GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF INTER - CASTE MARRIAGE
- A CRITICAL STUDY

SYNOPSIS

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INTRODUCTION:

Mahatma Gandhi, was not only a philosopher and freedom fighter but also a Hindu reformer and a Humanist. It can be seen from the words of Gandhi in Young India, "I am more a reformer than a politician". He said Religion is a matter of life and death. Religion is associated with a man even beyond death\(^1\). Gandhiji said that his fellowship with all the religions is same. And his aim is to help a Hindu, a Mussalman and a Christian to become better in their respective religion\(^2\).

Untouchability in India, as the race and colour problems in the west, rests upon the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on the basis of their birth. In the name of Hindu religion, the untouchables were treated cruelly by the caste Hindus. Untouchability is a denial of the human rights to a section of people in the name of Hindu Religion. Gandhi opposed this and expressed it in the following words, "Untouchability is a device of Satan and it does not have the sanction of religion\(^3\).

The practice of untouchability has been for a long time and the most serious problematic social sin of Hindu Society. In the past, several efforts were made to abolish it, by many social reformers all over India from time to time. All of them addressed and approached the problem of untouchability in different ways as they perceived the problem. Their goal was to uplift the untouchables from their economic backwardness only. Whereas Gandhiji had a unique approach to liberate the untouchables from their social, economic and political backwardness. He wanted to liberate them from their backwardness.
Gandhiji had realised the problem of untouchability even in his childhood and according him untouchability was a curse and a blot on Hinduism. At that time untouchables were considered as fifth varna in Hinduism. According to Hindu religion there are four varnas in the society. But Gandhiji said that there is no such thing as a fifth varna in Hinduism and so insisted that the untouchables should have all the rights common to the four varnas\textsuperscript{4}.

Gandhi went another step and told at a meeting in Bhuj, on 22.10.25 that Hinduism would be destroyed, if untouchability is not removed. But at the same time he wished to live and die for Hinduism, with which he identified himself\textsuperscript{5}. This shows his committedness for Hinduism and also his reformistic mind.

In November 7, 1933, Gandhi started his all India Harijan tour and the next day, at a huge meeting at Chitnis Park, he declared that the removal of untouchability was his religion\textsuperscript{6}.

Gandhi considered that, Human beings are sparks of the Divine power. He has described all his experiments in his life up to 1925 in his Autobiography named “The story of My Experiments with truth”. Later, he declared, “Truth is God“. For Gandhiji Religion means Truth and Ahimsa\textsuperscript{7}.

And also, in every field of social activity, he had a scientific approach. He had rejected some custom that was against reason. He wanted to verify even the Shastras to reject some wrong interpretation. According to Gandhiji the true foundation of all religions is Truth and Ahimsa and anything contrary to these mentioned in religious scriptures should be rejected by the seekers\textsuperscript{8}. He had spiritual approaches to the problem of untouchability. Gandiji believed in the absolute oneness of God and man and therefore also of humanity.
Gandhi makes clear that, Soul is one, though God’s creations are many. Gandhiji compared men having different bodies but one soul with that of sun producing many rays but the source being the same one⁹.

Gandhiji was a believer of Advaita (the Indian doctrine of Monism). And, he believed in that, the nature and all that exist are parts of the divine. Answering to a friend, Gandhiji wrote he is an advaitist (monist) who can support dualism. Though the world is changing every moment it has also some persisting that makes it real. So, he calls the world an Anekantavada or a Syadvadi, where his Anekanatavada is the result of the twin doctrine of Truth and Ahimsa¹⁰.

Gandhiji’s Religion of Truth is that it is essentially a religion of service. For him religion or spirituality is not a mere matter of knowing scriptures and engaging in philosophical discussions. True Religious life is practical application of Religious and spiritual values in actual real life. Hence, for Gandhi, service to his creation is the service to God. He considers service of God’s creation as the easiest way to attain moksha. He accepts moksa as the only goal of human life. In Gandhiji’s view, religion that does not help to solve the practical affairs is not a religion¹¹.

Caste system in India is a vital phenomenon. Hinduism divides the peoples hierarchically into four varnas. Besides it categorises into touchables and untouchables. The untouchables were forced to suffer from numerous disabilities of social, religious, economic, political and other cultural taboos. All along the Indian history, many early social reformers and Hindu religious reform movements like Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj and others have made several efforts to get relief to the untouchables.

Gandhiji had a unique approach to the problem of casteism in Hinduism. By caste, Gandhiji did not mean Varna or the four functional and occupational divisions of Hinduism, but only the multitude of subdivisions, which according to
him, might have had its original correspondence with guilds. All restrictions and limitations might have crept into the system later. All varnas and castes shall be described only as Shudras.\textsuperscript{12}

Though Gandhi\textsuperscript{i} belongs to Hinduism he had different opinion about caste. Gandhi found caste to have nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin Gandhi doesn't know. But he found caste to be harmful both to spiritual and National growth.\textsuperscript{13} He found out caste as an obstacle for national development and human progress in India.

As a worshiber of Truth, he considered every human being as a creation of God. Therefore, he considered the practice of sub-caste and untouchability as a sin against God. He said that Hinduism has sinned by sanctioning untouchability. And this has degraded and lead Hinduism to many evils.\textsuperscript{14}

Following the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi too considered the service of God incarnated in poor (Daridra Narayana Service) as the path to God realisation. Gandhi considered his resourceless countrymen to be his nearest neighbours. And so he has the duty to serve them.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1925, Gandhi said that the removal of untouchability is an integral part of his life and hence it cannot be isolated from all his activities.\textsuperscript{16} Gandhi stressed his goal as not to have Harijan's as a separate body in Hinduism or outside it. And he shall be satisfied only with the removal of untouchability and having the untouchables within the Hindu fold.\textsuperscript{17}

For Gandhi Harijan service will be more precious than the daily bread. Whether he is in or outside prison, he can live for some days at least without the daily bread, but he cannot live without Harijan service for one single minute, since he considers such service as the breath of his life.\textsuperscript{18}
Gandhiji believed in the Hindu Doctrine of Karma and rebirth. He explained his wish for rebirth as Harijan. At the Suppressed Classes Conference (13-14 April 27) held at Ahmedabad Gandhiji said that he did not want to attain Moksha and to be reborn. If he had to be reborn, he wanted to be born an untouchable, so that he may feel the total sufferings and miserable conditions of the untouchables. He, therefore, prayed to be reborn as an 'Athisudra’ to bring his Hinduism to its fulfillment\textsuperscript{19}.

In this context, his concept of Harijan is aimed to bring a casteless society in the future. He strongly believed that, removable of untouchability can be achieved only by the annihilation of caste. He emphasised the removal of untouchability to establish a casteless society. That is why he took the responsibility of fighting it out. He strongly believed that, caste must go if untouchability is to be rooted out\textsuperscript{20}.

He was basically a Sanatana Hindu, and he approached the removal of untouchability as basically a Hindu religious reformation. In this way, he thought, he can reform Hinduism. For that purpose he started the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932. He devoted his whole energies to Harijan upliftment. He went on Harijan Tour (12500 miles) from November 1933 to August 1934. In January 1933, he started “Harijan”, a weekly journal, in the place of “Young India”. In May 1933, he went on 3 week fast for Harijan cause. According to Gandhi, public wells and private temples should be opened to Harijans, wherever public opinion is favourable\textsuperscript{21}.

Gandhiji believed that if the objective of the Harijan movement is religious purification and protection of Hinduism, then it can be achieved only by truth\textsuperscript{22}. Through Harijan Sevak Sangh, he carried out several programmes for the upliftment of Harijans. Later on, he advocated inter-caste marriages. He categorically stated that in inter-caste marriages one of the party should be
Harijan. But, in the beginning (prior to 1932), he was not in favour of inter-caste marriage and so he said that for the promotion of the spirit of democracy, intermarrying is not essential.

This shows how the genuine Ideological Transformation happened within Gandiji, So that it will help to attain the goal of casteless society. This shift of emphasis had led to several criticisms. He had been charged with inconsistency in thought. And he puts forward the following argument in support of this shifting.

Gandhiji wrote in Harijan that he is not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In his search after truth he has discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. He is concerned with his readiness to obey the call of truth (God), from moment to moment. And therefore when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of him, the later of the two on the same subject shall be chosen.

Gandhiji with his profound experience and sincerity had advocated the inter-caste marriage, for Harijan emancipation and caste Hindus self realization. In his last phase of his life, during 1946, he devoted himself whole heartedly to the abolition of untouchability through various constructive programme. Inter-caste marriage was one of his prime approach to eradicate untouchability and caste.

He encouraged and blessed only those couples who underwent inter-caste marriage, where one of the party should be Harijan and the other party a non – Harijan (caste Hindu).

In 1946 he said that if he had his way, he would persuade all caste Hindu girls to select Harijan husbands. Later he said if he lives upto 125 years, he does expect to convert the entire Hindu Society to his view.
Louis Fischer, a famous American Journalist, came to Sevagram Ashram and had spent one week with Gandhiji. He interviewed Gandhiji (03.06.1942) all which contents has expressed itself in Fischer’s biography on Gandhiji where he has aptly remarked Gandhiji’s ideological shift on inter-caste marriage thus, “from 1921 to 1946 Gandhi had gone full circle: From the utter disapproval of inter caste marriages to approval of only inter caste marriages”26.

This made the scholar to take this subject for the research work. In this context, the research scholar has taken the following objectives for the research work.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :**

1. To study Gandhi’s concept of Hinduism with a view to understand the problem of untouchability and Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage.
2. To know Gandhi’s concept of caste and Varna Ashrama Dharma with a view to understand his ideas of Casteless society.
3. To analyse Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage and its evolution.
4. To trace out the Gandhi’s views on religious conversion and inter-caste marriage.
5. To study Gandhi’s concept of Harijan and Durjan. To evaluate Gandhi’s ideas of “All Hindus become Harijans” with the perception of inter-caste marriage.
6. To analyse the relevance of Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste Marriage in the Modern World.

**HYPOTHESIS :**

Caste is the most essential part of Hinduism. Hinduism is the religion of the majority in India. Caste sustains Hinduism and is therefore protected. The institution of marriage is a sacrament. Those days Hindu doctrines strictly insisted
only in eight forms of marriages viz, Brahma, Deiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasha and Paishacha Vivakam. According to Hinduism every Hindu must belong to one particular caste and he should undergo marriage within the caste or Varna. Marriage between any two castes is termed inter-caste marriage and hence restricted in Hinduism. Only 'Anuloma' Marriages were encouraged to perform within the Varna system. Hinduism strongly insisted in 'endogamy'. Besides inter-caste marriage with Harijan (low caste) or with 'Avarna' people is prohibited and punishable.

The untouchables were termed 'Avarna' by the sacred law books of the Hindus. Hinduism misled the people and so they misunderstood the term 'Avarna'. The term 'Avarna' as such does not mean Varna or caste. The untouchables were originally the rejected people from the four fold division itself. That is why they were called the 'Panchamas' or 'Antyasa' or 'Chandalas'. In other words they were simply called the 'outcastes' or 'the excluded one'.

Gandhiji viewed it differently and his views were diametrically opposite to that of the excluded status of the untouchables and his opinion was that the untouchables should remain within the Hindu mainstream. The roots of Gandhi's concept of Harijan (Children of God) can be from the concept of good and evil. He remains an eclectic in his attitude towards Hinduism. He preferred to call the caste Hindus as Durjan (Men of evil).

Gandhiji considered caste an obstacle to national and spiritual growth. And so he believed that the eradication of caste is essential for the removal of the scourge of untouchability. For this he wanted to annihilate the caste system by encouraging the inter-caste marriage among Hindus. He insisted that in inter-caste marriage, one of the party should be Harijan (low caste) and the other party a non-Harijan (Caste Hindu). He promoted only such 'Pratiloma' marriages.
His ultimate aim was to annihilate the caste system to establish the casteless society among the Hindus. He called upon all Hindus to become one caste, ie. Harijan. He has also said untouchability cannot be removed by any force, including law and Reservation policy, but only by the process of conversion, by which Gandhiji meant, 'Purification of Hindu heart,' and not religions conversion. Gandhiji firmly believed that inter-caste marriage is the opt way to abolish untouchability and to create a casteless society.

SOURCE OF THE STUDY:

This Thesis is a Literary research mainly relying on Literatures. Reference are drawn from Gandhi's personal writings in his magazines young India (1919 - 1931) Navajivan and Harijan (1933 - 1947) and also in "The story of my experiments with Truth". The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi (Volume - 1-100). Has been primarily relied upon for direct reference of Gandhi.

Besides a number of books, by others written about Hinduism, caste system, untouchability, conversion and social change, were taken up for this study.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The method adopted in the thesis is descriptive, analytical and critical study. While explaining Gandhi’s concept of Hinduism, Caste and Varna system descriptive method is followed. While dealing with the term 'Harijan', inter-caste marriage and Conversion to other Religions, analytical method is followed.

Gandhi's conception of inter-caste marriage and his ideological shift from disapproval of inter-caste marriage to encouragement of only such marriage are taken for critical analysis. This scholar attempts here to analyse Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage and to trace the cause of the shift of his statement- "All Hindus become one caste, ie. Harijan, among Hindu masses".
SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

Most the research on Gandhi has been of a general nature. No in-depth study on Gandhiji’s concept of inter-caste marriage has been made so far. This study is a pioneering attempt in that direction. Further this study aims at increasing awareness among the students of Gandhian Thought, with reference to the removal of untouchability and to create casteless society.

LIMITATION:

Since the researcher has undergone the study about Gandhiji’s thoughts on inter-caste marriage, 55 years after his martyrdom (30.01.1948) the researcher was unable to collect the facts from the Gandhi’s contemporary personalities. For this research, as much as possible, the researcher has put in profound efforts and has assimilated all the necessary data’s mostly from Gandhi’s journal namely Young India, Harijan, and the collected works of Mahatma Gandhi (vol.1-100) published by Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1958.

The whole research has been carried out only on the basis of Gandhi’s speeches, writings and his actions towards the inter-caste marriage. The research is restricted to the term inter-caste marriage and its various connotations. The whole study deals about the inter-caste marriage between Harijan and Caste Hindus exclusively among the Hindu masses.

The whole research is limited to Gandhi’s vision and wisdom of Hinduism, and Hindu religious reformation. The main focus on Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage is to establish casteless society by the eradication of caste system in India.
CHAPTERISATION:

The whole analysis of the study will run into Seven Chapters, each devoted to specific aspect of Gandhi’s Concept. The first Chapter elaborates the Introduction of the subject, reason for choosing this topic, Source of Studies and Methodology, Hypothesis, Limitation, and the Objectives. The second Chapter entitled, “Gandhi’s Concept of Hinduism” will critically analyse the right understanding of Gandhi’s ideas on Hinduism, without this essential study we cannot evaluate his concept of inter-caste marriage.

The third Chapter is entitled, “Gandhi’s Concept of Caste and Varna Ashrama Dharma”. It elaborates the Gandhi’s understanding of caste and Varna. It deals with the practice of untouchability and Gandhi’s ideas on removal of untouchability and annihilation of caste system. This study will explore his ideas of casteless society.

The fourth Chapter entitled “Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage” will evaluate the real spirit behind the strategies and change of Gandhi’s ideas on inter-caste marriage. This critical study will enable us to answer the Gandhi’s vision and wisdom of “Inter-caste marriage”.

The fifth Chapter entitled, “Gandhi’s concept of religious conversion” will discuss Gandhi’s thoughts and writings and actions in respect of conversions to other faith. It is must to study Gandhi’s view on this vital issue of conversions. And so as to find out the reasons for his rejection of religious conversions of untouchables and his encouragement to the inter-caste marriage among Hindus.

The sixth chapter entitled, “Gandhi’s concept of Harijan and Durjan” will make us to understood Gandhi’s perspective on the key concept of Harijan and Durjan. It critically analyses the Gandhi’s vision and wisdom of “All Hindus become one caste” i.e., Harijan

The Seventh Chapter entitled, “The Relevance of Gandhi’s concept of inter-caste marriage in the modern India”, will analyse the various aspects of removal of untouchability with reference to Harijan Sevak Sangh and Gandhian
Constructive programmes. It will evaluate the constitutional remedies undertaken by the Government and to study the social welfare programme implemented by the Government and the NGOs in the society.

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