
UNIT 15 GANDHI'S PROGRAMME ON SOCIAL REFORMS

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15.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's contribution in the field of social reform was important for the reconstruction of the life of the nation. It can be said that the whole of his constructive programme was devoted to social reform. When Gandhi advised the Congress to accept office in the provinces under the 1935 Act, he told the Congress Ministers, that he expected them to carry forward the constructive programme, as far as it lay with them. Politicians, who did not believe that national independence could be achieved through truthful and non violent means, considered Gandhi as merely a social reformer, doing good work, but having no practical conception of politics. Even the Swarajists, who believed that they could non cooperate from within the Councils, thought, during the interval between the suspension of satyagraha on account of violence at Chauri Chaura and its resumption in 1930, that Gandhi was merely concerned with social reform and had ceased to take interest in politics and considered Gandhi as merely a social reformer. The Mahatma did not believe that the imperial ambitions of Britain were alone responsible for our slavery. It was the neglect of national duty, the social reforms which he considered as *dharma* that was primarily responsible for it. The constructive programme was devised to reform our national character. A reformed India would be a free India.

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you should be able to understand

- Gandhi's approach to social reforms; and
- How a reformed India would have been a free India.

15.2 REMOVAL OF UNTOUCHABILITY

The first and foremost item of this reform was the removal of untouchability, a cruel and inhuman institution. It violates human dignity and blinds the sensibility of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Untouchability was against the spirit of democracy and also raised economic problems. The untouchables were the poorest section of Indian society. Their avenues of employment were strictly limited; they lived apart, in unhygienic surroundings, on the outskirts of villages and cities. Though they were Hindus and believed in and worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses, they were not allowed to enter Hindu temples. Public institutions like schools, hotels, hostels, etc., were closed to them. Gandhi rightly felt that they who denied justice to those who suffered injustice at their hands had no right to demand justice for themselves from their oppressors.

In tackling the problem of untouchability Gandhi did not call upon the untouchables to join in the struggle for the assertion of their human rights. They were even incapable then of doing so. They took their lowly position as having been ordained by God. During the campaign against untouchability, the so called higher castes often visited their lowly homes. If they asked for water from them, they would refuse to give it, saying that it would be '*adharma*' for them to offer water to high caste people. It was such a degradation to which a large portion of the population was reduced. Gandhi, therefore, called upon the caste Hindus to make all the sacrifice necessary for the removal of untouchability. He said that they would thus be rendering only belated justice for the grievous injury inflicted by their ancestors on the untouchables through the centuries.

About untouchability Gandhi said: "To remove untouchability is a penance that caste Hindus owe to Hinduism and to themselves. The purification required is not of 'untouchables' but of the so called superior castes. There is no vice that is special to the 'untouchables', not even dirt and insanitation. It is the arrogance which blinds superior Hindus, to their own blemishes and which magnifies those of the downtrodden brethren whom they have suppressed and whom they keep under suppression. Religions like nations are being weighed in the balance. God's grace and revelation are the monopoly of no race or nation. They descend equally upon all who wait upon God. That religion and that nation will be blotted out from the face of the earth which pins its faith to injustice, untruth or violence."

He poured out the anguish of his soul when he said : "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition. I, therefore, pray that if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra but as an Atishudra." In framing the Congress constitution he made it a condition precedent for anybody joining the national organisation that he declare himself against untouchability. This was incorporated in the annual pledge that every Congressman had to take.

15.2.1 Temple Entry

The equality that Gandhi claimed for the untouchables in Hindu society included the right to enter Hindu temples. It did not matter to him if these temples were built or endowed by caste Hindus. This insistence of Gandhi on temple entry was misunderstood by some intellectuals. This was generally due to the influence of Marxist thought, which explains every human activity and institution in economic terms. Such an interpretation is manifestly untenable in the case of untouchability in India, as is the racial and colour prejudice in Western communities, in their homelands and their colonies. 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 account of their birth. The untouchable continues to profess the Hindu religion, worships the same gods and goddesses but is denied access to the Hindu temples. Once the untouchable is allowed entry into Hindu temples, the stigma attached to his community will no more be there, being deprived of its so-called religious sanction. About this Gandhiji says: "Temple entry is the one spiritual act that would constitute the message of freedom to the 'untouchables' and assure them that they are not outcasts before God". "It is not a question of Harijans asserting their right of temple entry or claiming it. They may or may not want to enter that temple even when it is declared open to them. But it is the bounden duty of every caste Hindu to secure that opening for Harijans".

"If all that there is in the universe is pervaded by God, that is to say, if the Brahmana and the Bhangi, the learned man and the scavenger, the Ezhava and the Pariah, no matter what caste they belong to- if all these are pervaded by Lord God, in the light of this Mantra, there is none that is high and none that is low, all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that Creator. And this is not a philosophical thing to be dished out to Brahmanas or Kshatriyas, but it enunciates an eternal truth which admits of no reduction, no palliation. And if that is so, how can anyone here dare to arrogate superiority to himself or herself over any other human being? I tell you, therefore, that if this Mantra holds good, if there is any man or woman here who believes that the temples are defined by those who are called Avarnas, that person, I declare, would be guilty of a grave sin".

Gandhi made it a point not to enter a Hindu temple which was not open to Harijans. His religion did not require of him to enter a temple. But he sometimes did it as a mark of courtesy. Even this courtesy he did not extend to the temples where Harijans had no free access. Gandhi set up the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which was to work for the removal of all their disabilities. This organisation continues to function even to this day. It consists not only of politicians but also all those who on humanitarian grounds are against untouchability. To set an example, Gandhi brought a Harijan family to live in the Ashram. He adopted their daughter as his own. He also blessed all the marriages that were celebrated between Harijans and caste Hindus. Some of these marriages took place in his own Ashram. In 1932 he even endangered his life to see that the disabilities of the Harijans were removed while they remained in the Hindu fold. He opposed the award of the British Prime Minister giving them separate electorates. He knew that a vast majority of them did not want to abandon their religion in spite of the fact that they could have equality with other citizens by merely changing it. Then even the Hindus would not regard them as untouchables.

15.3 CASTE SYSTEM

The movement against the caste system in India is almost as old as caste itself. Buddhism and Jainism were reformist movements which were partly aimed against caste. The Bhakti movement of the middle-ages was mainly directed against the caste system. Sikhism was similarly opposed to caste. The various reformist movements in the second half of the Nineteenth Century like the Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Theosophical Society, etc. all believed in human brotherhood and the leveling up of Hindu society.

Gandhi separates what he considers to be the inessentials of the caste system from its essentials, rejects the former and declares the latter to be beneficial for society. He tackles the problem on three fronts: (i) untouchability and its attendant strictures, (ii) the thousands of endogamous or semi-endogamous groups called caste, and (iii) varna or the four-fold functional division of society. He regards untouchability as 'immoral' and therefore, in need of complete eradication, caste as unnecessary and undesirable.

Gandhi believed that there is no inseparable connection between untouchability and the caste system; untouchability can be eradicated without abolishing caste altogether. He argues in favour of the abolition of the multiplicity of castes and their reduction into the four varnas; the eradication of untouchability is not dependent even on this proposed simplification of the caste system, not to speak of its abolition altogether. Gandhi had asked for a message from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, for the inaugural number of Harijan. Ambedkar refused to send any message, and instead sent a statement for publication in the inaugural issue of the journal. Dr. Ambedkar observed untouchability as a by-product of the caste system, and it could be abolished only when the 'odious and vicious dogma' of caste was altogether abolished. Gandhi published this statement in the first issue of Harijan with the following comment:

"As to the burden of his message, the opinion he holds about the caste system is shared by many educated Hindus. I have not, however, been able to share that opinion. I do not believe that the caste system, even as distinguished from varnashrama, to be an 'odious and vicious dogma'. It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability, and if it is a by-product of the caste system it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body, or weeds of a crop. It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcaste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of the weeds' (Harijan, 11-2-1933).

Yet, since in practice the caste system represents a social hierarchy based on the idea of high and low, and since it is an unnecessary outgrowth of the four varnas which alone are fundamental and essential to the organisation of a society, he considers the multiplicity of castes to be undesirable and superfluous. "The division, however, into innumerable castes is an unwarranted liberty taken with the doctrine (of varnashrama). The four divisions are all-sufficing".

15.4 COMMUNAL PROBLEMS

Gandhi was a protagonist of the concept of common good of all the inhabitants of India; he believed in the spiritual unity and equality of mankind and in Hindu-Muslim unity on moral grounds. He never made distinctions among people on racial, religious and caste

grounds. His Satyagraha in South Africa was launched to redeem the civic rights of the Indian community amongst whom the Muslims constituted a majority and controlled the larger share of wealth.

Gandhi supported the Khilafat movement because he deeply felt that it was initiated on the grounds of restoring justice and also because it offered “an opportunity of uniting Hindus and Muslims as would not arise in a hundred years”. In a letter to the Viceroy in 1920, he wrote: “I consider that, as a staunch Hindu wishing to live on terms of the closest friendship with my Mussalman countrymen, I should be an unworthy son of India if I did not stand by them in their hour of trial”.

In 1920, Gandhi had emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity as a precondition for Swaraj. He had said that Hindus and Muslims should unite on the issue of fighting for freedom. This unity would have hastened the process of the achievement of political independence and would have negated the cry for the partition of the country. Gandhi did not advocate Hindu-Muslim unity mainly for social and political reasons. In 1924, he undertook a twenty-one day fast for Hindu-Muslim unity and claimed that the fast was dictated by God and thus was the call of the highest duty. In the eyes of God, all men are equally his children and Gandhi was deeply anguished at the growing communal schism and tensions in the country.

The solution that Gandhi provided for the Hindu-Muslim problems was threefold. First, a sincere and devout understanding of the fundamental moral bases of the two religions was essential. He himself had studied Sale’s translation of the Koran in the early years of his stay in South Africa. He ‘learnt of the Prophet’s greatness and bravery and austere living’. He read Washington Irving’s *Life of Mahomet and his Successors*. From the chapter entitled ‘Comparative Study of Religions’ in his *Autobiography*, it is clear that Gandhi read Carlyle’s chapter on Muhammad’s practical instinct as reformer and his monotheism have been ‘a constant strength and support to him’. C. F. Andrews mentions that for Gandhi, Ali, Hassan and Hussain were representatives of the concept of ‘suffering injury without retaliation’ (Andrews, 1931, pp.163-64). Gandhi was encouraged to find that in moments of despair and confusion, Muhammad also fasted and prayed. He admired the patriarchal simplicity of the early Caliphs of Islam. In 1924 Gandhi wrote: “When the West was sunk in darkness a bright star rose in the eastern firmament and gave light and comfort to a groaning world. Islam is not a false religion. Let Hindus study it reverently, and they will love it even as I do”. He believed that communal struggles are rooted in an insufficient understanding of the tenets of the two religions and cultures. He stated that to say that “Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures” is a denial of God for “I believe with my whole soul that the God of the Quran is also the God of the Gita”. He accepted that all the religious scriptures of the world should be studied in a spirit of genuine humility. He disclaimed the use of religious scriptures as armoury for pugnacious disquisitions and sectarian animosities. He preached, instead, a process of “heart-unity”. Gandhi opined, in the Koran, non-violence is sanctioned as a duty while violence is permitted only as a matter of necessity.

The second basic point in Gandhi’s approach to the communal problem was that he pleaded for generosity on the part of the majority community. He did not subscribe to the mathematics of the exact allocation of seats and shares in strict proportion to the numbers of the two communities. Instead, he wanted an attitude of generosity to be cultivated. He felt that being in a majority did impose some obligations and the majority community had to inspire the minorities with confidence in their bona fides. They had to

adopt even an attitude of self-sacrifice. He was not tired of eulogising the self-sacrificing martyrdom of Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi in April 1931, at Kanpur, in the cause of settling Hindu-Muslim tensions and riots.

The third point in Gandhi's philosophy of communal harmony is the pursuit of the Constructive Programme by both the communities. Such a common social and economic action was bound to generate in their hearts an enhanced regard for independence. The Constructive Programme was bound to bring together the masses and the classes, and foster unity of hearts based on mutual interest. It was clear that the common pursuit of the Constructive Programme as a method of Hindu-Muslim unity would generate a process of the growth of heart unity. For the promotion of lasting unity what was needed was not a promulgation of a decree by the foreign government but the pursuit of the obligations of a common citizenship as implied in the Constructive Programme.

Gandhi had regarded Hindu-Muslim unity as a matter of pre-eminent national importance. He was never tired of repeating that they were blood brothers born of the same sacred soil of Hindustan and nourished by the same water. Regarding each other as natural enemies was the denial of the central divinity lodged in the heart of all living beings. The advent of British imperialism wedded to the cult of 'divide and rule' and driven the wedge of acrimony and suspicion among them. He believed that during Muslim rule, Hindus and Muslims lived more in peace than under British rule. Their unity could convey the gospel of reconciliation to the world.

15.5 DIGNITY OF WOMANHOOD

Gandhi worked for the restoration of the status of India's womanhood which had deteriorated appallingly in a degenerating society. Gross violations of the dignity of a woman veiled under customs and traditions, violated woman's equal rights with man. Gandhi succeeded in lifting, to some extent, the degrading burden placed unjustly on the Indian woman. Gandhi revolted against the subordination of women: 'By sheer force of vicious custom even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have.'

Illiteracy is no justification for the denial of their 'equal and natural rights' as human beings. He pointed an accusing finger at 'the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected' in being, for instance, incapacitated to inherit anything. 'The root of the evil lies much deeper than most people realise. It lies in man's greed of power and fame, and deeper still in mutual lust . . . 'She should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man' (Young India, 17-10-1929).

15.5.1 Ill-treatment of Women

What came in for real scathing remarks from him was the positive ill treatment of women. 'We know by painful experience of what is daily happening in India, that there are husbands enough who regard their wives as their property like their cattle or household furniture, and therefore think they have the right to beat them as they would their cattle.' 'More often than not the woman's time is taken up, not by the performance of essential domestic duties, but catering for the egoistic pleasures of her lord and master... To me this slavery of woman is a symbol of our barbarism... It is high time that our womankind was freed from this incubus.' 'Excessive subordination of the wife to the husband... This has resulted in the husband sometimes usurping and exercising authority that reduces him to the level of the beast' (Harijan, 5-6-1940).

15.5.2 Child Marriage

Gandhi lashed mercilessly against some evil customs in Indian society, such as child marriage etc. 'It is irreligion not religion to give religious sanction to a brutal custom' he said of the evils of child marriage. He even defied the Hindu scriptures when they gave sanction to it. The health of the race, the morality of the children involved and so many other reason, he said, would induce us to hold it as 'sinful' to give children in marriage. He spoke against it by drawing on his own experience and also on the appalling statistics he had before him of its consequent evils. He spoke against forced marriages and forced widowhood, especially of teenage widowhood. He was all for 'voluntary widowhood . . . which adds grace and dignity to life, sanctifies the home and uplifts religion itself.' But he could not bear the 'enormity of the wrong done to the Hindu girl widows...Widowhood imposed by the religion or custom is an unbearable yoke, and defiles the home by secret vice and degrades religion', especially when widowhood is so common in child marriages. Besides it makes one 'lose sight of elementary justice'.

15.5.3 Dowry and Purdah System

The system of dowry, for Gandhi, 'was nothing but the sale of girls'. Speaking of the evils of dowry, for instance disposing of young children to old men by needy parents, accused the community of committing 'a double sin'. 'Any young man who makes dowry a condition for marriage discredits his education and his country and dishonours womanhood.'

He waged war also on the system of purdah. Refuting the charge that it was meant to protect the chastity of women, he said: 'Chastity is not a hothouse growth. It cannot be super imposed. It cannot be protected by the surrounding wall of the purdah. It must grow from within, and to be worth anything it must be capable of withstanding every unsought temptation. It must be as defiant as Sita's. It must be a very poor thing that cannot stand the gaze of men. Men, to be men, must be able to trust their womenfolk even as the latter are compelled to trust them'. In 1927 he spoke against the purdah saying: 'It pained and humiliated me deeply. I thought of the wrong done by men to the women of India, by clinging to a barbarous custom which, whatever use it might have had when it was first introduced, had now become totally useless and was doing incalculable harm to the country' (Young India, 3-2-1927).

15.5.4 Other Evils

There are many other fields in which Gandhi tried to uphold the dignity of the woman. Thus for example he continually railed against obscene literature which had reached 'an altogether wrong apotheosis' of women, thus degrading their nature. He did his best to counteract the practice of prostitution which he called 'a life of shame', a life of 'debasement indulgence', against which 'curse' he hoped 'humanity will rise. So too, he pitted himself against the protagonists of contraceptives who asked the Indian woman to violate 'the sacredness of her body'.

Behind all his holy zeal there lay the implicit conviction that women are as much human as, men and hence they must enjoy perfect equality of rights pertaining to human nature as such. He said: 'I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. He emphasised the point repeatedly 'She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of activity of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he.'

'Man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being complementary to one another.....' Of course he admitted the 'point of bifurcation' in them. Thus he said: 'Whilst both are fundamentally one, it is also equally true that in the form there is a vital difference between the two. Hence the vocation of the two must be also different.' The woman by vocation is destined to rear children. And it would be wrong to forsake that work altogether for another. Gandhi felt that 'she is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his' and is unjust in denying her that right.

Gandhi did succeed in bringing back honour to India's womanhood. He asked them to 'forget that they belong to the weaker sex'; he convinced them that 'the economic and moral salvation of India' rested mainly on them. 'The future of India lies on your knees, for you will nurture the future generation.' He drew away thousands of them into his political campaign; scores of hundreds answered his call to the satyagraha and swadeshi drive; they lived up to his definition of woman – 'embodiment of sacrifice and suffering' by giving their all to fight for truth with him. The fearlessness they displayed and their capacity to 'work wonders on behalf of the motherland', rebounded in getting back the honour and dignity that had increasingly been denied to them in modern Indian society.

15.6 SOCIAL EQUALITY

Gandhi was driven by the basic conviction that no man can claim superiority just by his birth. It is the equality of the human rights derived from one common Father whom, we have in God that postulates a social equality among men. And due to his persuasion, he threw himself headlong into the struggle for social justice. This struggle was specially seen in his efforts to reinstate the Indian woman in her rightful position, and to purge the scourge of untouchability from India's soil.

Gandhi was too much of a realist to rule out every difference in social status. He admitted some inequalities in property and opportunities and saw the necessity of a social hierarchy. 'We own no master but Daridranarayana, and if for the time being we own human superiors, we do so voluntarily well knowing that no organisation can be carried on without discipline. Discipline presupposes an organising head. He is only the first among equals. He is there on sufferance. But whilst he is there, he is entitled to the whole hearted allegiance and uncompromising obedience of all the fellow servants' (Harijan, 22-6-1935). Though this was said in connection with some 'humanitarian services' there is no doubt that it well expresses the social aspect of his philosophy.

Coming to the positive meaning of his social equality he says, 'I do not believe that all class distinctions can be obliterated. I believe in the doctrine of equality as taught by Lord Krishna in the Gita. The Gita teaches us that the members of all the four castes should be treated on an equal basis. It does not prescribe the same *dharma* for the brahmin as for the bhangi. But it insists that the latter should be entitled to the same measure of consideration and esteem as the former with all his superior learning.' This equality derives from 'God, who is the creator of all.' 'All are one in the eyes of God', and so He, 'the Father in heaven will deal with us all with even handed justice'. Therefore, 'there cannot be greater ignorance than this; birth and observance of forms cannot determine one's superiority or inferiority. Character is the only determining factor. God did not create men with the badge of superiority or inferiority, and no scripture which labels a human being as inferior or untouchable, because of his or her birth, can command our allegiance. It

is a denial of God and of Truth which is God' (ibid, 31-8-1934). Gandhi held that man's essential dignity, which he has in common with all men, derives neither from his birth nor his occupation but from his very human nature, which thus entitles him to all basic human rights and to an indiscriminating justice.

15.7 PROHIBITION

Gandhi was a tireless campaigner against alcohol and an open advocate of prohibition as a national policy. He considered the consumption of alcohol as a social evil, on par with the reprehensible practice of untouchability, and totally inimical to the pursuit of nonviolence. Gandhi's public opposition to consumption of alcohol dated back to his days in South Africa when it was reported that 'one of the reasons for disfranchisement of Indians in South Africa was because they either supplied liquor to the natives or consumed it in very large quantities themselves'. Writing in the *Vegetarian*, 21 February 1891, Gandhi said: "Alcohol is one of the most greatly-felt evils of the British Rule an enemy of mankind and a curse of civilization. The poor, as everywhere, are the greatest sufferers. It is they who spend what little they earn in buying alcohol instead of buying good food and other necessaries. It is that wretched poor man who has to starve his family, who has to break the sacred trust of looking after his children, if any, in order to drink himself into misery and premature death" (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1, pp.29-30).

The use of alcoholic drinks is habit-forming and there is always the possible danger of excess. It is more so among the poor whose power of resistance to a bad habit is the lowest. Also, they can ill-afford to indulge in this expensive habit. They generally waste in drink their earnings, which could be profitably used for raising the standard of living of their families and promoting the welfare of their children. Often the labourer as soon as he gets his wage visits the grog shop before he goes home. The consequence is that the family lives in chronic poverty and indebtedness. Thus the innocent are made to suffer for the guilty. In the case of most people, especially the poor, intoxicating drinks impair their intelligence which distinguishes man from the animal. It also deadens one's moral sensitivity. Gandhi says: "Having identified myself with labour, I know what ruin drink has brought to the homes of labourers given to drink. I know that they will not touch liquor if it was not within their reach. We have contemporaneous evidence that drinkers themselves are in many cases asking for prohibition".

15.8 SUMMARY

As a matter of fact, the social reforms were meant to revolutionise the nation's outlook in all the spheres of social life, social in its most comprehensive sense. His was a comprehensive revolution as it was based upon the revaluation of our basic values. He wanted to train and discipline the nation. Each item of the social reforms is designed to have a worth and value by and in itself apart from its use as training for freedom fight. It strengthened the nation by eliminating from its life some of the drawbacks in its character which, Gandhi held, were largely responsible for the slavery.

15.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Gandhi's approach to social reforms.
2. "A reformed India would be a free India". Analyse in terms of Gandhian perspective.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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