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Mahatma Gandhi's Evaluation of the Caste System as an Element of the National Independence Movement in India

By

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Introduction

Castes still determine the social reality of India in many fields and affect politics more and more by functioning as vote banks which are decisive in elections. Thus it is small wonder that there is an ongoing discussion about this social phenomenon. The controversies in the course of this discussion not only relate to academic theories concerning the origin, the evolution and the mode of operation of the caste system but also determine the discussion about reform models for the Indian society. Such models either strive for the complete abolition of the caste system or at least call for a comprehensive reform of it. Especially the Dalit movement blames the caste system for the oppression and discrimination of the Dalits in society and tries to withdraw them from this system.[1] Yet the Dalit movement does not develop any alternative social draft. The Hindutva movement makes a strong effort to establish a modern (Hindu) nation which is only possible by overcoming the caste system that totally divides the society. Thus Hindutva is against the caste system though the antagonists of this movement usually maintain the contrary.[2] Swami Vivekananda holds that the only way to overcome the caste system is the Brahmanization of the whole society. For this he gives a religious explanation as he announces the end of the *Kali-Yuga*.[3] The Hare Krishna movement wants to turn away from a hereditary

caste system towards a system where every individual is classified according to his skills and performance. Such a system should be based on Vedic traditions and especially on the fourfold varna system which is described in the ancient Rigveda.[4]
Gandhi's social draft and above all its attitude towards the caste system are often part of the current discussion but the interpretations differ according to the interpreter's ideological direction. Thus some charge Gandhi with having defended the caste system unconditionally, while others consider him a sharp critic of the system. This large spectrum is hardly surprising, since Gandhi's comments are very reserved and can only become understandable by a comparative analysis of different statements on the caste system made by him during his political career. This article intends to provide such an analysis without neglecting the historical context which is vital to make Gandhi's ideas clear.

Historical context

The cumbersome fight for national independence in India in the first half of the 20th century was afflicted with the extreme fragmentation of the Indian society according to caste, class and religion. All these different groups were guided by very different interests. Therefore Gandhi and the Congress party tried to surmount these contrasts by referring to an all-Indian cultural tradition. In this attempt they were able to draw on a fresh sense of self-confidence and a new awakening of national identity among the people of India which arose from the discovery by contemporary researchers of an ancient and very advanced civilization in India.[5] One of Gandhi's pivotal ideas was to present Hinduism or Hindu culture as an integral component of this cultural tradition, since this tradition was not linked with a single religion. Thus Gandhi hoped at least to give rise to loyalty towards Hinduism among the Non-Hindus.[6] The Hindu culture seemed to fit perfectly as an emancipatory element in the independence fight, since the strong criticism of the colonial power towards Hindu institutions made a clear delimitation possible. Moreover, the ancient Hindu scriptures achieved widespread circulation during this time. Advanced communication systems and modern education helped in this respect and ended the monopoly of the Brahmins to impart religious teachings. Gandhi and the Congress party made an attempt to support these cultural traditions, which were already embodied in the consciousness of the society. For this purpose the traditional Indian way of life was strongly idealized in order to meet with the feeling of inferiority towards the Britons, who were very successful in political and economic affairs.[7] For the current investigation it is important to note that one part of this concept consisted in promoting the 'varnashrama' as the traditional model of society in contrast to a completely westernized form of society. This was particularly promising, since the terminology of this system was well known among the people of India. The reason for this popularity can be traced back to the use of the varna model in the census reports by the Britons who consulted Brahmanical scholars

for their administration.[8] Yet the extreme fragmentation in hereditary jatis and the strict hierarchy of the Indian society, including the discrimination of the untouchables, did not prove useful for a concerted independence fight. Only by keeping this situation in mind can Gandhi's attitude towards the caste system become understandable.

Gandhi's representation of the caste system

The discrepancy between the 'varnashrama' as a system of four estates, which provides the basic religious legitimization for the caste system, and the social reality characterized by an extremely complex jati structure already proved to be a serious problem for the Hindu Shastra literature. In these texts an (unhistorical) attempt was made to explain the emergence of the jatis by illicit mixed marriages of people belonging to different varnas which led to the formation of new groups. Though Gandhi did not refer to this explanation of the development of Indian society into its present state, he held that the social order described in the ancient texts, which he called 'varnashrama dharma', indeed represented the starting point for the existing jati structure. In his terminology Gandhi only made an inaccurate distinction between the terms 'varnashrama dharma' and caste system. However, there is a tendency to describe the current situation of the society as caste system, while he used the word 'varnashrama dharma' for an ideal original society which will be described below.

According to Gandhi, ancient Indian society consisted of a fourfold varna order which was based on hereditary professions: "Varnas are four to mark four universal occupations,- imparting knowledge, defending the defenceless, carrying on agriculture and commerce, and performing services through physical labour."[9] Gandhi regarded these occupations as fundamental for all mankind. A varna order is necessary, since every human being is born with specific talents and deficits which limit his qualification to only one of the four fields. Thus a varna order prevents unnecessary competition: "From the economic point of view, its value was once very great. It ensured hereditary skill; it limited competition."[10] The disclosure of the existence of different talents as a kind of natural law as well as the development of a social order which took this natural law into account is a merit of Hinduism: "Gravitation affects us all, whether one knows its existence or not. (...) Even so has Hinduism startled the world by its discovery and application of the law of varna."[11] Yet the membership to a specific varna cannot be influenced by the individual but is determined by birth:

"Varnashrama dharma defines man's mission on this earth. He is not born day after day to explore avenues for amassing riches and to explore different means of livelihood; on the contrary, man is born in order that he may utilize every atom of his energy for the purpose of knowing his Maker. It restricts him, therefore, for the purpose of holding body and soul together, to the occupation of his forefathers."[12]

Here it becomes clear that Gandhi’s argumentation is based on the assumption that the existence of different talents understood as a natural law is not due to individually acquired qualification, but to heredity. That means that Gandhi clearly represented the idea of a caste system determined by birth.

However, according to Gandhi, the initial concept of 'varnashrama dharma' was influenced by two negative factors in the course of history. The first was the dissection of the varna order into innumerable castes and the resulting restrictions arising from endogamy and commensuality. "When Hindus were seized with inertia, abuse of varna resulted in innumerable castes, with unnecessary and harmful restrictions as to inter-marriage and inter-dining."[13] Gandhi did not consider such restrictions as essential for the varna order, since they were not part of the original varna idea, but he tried to find reasons for their origin: "These restrictions may be necessary in the interest of chastity and hygiene."[14] This obviously shows that purity had no ritual connotation for Gandhi but is understood in the sense of physical hygiene and chastity. Gandhi wanted to leave the decision on the realization of inter-marriage and inter-dining to the individual: "Though there is in varnashrama no prohibition against inter-marriage and inter-dining, there can be no compulsion. It must be left to the unfettered choice of the individual as to where he or she will marry or dine."[15]

The second factor indicating the decline of the varna order was the evolution of a strict hierarchy among the varna groups which was not a component of the initial conception either: "Whilst recognizing limitations, the law of varna admitted of no distinctions of high and low; (...)."[16] Gandhi completely rejected this hierarchy because it was responsible for the evolution of untouchability: "Untouchability is the product, therefore, not of the caste system [Here in the sense of 'varnashrama dharma', the author], but of the distinction of high and low that has crept into Hinduism and is corroding it."[17] This statement is of primary importance for Gandhi’s argumentation, since with this he rejected the responsibility of Hinduism for untouchability. The abolition of untouchability was a central goal of Gandhi’s politics, since he considered it as an insult of humanity: "In battling against untouchability and in dedicating myself to that battle, I have no less an ambition than to see a complete regeneration of humanity."[18] In his writings and speeches he emphasized his personal zeal in this respect: "There were two occasions in our joint life when there was a choice between working for the untouchables and remaining with my wife and I would have preferred the first."[19] Gandhi even saw the future of Hinduism threatened by untouchability: "If untouchability lives, Hinduism must die."[20] "I would rather that Hinduism died than that untouchability lived."[21] But Gandhi was also afraid that this fight would prove to be very difficult: "It may be a mere dream, as unreal as the silver in the sea-shell."[22]

Although Gandhi recognized that the caste system has crept into Non-Hindu communities as well [23], he found Hinduism the only religion where 'varnashrama' was an integral and necessary component. Thus, according to Gandhi, the future of Hinduism depends on the reform of the caste system: "The moment

untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified, that is to say, according to my dream, it will resolve itself into the true Varnadharma, the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each as necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other."[24]

In conclusion, Gandhi's strategy is composed of a firm refusal of any jati structure and hierarchy within society whereas he pleads for an egalitarian varna order which is determined by birth and organized according to professions. Gandhi regarded this order as the original condition of Indian society. To recapture such an order it is essential to overcome the social hierarchy and the concept of untouchability connected with this, whilst the observance of the regulation of endogamy and commensuality as a kind of hygienic protection should be left to individual choice.

However, regarding the historical accounts Gandhi's representation of caste system is not very conclusive. There are historical investigations [25] which show that the 'varnashrama' as a system of four estates did roughly correspond to the social conditions at the time of Rigveda but that there is neither any indication of an implementation of this system by a religious authority nor of an original equality among these estates without hierarchy, endogamy and commensuality. Moreover, by exposing striking contradictions between different texts of the Shastra literature it could be demonstrated [26] that all the stories in the Hindu scriptures dealing with the evolution from a fourfold social order to a complex jati structure by inter-marriage are only legends to provide a link between the religious theory and the actual social situation.

Final remarks

Gandhi's evaluation of the caste system very clearly reveals its dependence on a specific historical context. Gandhi was convinced that the independence of India was only attainable by differentiating the Indian society from western forms. Therefore he had to propagate traditional values while avoiding strengthening the fragmentation and hierarchy of the society. For this reason Gandhi did not attack the basic principles of the existing social order but tried to present them as a great discovery to all mankind. However, comprehensive reforms should help to reconstruct the original outlook of this society without fragmentation and strict hierarchy. The clearest expression of this will to reform the society was Gandhi's committed fight against untouchability.

But this point of view represented by Gandhi and the Congress party was not accepted by others and led to a serious conflict between Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Ambedkar laid particular stress on the necessity of social reforms in favour of the "Depressed Classes" which he continued to designate as untouchables in order to point to their ongoing discrimination in society. The independence of India did not appear to him very useful to bring about these social reforms, since he saw a tendency within the independence movement to preserve

the caste order.[27] Moreover, Ambedkar thought that the situation of the untouchables could only be improved by removing them from the existing society. Out of these considerations Ambedkar claimed a separate electorate for the "Depressed Classes". He discussed his demand with Gandhi during the "Round Table Conference" in London in 1931 for the first time. Ambedkar proposed that the representatives of the "Depressed Classes" should be exclusively elected by the members of this group. After the "Communal Award" of 1932 had taken up Ambedkar’s demand, Gandhi began a fast until death until the revocation of the separate electorate for the then called "Scheduled Castes". After that a compromise was found and laid down in the "Poona Act" which guaranteed the Scheduled Castes a distinct quota of seats in all political assemblies proportional to their numerical strength in society. This arrangement was confirmed by the "Government of India Act" in 1935 and the basic principles were finally incorporated in the Constitution of independent India and therefore it is a legal force till today.

Notes:

1] The Dalit movement energetically stresses such demands by publishing numerous magazines like the 'Dalit International Newsletter' or the 'Dalit Voice'.
2] For more details, see E. Weber: Ambedkars Neo-Buddhismus und seine Beziehung zum Hindu-Dharma. In: Journal of Religious Culture No. 18 (1998), especially note 28.
3] For instance, see Swami Vivekananda: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta 1964, Vol. III, pp. 293-300.
4] See A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada: Varnasrama dharma (Die ideale Gesellschaft), o.O. 1975.
5] Interestingly enough, these investigations were initiated by archaeologists, numismatists and epigraphists during the 19th century who themselves came from western societies, see A. L. Basham: The Wonder That Was India, New York 1959, pp. 4-8.
6] However, this attempt failed completely and found its tragic climax in the partition of India in 1947.
7] See M. N. Srinivas: Social Change in Modern India, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1966, pp. 79/80.
8] The problem of whether the British way of dealing with the caste system by recording the jatis had changed the system and whether the varna theory had been of any importance in the local context before could not yet be clarified to satisfaction. However, for an important contribution to this discussion, see B. S. Cohn: The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia. In: B. S. Cohn: An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays, Delhi, Oxford, New York 1987, pp. 224-254.
9] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 4.6.1931, p. 129.
10] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 5.1.1921, p. 2.
11] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 4.6.1931, p. 129.
12] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 27.10.1927, p. 357.
13] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 4.6.1931, p. 129.
14] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 4.6.1931, p. 129.
15] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 16.11.1935, p. 316.
16] M. Gandhi. In: The Modern Review, Oct. 1935, p. 413.
17] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 11.2.1933, p. 3.
18] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 25.3.1933, p. 3.

19] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 5.11.1931, p. 341.
20] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 28.9.1947, p. 349.
21] M. Gandhi. In: Young India, 26.11.1931, p. 372.
22] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 25.3.1933, p. 3.
23] Thus Gandhi notes in one article: "Caste distinctions have taken such deep root amongst us that they also infected the Muslims, Christians and followers of other religions in India." M. Gandhi. In: The Hindu, 19.9.1945.
24] M. Gandhi. In: Harijan, 11.2.1933, p. 3.
25] For instance, see W. Rau: Staat und Gesellschaft im alten Indien, Wiesbaden 1957.
26] For instance, see S. N. Srivastava: Harijans in Indian Society, Aminabad 1980.
27] Other political groups shared this opinion. Thus the "Justice Party" which was a quite important political force in the second decade of the 20th century was afraid of a brahmanical oligarchy in the case of independence. See M. N. Srinivas: Social Change in Modern India, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1966, pp. 107-110.