The origin of caste system in India dates back to the Vedic period. The first picture of the social life of the Indo-Aryans was drawn in Rig-Veda, the earliest record of the Vedic period. It points to the functional theory of the origin of the classes and shows how their life was organised on the principles of division of labour which divided the whole society into four major divisions, the Brahmins, the Kashtriyas, Vaisyas and the Shudras. The last one had been introduced at a later date. This class is supposed to have emerged as a result of the Aryans’ contact with the Dravidas, the aboriginals of India.

Among the Hindus, religion is not a concern of the philosophers and thinkers only; it has an important say in the daily life of an average man. Moreover, by nature, the Hindu generally falls back upon the traditional agreements for the explanation of such problems. The great lawgiver Manu, in his ‘Manu Samriti’, added a religious sanction to these castes and their hierarchical arrangement. According to Hindu tradition, “The caste system owes its origin to the four Vargas, which are respectively derived from the Brahmin who sprang from the mouth of the deity, the Kashtriya who was created from his arms, the Vaishya who was formed from thighs, and the Sudra who was born from his feet”. To the Sudra was given the duty of serving the three higher Varnas. As he was created from the feet, he had to subsist by feet.

In due course of time, the Sudras were deprived of any justice whatsoever. The untouchables represented the despised group of population consisting of outcastes, aborigines and the offsprings of mixed unions. With the ritual disadvantages of the group, economic disadvantages coincided due to the concentration of power in the hands of upper castes, and this stabilised the existing structure of the castes.
The initiative to reform this system was already taken by some social reformers even before Gandhi entered the scene in early twenties of the last century. His peculiar contribution lies in the momentum he gave to the problem. His observation carried a charismatic conviction. He refused to accept the traditional explanation for justification of the existing practices. He rather fell back to the functional interpretation of the division of society and endeavoured to rationalize Varna dharma, which was never a historical reality. 'Varna' to him was a norm, a construct to explain the division of society, the divisions which never functioned as well defined, pure Varnas (occupational groups) open to any eligible candidate for entry, where the membership was to be achieved and not to be ascribed by virtue of birth.

The Mahatma was particularly severe against untouchability. He saw no connection between untouchability and the caste system. To him untouchability was no part of Hinduism. It was rather a plague and "it is the bounden duty of every Hindu to combat it". On resuming the publication of 'Young India', he renamed it 'Harijan' on February 11, 1933, as a measure to stress upon the urgency of the need to eradicate untouchability. For equaling untouchables with other section of society, he started calling them 'Harijans'; the word means 'men of God'.

He devoted whole of his life for the upliftment of the down trodden irrespective of the consideration of a particular community. Perhaps, this was the main difference between his and Dr. Ambedkar's approach to the problem, the latter confined himself to the cause of a group of community. Dr. Ambedkar's own statement reveals this fact.

"But I have only one quarrel with you that is you work for the so called national welfare and not for our interests alone. If you devote yourself entirely to the welfare of the depressed classes you would then become our hero".

But Gandhi always worked for the down-trodden of any community. "Antyodaya', the upliftment of the least developed of any caste, community,
religion was his main concern. And from Antyodaya, he wanted to move towards Sarvodaya “The upliftment of all”.

If we analyse Gandhi’s views in the present context of Mandal report reservation issue etc. very strange picture emerges. He was particularly very severe on those using caste of down-trodden for political purposes. ‘Hypocrisy’ and the ‘political gimmick’ had absolutely no place in his scheme of things. Had he been alive today, his soul would have cried with agony to see all the hue and cry made by the politicians for using caste as a political weapon.

His heart used to bleed to see the sufferings of these people and he did whatever he could do to ameliorate their sufferings. He went to the extent of saying that though he did not wish to have rebirth, but if at all he was to take a birth again, he should be reborn as a Harijan so that he may have an firsthand experience of their lots and sufferings and what it mean to be a Harijan.

Apart from the heart felt feelings and concern for them, the Mahatma had a definite approach towards upliftment of Harijans. His efforts were to make them self-sufficient and not parasites, so that they could stand on their own feet and compete on equal footing with the other section of the society. He was not in favour of any kind of doles, reservations etc. for Scheduled Castes, as we see today.

With the above stated perspective in view, the present study is undertaken. There are several focal points of the present work, a few of the important among them are as under:

1. To what extent reservations have contributed for the upliftment of the section of society towards which these are made?

2. It is widely believed that reservation makes one parasite and adversely affects his self-confidence. To what extent this hypothesis is true?

3. As alleged and feared that whether the benefits or the gains of reservation are being appropriated by the creamy layer among...
the depressed classes or have percolated down to the deserving person?

4. Is reservation leading to the generation of social tension in the society?

5. What was Gandhi's response to this problem?

I have done this work under the supervision and able guidance of Dr. J. N. Sharma. I want to utilize this opportunity to express my deep sense of gratitude for his keen interest, able guidance, valuable comments and the freedom he allowed to me during the course of this work. But for his affectionate and persistent encouragement this work would never have reached its final stage.

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CHANDIGARH

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\[\text{Seema Pasricha} \quad 7/14/04\]

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