

GANDHI & AMBEDKAR-II

Divergent Ideas On Social Discrimination

By SUBRATA MUKHERJEE

Ambedkar considered untouchables a "separate element" in India's social existence and declared the need to choose any religion other than Hinduism to receive equal treatment. In 1935, he declared that though he was born a Hindu, he would not die as one and towards the end of his life converted to Buddhism. In contrast, Gandhi repeatedly stressed the "fundamental truth of all great religions of the world" and earnestly pleaded with his followers to "remember that his own religion is the truest of every man even if it stands low in the scales of philosophical comparison".

He came in contact with a group of British evangelists who tried to unsuccessfully convert him to Christianity. Gandhi saw both positive and negative sides to this teaching. On the positive side, he adopted their evangelical outlook that God guided people, and the Church and other voluntary associations should become instruments for reforming society and alleviating human miseries.

Narrow vision

However, he could not get reconciled to the narrow vision that one particular religion alone could be true. He rejected religious concessions because it showed lack of respect for other beliefs.

Ambedkar did not take any note of a separate Harijan church that the British allowed to function nor did he mention the existence of a separate black church in the US and the fact that during the Second World War, US army operations were manned by separate black and white contingents though both were Christians. His explanation for the continuation of caste system among Indian Muslims and Christians was the all-pervasive influence of Hinduisim, without asking the question that since conversion to most other religions would not free people from casteism, why not support reforms within different

religious orders? The rejection of the Ambedkar line on conversion in the present times is revealed by the fact that this is used more as a symbolic political weapon without much support from the scheduled castes

advancement as the present economic order was based on inequality. The prescription for eradicating inequality was the abolition of industrial civilisation. Gandhi found human salvation in a return to nature. The



themselves. Unable to work out a larger integrative mechanism like Gandhi, the solution for Ambedkar and his past and present followers continues to be extension of reservations to Dalits who have converted either to Islam or Christianity.

Apart from rejecting the Gandhian framework for tackling the caste problem in India, Ambedkar rejected Gandhian economic thinking. He points out that Gandhi's opposition to the modern industrial civilisation, and propagation of the charkha indicated Gandhi's passion for economic inequality. He also rejected Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship. However, he overlooked the fact that Gandhi's indignation at the consequences of industrialisation was apparent.

Return to nature

With a remarkable affinity to Marx's criticism of Adam Smith, Gandhi rejected the claim of

hidden meaning of the Hindu Swaraj was the need for the freedom of the working class and the common people. Political independence by itself is irrelevant unless there is improvement and elevation in the lives of the ordinary people, the underprivileged and the toiling masses. He was aware of the enormous differences among countries and pointed out that the choice of technique depended on circumstances. Countries like India with abundant labour and large-scale unemployment and underemployment should restrict the use of machinery.

Gandhi preferred individual initiative and voluntary efforts and was realistic enough to accept the inevitability of limited state regulations. Even his doctrine of trusteeship did not preclude limited regulatory legislations. He went on to declare that if trusteeship failed, he would be prepared to accept limited state ownership. But he

could not accept complete state control in any case.

Ambedkar did not take notice of the fact that Gandhi acknowledged his debt to Rousseau, Ruskin and Tolstoy. However, what set Gandhi apart from the other thinkers was his realism in accepting conflict as inevitable and pointed out that it was pronounced in three sectors in India: (a) conflict of labour and capital in industry, (b) conflict of tenant and landlord in agriculture and (c) conflict of village and city. These conflicts would be resolved through trusteeship and passive resistance.

He wrestled with contemporary problems and did not try to put the clock back. He identified what he called the three pillars of Swaraj which would include (a) Hindu-Muslim unity, (b) abolition of untouchability and (c) uplift of Indian villages. Criticising Tilak he categorically emphasised that social evils were an impediment for *swaraj* and, therefore, underlined the importance of social reforms. The fight for *swaraj* meant not only political awakening but an all round awakening — social, education, moral, economic and political.

Real difference

The essential difference between Ambedkar and Gandhi was in working out the framework for a solution to the problems of the underprivileged and social discrimination. Gandhi in the tradition of reformative liberalism considered the problem in its entirety whereas Ambedkar remained a spokesman of a particular concern and agenda without any plausible programme of integrating within a democratic framework of assimilation.

The recent attempts by Mayawati to integrate Ambedkar and Parsuram as two symbols of antagonistic social division in India vindicates the need to transcend the sectoral vision of Ambedkar and integrate more with Gandhi's holistic vision.

(Concluded)

HINDUISM AND GANDHI

To follow a shallow and superficial secularism is one of the worst sins that the false prophets of contemporary India are committing

ON Gandhi's birthday, instead of going round the samadhis and attending prayer meetings ritualistically, the ruling elite will do well to think how a strong and healthy India could be built on its spiritual traditions and how Hinduism, as viewed by Gandhiji, could be used to refertilise and revitalise that tradition. Dr S Radhakrishnan, in connection with his study of religion, posed three questions to Mahatma Gandhi. What is your religion? How are you led to it? What is its bearing on social life?

Gandhi answered the first question thus: "My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is the religion of humanity and includes the best of all religions known to me". In response to the second question, Gandhi said: "I take it that the present tense in this question has been purposely used, instead of the past. I am led to my religion through truth and non-violence. I often describe my religion as religion of truth. Of late, instead of saying God is Truth, I have been saying Truth is God. We are all sparks of Truth. The sum total of these sparks is indescribable, as yet unknown Truth, which is God. I am daily led nearer to it by constant prayer".

To the third question, Gandhi replied: "The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion, one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all in life. Realisation of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. In this scheme, there is nothing low,

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nothing high. For all is one, though we seem to be many".

Gandhi elaborated: "The deeper I study Hinduism, the stronger becomes the belief in me that Hinduism is as broad as the universe. Something within me tells me that, for all the deep veneration I show to several religions, I am all the more a Hindu, nonetheless for it".

On the Mahatma's birthday, it seems necessary to bring home these fundamentals, particularly

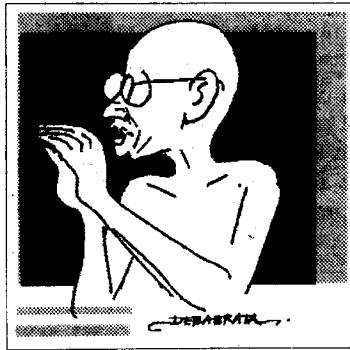
Most of our institutions have lost their underlying motivation of service and become effete and venal

to those who go on condemning Hinduism without even studying it and also to those members of the ruling elite whose attachment to fake and fraudulent "gods" have made the country a den of corruption, callousness, confusion and criminality.

Gandhi's elucidation makes it clear that true Hinduism is nothing but spiritual secularism. To relegate such a religion and to follow a shallow and superficial secularism is one of the worst sins that the false prophets of contemporary India are committing. They call Gandhi the Father of the Nation. Yet in practice they do everything to negate all his beliefs.

Throughout human history, religion has remained a potent force, despite all the pounding it has received from thinkers like Marx who called it "opiate of the masses" and Freud who termed it as "a collective neurosis of the masses". It may be relevant to recall a talk between Cardinal

Gonsalvic and Napoleon. The Cardinal was pleading the case for the Catholic church. Napoleon got annoyed on some point and shouted at the Cardinal: "Your Eminence, are you not aware that I have the power to destroy the Catholic Church?" The Cardinal smiled and replied: "Your Majesty, we, the Catholic clergy, for the last 1,800 years, have done our level best to destroy the Catholic Church. We did not succeed. You will not



succeed either". This conversation brings out in a telling manner the staying power of religion, notwithstanding its internal and external destroyers.

While religion has its influence in every country, it is more so in India. Swami Vivekananda, with his characteristic clarity and insight, has observed: "Each nation, like each individual, has one theme in its life, which is its centre, the principal note around which every other note comes to form the harmony. If anyone attempts to throw off this central note, that is, its national vitality, the direction which has become its own through the transmission of centuries, that nation dies. In India, religious life forms the centre, the key-note of the whole music of national life. Take away religion from India; nothing would be left".

Power in present-day India has become an end in itself. Justice is being buried deeper and deeper. Means, howsoever unscrupu-

lous, are resorted to and then rationalised. Corruption in public life has attained alarming proportions. Most of our institutions have lost their underlying motivation of service and become effete and venal.

Why has this happened? Why have our state and society become soulless entities? Why have criminals enlarged their hold on politics? And why have power and pelf become everything and justice and truth nothing?

The answer to these questions is that the ethical foundation of Hinduism, as seen by Gandhi, which could provide "an awakened conscience" to an individual and make him an honest, just and compassionate component of society has been destroyed partly by the stink and slush of our past degeneration and partly by the type of spurious secularism which has been exploited in post-independence India.

Hinduism, as made clear by Gandhi, sees all human beings as "sparks of truth/divinity". As such, it neither goes against any other religion; nor is it incompatible with the constitutional goals of equality, fraternity, liberty and justice. If the same divinity constitutes the core of all individuals, they cannot but be equal. Further, divinity in one person cannot in any way be unjust to the same divinity in another person. As the Gita puts it: "Seeing the same God equally present in everything, one does not injure the self by self; and goes to the highest goal".

In Hinduism, Gandhi saw a unique quality: "In it there is room for the worship of all the prophets of the world. It is not a missionary religion in the ordinary sense of the world". Gandhi underlined: "God is not encased in a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but He is open to be approached through billions of openings by those who are humble and pure of heart".

Magsaysay for Dr. Shanta

SINGAPORE: Dr. V. Shanta, Chairperson of the Cancer Institute, Adyar, in Chennai, has won the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service for 2005.

The eminent physician was given the award in recognition of her "untiring leadership of the Cancer Institute as a centre of excellence and compassion for the study and treatment of cancer in India," the citation from the Magsaysay Foundation, Manila, said on Monday.

Dr. Shanta has pioneered re-

search and treatment of various kinds of cancers, especially cervical cancer.

Other winners

Thai Senator Jon Ungphakorn, Indonesian anti-graft campaigner Teten Masduki, Bangladeshi editor Matiur Rahman, South Korea's Yoon Hye-Ran and Laotian Sombath Somphone were the other winners.

The presentation ceremony will be held on August 31 in Manila. — UNI, AFP



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