introduction:

Society to Gandhi is a place where God can be found face to face. The best way to relise God, therefore is to find him amidst his creation. Gandhi asserted: "If I could persuade myself that I should find Him (God) in a Himalayan cave I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find him apart from humanity"[1]. The Bhagavadgita has defined the bhakta in different Slokas. Gandhi has also suggested a definition of bhakta as one who serve is follow men. Now the question is: what kind of society did Gandhi want to build up in India. Gandhi subscribed to the belief that all human beings were one single family: and any action or institution which stood against this principle was therefore immoral. Exploitation or inequality of any form was a rejection of this principle. A truly religious man who aimed at perfection should therefore resist injustice wherever it evicted and re-establish the unity and brotherhood of all men. Meanwhile I have to attain both the ends of perfecting of truth and non-violence. It is because of this that his religions played a very great part in whatever reformation he suggested for the society of India.

### II. Objectives of the Study:

The study has been undertaken with the following objectives:



- 1) To trace the historical background and the development of Gandhian religious principles.
- 2) To examine the relevance of Gandhi's basic education in the content of modern society.
- 3) To suggest a solution on the various problem of our society by adopting the policy of Truth, Love and Ahimsa.
- 4) To draw out the importance to Gandhian thought in society.
- 5) The main aim of the study is to discuss about the education system of the basic thinking of Gandhi which would improve our personal life, fearless, freedom from bondage, quest for truth.

### **III. Database and Methodology:**

The methodology for the study will be historical and analytical. Both primary and secondary sources of data are collected for the proposed study. Secondary data are from mainly articles relating with the Gandhian philosophy and religion published in books, newspapers, journals.

### **IV. Result and Discussion:**

#### **Historical Background Of Indian Society:**

The present society it is believed is the result of mutual contract based on the individual's own interest an exchange of obligations in return for certain privileges. The theory of social contract has been regarded as the most acceptable theory. Kautilya in his Arthashastra gives us an elaborate view of the origin of society thus: "People suffering from anarchy as illustrated by the proverbial tendency of large fish swallowing the small one, first elected Manu, the vaivasvata to be their king, allotted one sixth of the grains grown and one tenth of merchandise as sovereign dues. In return the kings took up the responsibility of maintaining the safety and the security of the subject"[2].

The theory of the four varanas though true of ancient Indian society, also refer to same mined communities which gives us suggestions of inter dining and inter marriage. There were numerous communities in society whose place in the



scheme of four varnas could not be easily determined. According to the arthashastra (with which the Manusmriti agrees but not yajnavalkya), the son of a Brahmin from a kstriya woman, and that of a kstriya from vaisya women belong to their father's caste. A vaisya's son from a sudra woman in however, a sudra. This also points out to the fact that in ancient India the caste system was not as rigid as it was practiced in later times. Besides there were the existence of different castes, each following a separate fixed profession. We therefore feel justified in looking upon Rajaka 'washerman', Sutuvaya 'tailor', suvarnakara 'Goldsmith', caramakara leather worker, karmara 'smith' and others as names of castes which had their origin in the differentiation of profession." [3].

A significant point to be remembered while discussing the condition of the early Indian society is that it was not as rigoristic in its outlook as it is thought to be. For example the rigidity in respect of caste, status of women and so on is mostly an invention of later times. There were certain evils no doubt that were handed down to the later generations and which still prevail to some extent even in modern India. It must be noted that these ancient social tradition and practices Gandhi's attitude towards the social problems to a great extent.

### **Gandhi's Concept of Society:**

Gandhi wanted to establish a new society, a society completely free exploitation and oppression Gandhi worked hard to set up a sarvodaya samaj and a 'soshan bihin' samaj (society free from exploitation). According to Gandhi every individual whether rich or poor, high or low should get equal opportunity for his development. The utilitarian ideal of the greatest good of the greatest number did not satisfy Gandhi. Gandhi wanted the upliftment prosperity of all.

### **Relation between the Individual and Society:**

Gandhi says that 'the Swaraj of the people is the sum total of the Swaraj of the individual'. This means that it is the individual who go to make the society and the welfare of the latter depends upon the welfare of the former. If individual Swaraj is attained then peace and prosperity will naturally follow. According to Gandhi though we should have individual freedom, we must not forget that man



is essentially a social being. He should learn to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress.

### **Varnasrama Dharma:**

The law of varnasrama can be traced back to our most ancient scripture, the Vedas. The law of varna stated that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. Varna therefore is in a way the law of heredity. The law of asrama is concerned, Hinduism laid down four asramas of life – the Brahmachari, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa, through which a Hindu should fulfil the purpose of his life. The law of varna was a means to earn one's livelihood. Thus the function of a brahmana was to teach the science of brahma or spiritual truth. This in turn secured him his livelihood. A kshatriya was to perform the function of protecting the people, a vaisya was required to perform wealth producing occupations for the welfare of the people and a shudra was to perform other physical labour in the same spirit of service. Gandhi tried his best to give a new light to the age old tradition of varnasrama. Gandhi use varnasrama as means to promote human welfare.

### **Untouchability:**

Gandhi it should be noted defended the order of the caste system so far as it is related to the functional aspect, in the sense of the social function which were related to one's status in the society but he was deadly against the caste system when it stood for the practice of untouchability. According to Gandhi all functions in a society were to be treated with equal respect and no form of labour were either superior or inferior in status. A man should try to develop the skills and proficiency of his forefathers no doubt, but a person's aptitude or interest should also be taken in to account Gandhi also maintained that a man's acceptance of his hereditary profession would necessarily put in check the development of ambition which would help one in its turn to release surplus energy for spiritual pursuit[4]. The people who are so called untouchables has immense potentialities latent in them. Some are more cultured and educated than the so called men of high castes. We can cite here the example of B.R. Ambedkar, who was himself an outcaste, and also a well-known lawyer. Gandhi recognizes Ambedkar's intellectual distinction and eminence and shows how



silly it was for orthodox Brahmins to count his untouchable simply because he was born a Mahar, or an untouchable.<sup>[5]</sup> Gandhi tried to remove the practice of untouchable in every possible way both by precept and example. Gandhi self so strongly about it that he expressed the desire that should be not attain moksha or liberation from the realm of samsara, he should be born as an untouchable, so that he might identify himself with their sufferings and sorrows. Gandhi himself did that work of scavenging. He also persuaded his wife to follow his example.

### **Harijans and Temple Entry:**

Another notable achievement of Gandhi in the society field was that he could secure for the harijans the right of free entry into the Hindu temple. Formerly the harijan or untouchables were denied this right. Gandhi adopted the word 'Harijan' for untouchables. 'Harijan' means 'a man of God'. All the religion of the world describe God as the friend of the friendless, help of the helpless and protector of the weak. In India, perhaps there is no one more helpless and more needy than these group of people classified as untouchables. Gandhi fought for the equal rights for the harijans in all spheres of life. Since God in the creator of all beings it is unjustified that a section of the people be denied his blessings on the ground that they are 'untouchables. Therefore the harijans must be free to visit all temples that are open to the Hindus.

Gandhi implemented the technique of satyagraha on behalf of the untouchables who were forbidden to use the roads in the vicinity of the vykom Temple in Travancore. The aim of this Satyagraha was to open the road and the temple to the untouchables. He thus tried to eliminate the discrimination against the untouchables and Harijans. Thus Gandhi put his idea of Sarvodaya in to practice by showing his concern for the welfare of all men and Harijans in particular who were the most exploited class.

### **Inter-Dining and Inter – Marriage:**

Inter-dining and inter-marriage are important social problems specially in a Hindu society and therefore deserve special mention. Both inter-dinning and inter-marriage according to Gandhi are matters of choice not matters of regulation. They are in fact the result of social habits. Gandhiji does not regard inter-dining and inter-marriage as essential to the removal of untouchability. The



Vedas and the Mahabharata are full of illustrations both of inter-dining and inter-marriage. In ancient times, it is believed that there was no water tight compartment between varnas so far as marital and social relations were concerned. According to Gandhi we have done a great harm to Hinduism by making 'varna' a matter of were restrictions about food, drink and marriage. Gandhi favored inter-dining and inter-marriage because it helped to foster the sense of unity amongst various classes. He greatly encouraged couples of inter caste marriage with his blessings. But he also finds justification in marriage amongst one's own community.

Gandhi believed that dining and inter-marriage must be left to the choice of the individual as to whom and where he or she will marry or dine. Gandhi's one son Devdas fell in love with a Brahmana girl. As a reformer of Hinduism he did not object to the marriage but only wanted that it should stand the test of love but when Indira Gandhi was engaged to Feroz Ghandhi, a parsi, Gandhi welcomed the union. But Gandhi was opposed to either party changing religion for the sake of marriage. To-day our Government is trying to encourage inter-caste marriage by giving awards to such couples. But still the percentage of inter-caste marriage is quite low what is required is a change of attitudes and beliefs. Unless there is a change in the outlook of the people, inter-caste marriage and inter-dining cannot be popularized.

### **Cow Protection :**

The essential unity of life that underlies his feeling of oneness with the animal kingdom and consequently his support of Cow protection. The word 'cow protection' has a much wider significance for Gandhi, for he uses it to mean protection of all that lives. As Gandhi said "Cow protection to me is infinitely more than mere protection of the cow.....cow protection means protection of the weak, the helpless, the dumb and the deaf. Man becomes then not the lord and master of all creation but he is its servant"[5]. A true follower of Ahimsa cannot allow the killing of animals. Therefore Gandhi insisted that a Hindu who protects the cow should protect every animal. For him the cow epitomises the sub human world, it is a plea for justice on behalf of the animal world.

Non-violence towards animals and other living creatures is an important aspects of Hinduism and specially of the Jaina religion. Protection of the cow is a



step for putting this lofty ideal into practice. Gandhi believed that the animals should also be put on the same level as human beings so far as the right to level is concerned. Gandhi with his constructive mind laid various programmes of establishing Goshala, dairy farms, tanneries, pasture land and so on. In later times, Gandhi's emphasis on cow protection found expression at the hands of the framer of the constitution of India who have enshrined it in the Directive principles of State policy. "The State shall Endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry in modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and draught cattle." To Gandhi " Cow slaughter and man slaughter are the two sides of the same coin." [6],

### **Womens Status in Society:**

The status of women at a stage in the evolution of Hindu society was not equal to that of men: women were regarded as being inferior in status to men as a result of which the women have developed a sort of inferiority complex. But through this is a picture of the general society, our ancient seers and learned men have realised the great potentialities in woman. No wonder they have addressed her as 'Sakti' - the source of all creation and strength. We find in the ancient Hindu Scriptures that women were highly honored. She was addressed as goddess (devi), friend (sakhi), auspicious (Mangala) and who was joyfully welcomed as the empress (samrajni) - the ruler of the husband's household. Women were as the better half. No religious ceremony in Hinduism is complete without the wife who is a 'dharama patni' to her husband. But then came a period of about thousand years which brought gloomy picture for women. She came to be looked upon as an object for pleasure. Gandhi, however, recognizes the fact that physically there are vital differences between men and women. Hence their respective functions are different. Gandhi therefore strongly disappointed the modern tendency in women to imitate men in every sphere. If the mother does not look after her children the race would become extinct. There is as much bravery in keeping one's house in order as there is in defending it against external enemies.

Gandhi expressed the view that the real ornament of a woman is her character and purity. Metals and Stones can be no real ornaments. The name of



Sita and Damayanti have become immortal not for their external jewellery but for their inner virtues. Therefore the asking of ornaments by Gandhi in the form of donation had a much wider significance. Gandhi wanted women to take part in politics too and have independent thinking. Women should not merely live to carry out her parents or her husbands' wishes. Women should be enrolled as voters and have practical education in any field of knowledge. As legislation is mainly the creation of men, they have been biased in framing the law of society. Gandhi maintained that women should work under no disability which is not suffered by men. Gandhi vigorously opposed the system of purdah which was imposed on women, originally purdah was an Islamic practice of veiling the faces of women and later on it came to be accepted by Hindus. The long struggle of Gandhi to establish the rights of women bore excellent fruits. How Indian women stood heroically by their men folk, not only in the struggle for freedom, but also in the fight against caste, tyranny, superstition and against a multitude of social evils like drinking, child marriage etc. is a glaring proof of the success achieved in this respect.

### **Brahmacharya :**

Gandhi borrowed his idea of brahmacharya from the Hindu Dharma Shastras and adopted and modified it in his own way. Gandhi realised that the great cause to which he and his followers dedicated themselves required a considerable amount of self-control. This self control can be acquired only if one has acquired control in other ways namely of thought, speech and action. He realised that without self control one could not have true dedication. No worker who has not overcome lust can dedicate himself to the cause of Harijans, communal unity, khadi, cow protection or village re-construction. Marriage, according to Gandhi is a natural thing in life. But what is required is that one should live a life of self - restraint even within the married estate. The ideal of marriage is a spiritual union through the physical. The human love that marriage brings forth is a stepping stone to divine or universal love. Therefore he urged the married people to turn that human love into universal love through the practice of truth, and non-violence. Gandhi holds marriage to be a Sacrament. It is both a physical and spiritual union. The purpose of marriage should be friendship and companionship and not simply the gratification of the sexual desires.



### **Widow Remarriage and Child Marriage :**

Gandhi insistence on the right of remarriage for widow is a divergence from the long standing Hindu tradition according to which widows were bound to follow a life of strict celibacy, more so in the case of Brahmana widow. According to the custom of sati, the widow has to burn herself along with her dead husband. Sometimes she was forced to do so by her relatives. Cases are on record when the woman out of fear used to jump out of fire but her body was again forcibly thrown back into the fire. Gandhi therefore gave all encouragement to widow remarriage. He believed that a women had an equal right to remarry as much as a man. In Gandhi view, widows remarriage is no sin. Widowhood is an adornment to one who can observe it. But if she wished she has the full right to remarry, just as a widower has. The statement that the widows attain moksha if they observe Brahmacharya has no foundation, according to Gandhi, in experience. More things are necessary then mere brahmacharya for the attainment of the final bliss. Widow remarriage has nothing to do with the attainment of mukti. Gandhi also tried to abolish the custom of child marriage. In golden times it was considered to be a great social sin if girls attained puberty before marriage. According to Gandhi the father is a guardian and not the owner of his children. It is therefore, undesirable, according to Gandhi to rid himself of the burden by giving her in marriage at a very early age.

### **Dowry System :**

the dowry system is a great social evil which has plagued indian society up to the modern times. Even today we hear of innumerable cases of young girls committing suicide being unable to bear the torture of her in-laws for failing to bring enough dowry. Gandhi wanted the parents to educate their daughters in such a way that they would refuse to marry one who wanted a price for marring and would rather remain spinners than sit for marriage, gandhi believed on mutual love and mutual consent.

### **Prohibition :**

According to Gandhi, we must not live in order to eat, drink and be merry, but eat and drink in order to make our bodies temples of God and to use them for the service of men. Hence he condemns strongly the habit of drinking and smoking. The drinking habit destroys the soul of man and turns him into a beast.



Gandhi was well aware of the dangerous effect of wine not only on the user but on others as well. Gandhi is constant fight against drink and other intoxicants found expression in the section under the Directive principles of state policy of our Indian constitution. It expressed the states Endeavour to bring about prohibition, except for medicinal purposes. Thus Gandhi constant effort in respect of prohibition was a reform in the social sphere which naturally had a tremendous effect on the individual and consequently on the nation.

### **Gandhi's Attitude Towards Other Religion :**

Gandhi said, "I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they are all God given ... And I believe that, if only we could read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another." [7] When Gandhi went through the sacred books of different faiths like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, he found that the different religions were beautiful flowers from the same garden. The prayer meetings at Sabarmati too were attended by Hindus, Mussalmans and Christians as well. In the songs and the prayers, the name of Rama would sometimes be substituted for Ahuramazda. Sometimes the word 'Christian' would be used in place of Vaishnava, thus showing equal respect for all religions. Gandhi always song 'Rama Rahim', 'Krishna Karim' as well as 'Isvara Allah tere nam'. In the Agakhan palace at Poona in 1942 on the eve of the ramajan Idd, Gandhi declared his intention to take only dates and milk on the next day, which were the prophets favourite articles of food and gave up braed and vegetables which were Gandhi's favourites. Once in South Africa he kept Roza (fast) for the whole month.

The realization of need for unity in diversity, should not be were toleration for toleration is a word which does not seen proper to Gandhi. We should respect other faiths as our own. The world cannot be reduced to one religion, one culture and one language. It should be a federation of religion, cultures and languages, according to Gandhi. The Jaina theory of anehantavada and Syadvada teaches us that every man is right from his own standpoint. Gandhi tried his best to put this great philosophy into practice. He appreciated the story of the seven blind men who gave Seven different descriptions of the elephant. They were all right from



their respective points of view though partially Gandhi was greatly inspired by the doctrine of many sidedness of reality advocated by Jaina philosophy. Gandhi passionate love for religions unity made him oppose conversion. He saw no reason of conversion in from one faith to the other. In Gandhi's view there may be cases of voluntary conversion but nobody should be converted by forceful means. He objected to the man conversion of Harijan and other poorer classes by the Christian Missionaries. He did not allow some of his co-workers to give up their ancestral religion. Gandhi said that a rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. The fragrance of religious and spiritual life according to Gandhi is far greater and finer. Gandhi therefore was the initiator of religious unity in the true sense although the germ of it can be traced back to a far ancient period. It is this sense of unity amongst different religious that has raised the status of Indian in the mind of the modern world and this was greatly result of the efforts of Gandhi in this direction.

### **Ideas on Education:**

Gandhi expressed his views on the ideal system of education that would be applicable to India. Though proper education Gandhi wanted to build up a strong man, not strong in the physical sense, but strong in character having high moral and religious virtues. The primary object of his socio-political-economic set up was to prevent a person from degenerating into a materialistic being and this he believed could be done only by a system of proper education.

Gandhi tried to frame his basic education in accordance with the ancient system of ashrama. Ashrama education is nothing but education with labour. The student in ancient ashrama learnt by rendering service to his "Guru" (teacher). He gathered fuel and water, cooked food and cleaned the surroundings. The student had to perform such function as tending of cows (gopalana), tending of the sacrificial fire (samidhaharan) and gathering of fruits and roots (Phalamulaharan). Similarly Gandhi's education had labour at the other side. Education and labour thus go hand in hand. The discipline laid down by Gandhi for a student life reminds us of the ancient yoga system of philosophy. In student life as well as in ashrama life one was required to follow the Dwadasha vrata prescribed by Gandhi. These twelve fold vows were nothing but only a few spiritual principle to guide the student along the right path. The universal prayer of Gandhi



‘vaishrava jara to, tena kahiye’ was to be recited by the student. The meaning behind it was that the qualities of a vaishrava should be the qualities present in every student. A study of the ancient Gurukul system of India proves that the aim of education is to develop the personality of the individual so as to make him a useful citizen of the society or country. Gandhi too wanted to train the students in such a way so that they may equip themselves properly in order to serve the country.

As we have seen that all the thoughts and activities of Gandhi revolve round religion. In the field of education also his ideas revolved round God realisation. The primary aim of Gandhi’s life was self realisation. Purity of personal life is the one indispensable condition for building up sound education according to Gandhi. And this purity can only come when the student are believers in God, that is Truth and non-violence, have a pure heart, lead a simple life and have faith in dignity of labor. Education according to Gandhi is an all round drawing out of the man’s body. Literacy not simply the end of education. Gandhi believed that an all round development of mind can be attained only when it goes with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child. Gandhi put more emphasis on the moral than on the intellectual aspect of education. Secure equal rights and opportunities for all Gandhi insisted that free and compulsory primary education should be given to all boys and girls from 6 to 14 years of age. Gandhi in his theory of basic education gives a unique approach to education. The foremost place, according to him should be given to handicrafts in the process of a child’s education. This has two advantages, namely that it infuses the sense of creativity in a child and it also helps one to be self-supporting. Gandhi pointed out that subjects like history, geography, mathematics etc. could be taught side by side with handicrafts. In this view a child should not be overburdened with reading and writing from a very tender age. A child learning through the medium of oral communication learns better.

Gandhi was well aware of the importance of bread, he was therefore conscious of the danger of higher education on the arts subjects without vocational training. Higher education without vocational training create students fit only for white collar jobs which are limited. It does not give them proper



training to earn their livelihood and this is responsible for the unemployment problem which has become so acute in our country. Gandhi firm conviction about the power of truth, love and Ahimsa made him base his education on these principles. Every person should be physically, mentally and spiritually trained to realise truth and love in every sphere of life. According to Gandhi children should themselves carry out cleaning and scavenging so that the prejudices against untouchables and scavengers would be removed. Gandhi also emphasized the need for self sufficiency in the schools. A child should share some burden of the financial expenses by such means. He can grow some fruits within the compound for mid-day meal or produce some small furniture of whitewash the walls of the school rooms. The Gandhian system of education therefore can solve some of the problem of present day society specially the problem of unemployment to some extent. Gandhi thus proposes a system of education in accordance with the religious and ethical ideas of his religious tradition which ethical ideas of his religious tradition which can fulfill the needs of the people of India to a considerable degree.

## **V.Conclusion:**

I concluded by saying that Gandhian thought is that idea which can be removed the violence, evil thought, war, terrorism, unrest, injustice, exploitation etc. from the human society. Through the idea of truth and non-violence people can maintain peace in society. Education is that instrument which is vital in developing individual personality as well as society. Though Gandhian Education, knowledge has to be given to the learner and people of the society so that they can learn and imbibe the ethics and values of humanitarian and peaceful society. i.e. 'Sarvodaya Samaj.' Gandhi's dream of future society was that society where every people irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex will get equal opportunity and equal justice as a citizen of the society or the nation. So we can say that in these days of unrest, exploitation, violence and injustice, people should follow Gandhian thought. The curriculum framers' should provide necessary important for the formulation and implementation of such peace education or Gandhian Studies as a curriculum in School and College level. If possible research activities should be conducted by the Govt., different organizations and educational institutions. These kinds of activities will develop



the feeling of co-operation, equal rights, justice, sympathy etc. which are very necessary for maintaining peace in society.

Gandhi is worshiped as the father of our Nation, his philosophy has a deep impact on the people living in NE region. Gandhi's message of love, non-violence, communal and social harmony should be conveyed to people of all castes and communities. These should be specially told to young generation. No achievement is possible unless and until we apply Gandhi's peace thought. If the peace loving people keep on conveying Gandhian message, political and social integration is certainly possible in our country. Gandhi, whose philosophy of life is quite relevant to all humanity and whose life itself is a message to humanity, himself said, "The nearest approach to the purest anarchy would be democracy based on non-violence. In such a state everyone is his own ruler." Gandhi was a staunch believer of Truth and Ahimsa. He uses his long search truth received from different religious scriptures to establish universal brotherhood, communal harmony, solidarity and peace among the followers of different religious traditions which are otherwise hostile to each other. He tried his best to wipe out religious fanaticism, bigotry and mutual distrust among the people belonging to different faiths and tradition. He showed the world a path of unity brotherhood, amity and peace and to attain all these goals in our national and global scenario the issue of inter religious communication have to make perpetual.

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