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BASAVESHWARA AND MAHATMA GANDHI: THOUGHTS ON EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

This study is a comparative study. It throws light on the problems of caste, sex and untouchability and ideology of Basaveshwara and Mahatama Gandhi to eradicate them. However, in the course of study the other aspects of their ideologies are also covered.

KEYWORDS

basaveshwara, mahatma gandhi, thoughts on equality.

INTRODUCTION

he concept of Equality has both positive and negative phases. In Greek philosophy, we encounter two different traditions on the question of equality. Plato and Aristotle supported inequality. Plato visualized a society in which equally meritorious children are provided equal chance. Aristotle distinguished equal cases on the basis of Virtue. But Pericles, Sophists, Antiphons and Stoics were of the opinion that all men were equal according to law of nature. It was reiterated by the schoolmen of the Church who advocated the principle of the "Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man". Equality should not be used as a negative factor in the progress of human society. We compared to the class, sex, creed discrimination as a basis of inequality in the west, the causes for the exploitation of the Dalits in the Indian sub-continent were totally different and peculiar. The practice of Chaturvarna, i.e. the concept of dividing society into four Varnas, created the most inhuman practice of untouchability for centuries. The people belonging to the last rung of Indian hierarchical caste-ridden society were considered as untouchables and were treated like animals. This evil practice of untouchability and exploitation of the downtrodden were considered as a done thing in Indian society. Although a number of attempts were made by social reformers to eradicate untouchability. Basavanna and his fellow beings Shivasharans were try to the eradication of inequality in the society. It appears from their Vachans(lyrics), the practice of Kayaka(work), Dasoha(inter-dining) and Anubhava mantapa (spiritual deliberative body). Under the leadership of Basavanna, the Shivasharanas were fought against the practice of untouchability. He advocated social justice and elevated the status of both men and women irrespective of birth, caste, creed, religion and occupation. Ultimately, Basavanna was a champion of the advocated Human Rights in the world. Gandhi is a father of the nation. He fought not only for the external independence but also internal independence of India. He is a religious person. He re-advocated the principles of Truth and Non-violence and adopting the great technique of Satyagrha to fight against all the ills and evils and try to eradicate the untouchability, exploitation, slavery, child marriage, caste, religion, sex and racial discrimination in Indian society. Discrimination against any class or caste leads to disappointment and resentment among them. Equality is an essential prerequisite for the survival of mankind. Therefore, there is essence of the sovereign state to enact the laws and declared the rights in order to maintain law and order, to constituted equality and freedom to protect one and all from all sort of exploitation and to regulate the ills and evils activities in society and nurturing humanity in the mind and soul of the people.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

In this age of degradation of human values, a study of humanism, especially exploitation of the downtrodden and the working class by the dominant class and caste is an urgent need. Therefore, in the light of the evils of discrimination on the basis of class, caste, colour and sex, the present society needs to be thoroughly revised and revitalized. We have been witnessing many crimes and atrocities committed in the name of caste, class and colour. Such crimes and atrocities have plunged the entire society into social choas threatening the very basis of political stability and economic justice. In the context of such challenges and conditions, the study of great emancipators like Basavanna and Gandhi is all the more important and relevant. It might serve as the beacon to new generation born with prejudice. It also traces the development of thoughts regarding discrimination and aspects.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study, entitled "BASAVESHWARA AND MAHATMA GANDHI: THOUGHTS ON EQUALITY", is comparative in nature. It throws light on the problems of caste, sex and untouchability and attempts to eradicate them. However, in the course of study the other aspects of their ideologies are incidentally covered.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present topic has been taken for research with an intention to develop a critical and comparative approach on two great thinkers namely Basavanna and Gandhi.

- 1. The first objective is to subject the hypotheses to the test in the crucible of human reasoning and scientific theory. Normally the hypotheses are formulated in the light of a layman's beliefs and emotional complexities of the persons emotionally involved with the thinkers. The hypotheses, which need to be tested, may be enumerated as follows:
 - Basavanna and Gandhi tried to equate *Chaturvarna* system with *Sudras* or untouchables of two different periods of India. No doubt the *Chaturvarna* system divides the society in more than one unequal division. But from the point-view of law, inheritance and internal mobility the class system seems to be more flexible than caste system of India. Whereas a number of proletariat could become members of the bourgeoisie in course of time was beyond human imagination in respect of *Chaturvarna System*. These subtle differences between class system and caste system treated by Basavanna and Gandhi as equivalent phenomena need to be tested.
- 2. This research work is examining the view of Basavanna and Gandhi with special reference to equality in thought and practice. Both have laid greater emphasis on discrimination as an essential feature of caste system. It aims at examining the degree and form of discrimination in the caste-ridden society as that of India.
- 3. The present research also aims at examining the relevance of their thoughts on equality in the present context. It is significant to note that the problem of discrimination in the form of untouchability in India is being eliminated through democratic and constitutional measures. This leads us to view the thoughts of Basavanna and Gandhi in the context of Medieval and Modern India. It is to be noted that emotionally modern India is not rid of untouchability. The similarities in the approach of Basavanna and Gandhi need to be examined in the background of different socio-cultural situations.
- 4. The study intends to find out the relationship between society and social justice followed by economic political aspect. At the same time, the study probes to trace out direct link between the great humanists and their great concern for social, economic and political changes of society.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

Since time immemorial, human beings have been victims of discrimination, exploitation, injustice, inequality and what not. Man is in dire need of values like justice, welfare, compassion, liberty, equality and fraternity. Such a need has been felt and realized through the birth of great human souls like Basavanna and Gandhi.

They spread the message of humanism accompanied by rationalism to put an end to the evil practice of exploitation or discrimination. The two great men were born with a mission to accomplish human welfare. They were predominantly great emancipators to do something concrete to humanity at large.

Abolition of untouchability through *Kayaka*, *Dasoha* and Truth and Non-violent movements in India may be cited as the best examples of the triumph of the exploited against the exploiting forces of the world.

A close perusal of the social, economic and political events which were globally prevalent during the 19th century, clearly indicate the trust in the movements on the class and caste struggles, the emancipation of the downtrodden, liberation of the exploited masses, attainment of people's freedom by several nations and the triumph of socialism, communism and humanism.

Although, the means adopted by Basavanna and Gandhi to eradicate the problem of exploitation were different, the ultimate goal of both the revolutionaries was same. Hence this comparative study.

METHODOLOGY

Since the research method is explanatory, it tries to explain the correlation between the concern of these two selfless souls in establishing a casteless and classless society. A large historical or library approach has been adopted hereby. Here the method largely depends upon the secondary sources like the works on both Basavanna and Gandhi by other scholars. At the same time the primary sources, i.e. the original works of Basavanna and Gandhi, in term of their speeches and writings have been consulted.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

We, as human beings, belong to the same species called "Homosapiens". Generally speaking, we have by nature, the same attributes but compatibility is a must for a congenial ambience and this indispensable quality is the soul of any society. It lies in the fact that humans possess the common traits to the members of that species. Their inequality lies in their individual differences. As an introductory note, let us fathom the depths of the denotations and connotations of the term "Social Equality".

It is a social state in which all people in a particular society or an isolated group have the same status irrespective of their religion, caste, creed or faith. Basically social equality includes equal rights under the law, such as security, voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, and the extent of proerty rights. However, it also includes accessibility to education, healthcare and other social requisites. Certain mental make up is also needed for equality. In a nutshell, the presence of equal opportunities and obligations is indeed significant. And for this sole reason the existence of a society is unimaginable. The term 'society' demands certain equalities and every human being is naturally given opportunities to be groomed so that he could keep himself with the requisite social norms.

Equality is a levelling process. The ideal of equality emphasises that men are politically equal, that all citizens are equally entitled to take part in political life, to exercise the franchise, to run and hold office. It is insisted that individuals should be treated equal before law, that when the general law confers rights or imposes duties, rights and duties shall extend to all; or conversely that they shall not confer special privilege on particular individuals or groups. Undoubtedly, it implies fundamentally a levelling process.

The concept of Equality has both positive and negative phases. The concept of equality implies that all human beings should be treated equally in respect of certain fundamental traits common to all like human nature, human worth and dignity, human personality and the like. Such equality has a 'positive value'. If equality is subscribed to by those who belong to the privileged section of the community and, for this reason, they seek to maintain the 'status quo' for the sake of their vested interests such a connotation has 'negative value' and it serves as a stumbling block causing retarded growth of humanity. Equality should not be used as a negative factor in the progress of human society.

In *Greek philosophy*, we encounter two different traditions on the question of equality. *Plato* and *Aristotle* supported inequality. *Plato* visualized a society in which equally meritorious children are provided equal chance. *Aristotle* distinguished equal cases on the basis of *Virtue*. *Pericles*, *Sophists*, *Antiphons* and *Stoics* were of the opinion that all men were equal according to law of nature. It was reiterated by the schoolmen of the Church who advocated the principle of the "Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man". But however the concept of equality has been assuming more and more negative value as the age has been advancing. In this sense, it may be taken to mean the denial of natural rights to helpless, innocent, ignorant and weaker sections of the society. Every society, be it civilized or uncivilized, cultured or uncultured or otherwise, is divided into stronger and weaker sections. Taking this aspect into consideration, the minority tends to dominate over the majority group. The minority always dominates over the majority because minority is united and has a greater sense of solidarity, whereas the majority is always divided and lacks solidarity and stability to sustain its unity. Consequently, the minority is always in a position to exploit the majority.

Several other factors contribute to the prevalence of social inequality or exploitation. Ancient Indian history provides us constant inequality in the "Chaturvarna System". According to the Chaturvarna doctrine, the Hindu society was divided into four main Varnas, namely, the 'Brahmins', the 'Kashtriyas', and the 'Shudras'. The Varna system which was prevalent during the Vedic period was mainly based on the division of labourand occupation. The caste system owes its origin to the Varna system. The present caste system can be said to be the degenerated form of the original Varna system. Varnas which were four in number and castes which are found in hundreds and thousands are not one and the same.

The *Brahmins* occupied the top place in the social hierarchy. Their duty was to read and teach the Vedic Literature and perform various sacrifices for themselves and for others. The *Kshatriyas* were primarily concerned with administration of the country, especially defence. As political power was the most important power, the *Kshatriyas*, often asserted their superiority to the *Brahmins*. To the *Kshatriyas*, the door of learning was always open. The *Vaishyas* were connected with the economic life of the country. They were responsible for production of wealth. The *Vaishyas* toiled the land and reared cattle, besides engaging in trade and commerce. Sometimes, they even became kings and warriors. The *Sudras* belonged to the most suppressed class. They were required to live outside the town. They were denied all the living opportunities. Mixing with them was not permitted to the three upper castes as they were untouchables. This section of society became the most suppressed and their lot was the hardest. The touch or even the sight of the *Sudra* was considered as an act of pollution. The view of 'Medhatithi' was that the dead bodies of *Sudras*, *Vaisyas*, *Kshatriyas and Brahamanas* must be carried out of the city by the South, West, North and East gates respectively.

The *Sudras* were organized according to their profession such as farmers, artisans, potters, gardeners, carpenters, goldsmiths, tailors, shepherds, stone-cutters etc. They considered themselves belonging to a particular sub-caste according to their profession. Among the *Sudras*, the *Chandalas* were employed for the execution of criminals. They were required to wear the clothes of the dead and live outside the village. They were not to touch others. They were to wear distinctive signs while going about their business. They were totally ill-treated by all four *'Varnas'*.

The practice of slavery in ancient civilization of India is another example for exploitation of the weaker section by the aristocrats. It was a common phenomenon in those helpless weaker sections of the society and criminals captured were made slaves. Slaves were exchanged, sold and purchased as like as commodities in the open. The problem of slavery is one of the darkest spots on the human civilization.

In a predominantly agricultural economy, there has been a tendency of exploiting the serfs and the small holding farmers by Feudal Lords. Feudalism in the medieval times was the source of large scale exploitation of serfdom. Collection of heavy revenue, multiplicity of taxes, tributes and presentations were meant for suppression. As a result of this the small farmers were hardly left with their agricultural production even required for their meagre maintenance.

Inequality based on gender discrimination has been an equally significant factor leading to exploitation of the female form by dominant the male form. Women in society suffered from inferior status. Married women were required to be devoted, obedient and faithful to their husbands. The widow was expected to live a life of strict celibacy and self-restraint. The rite of sati was practised. It is universally accepted that women in India had been denied the rights and freedom of participation in society until recently. Women did not enjoy enfranchisement in India till 1952. The fact that Fundamental Rights and special rights referred to them in the Constitution are gaining momentum all over India. They stand as an eloquent testimony to the prevalence of women's exploitation by men.

Inequality in the name of religion is no less noteworthy. The Brahmins or the priestly class exploited the ignorant people by propagating blind customs and superstitions. There is no religion in world which is totally free from exploitation. The innocent and ignorant people totally surrender themselves to the priests without ever questioning the rationale of the religious practices and beliefs. Religion was used and a tool to exploit the socially deprived class and casteism and untouchability were the off-shoot of this.

The 12th century witnessed great movement for the eradication of discrimination. Shivasharanas under the dynamic leadership of Basavanna pronounced and practiced equality among the fellow beings without discrimination. It appears that their experiences and resolutions have come out in the form of Vachanas of Basavanna and other Shivasharanas. They fought against the practice of untouchability. They advocated social justice, elevated the status of occupation, work or 'kayaka', treated women equal to men and respected them stating that the soul in human body is neither male nor female. They firmly believed in democratic principles of freedom of expression of thought to all, and so on.

Basavanna was a great humanist and a multifaceted personality. He was a great social reformer and a champion of the oppressed. In the words of Arthur Miles: "Whatever legends may say, Basavanna was the first free thinker of the World". He preached and practised the concept of universal man saying that a human being should not be discriminated either on the basis of birth or profession. He should be judged on the basis of good conduct and performance. He treated all human beings as equal, emphasizing dignity of life to every human being irrespective of power or position, caste or creed and country or occupation (kayaka). It should be the endeavour of all reasonable human beings to lead a dignified life supporting the dignity of life of others.

Veerashaivism, as advocated and practised by Basavanna, is a way of life based on virtues and human values of universal application. Principles of Veerashaivism, if practised sincerely, would lead to peace, prosperity and happiness in society. This way of life is not confined to any particular caste, creed and religion. Hence, it is aptly said that 'Veerashaiva Dharma' (considere to be a way of life) is the "Vishwa Dharama" and the chief architect is Basavanna i.e. "Vishwa Manava". Through his Vachanas, Basavanna gave a new dimension to the movement against untouchability. Although his way of life was not put into practice during his life time, they are now practised being in the 21st century.

French Revolution with the basic concepts of *Liberty, Equality* and *Fraternity* gave a new pace and dimension to liberate the discriminated and exploited masses from the clutches of exploiters. During 18th and 19th centuries, one finds the building-up of a slow but steady flow of thoughts and actions to strengthen the doctrines of liberty, equality and fraternity. It must be emphasized that the afore-mentioned doctrines were mainly aiming at the upliftment of the oppressed sections. The declaration of American Independence and subsequent adoption of the Constitution with individual rights enshrined in it heralded a new era in the human civilization. The American Civil War in the mid 19th century highlighted the issues of the exploited class and mobilized the opinions of all civilized communities of the world against slavery which was a severe form of exploitation. The distinct feature of American slavery was that it was based on racial discrimination. The slaves in America were exclusively Black Negroes purchased and brought from South Africa during the colonial period. Coming to the feminist viewpoint, it ascertained all sorts of natural and constitutional rights for women. It has also gained momentum during the later half of 20th century. Similar movements for the improvement of factory system for the welfare of the workers, abolition of untouchability and rationalization of religion with an intention to eliminate exploitation in its various forms and facets have been continuing since the beginning of 20th century in different parts of world.

Gandhi, the father of our nation, fought not only for the independence of India but also for the cause of untouchability and the downtrodden. He was the man who took this fight to a humane conclusion. Being a religious person, he has taught us Truth, Non-violence, Peace, Sympathy and Renunciation. He was connected with the saintly tradition of India. He showed the true and right path to the people in very unfavourable circumstances.

Gandhi, a 'Karma Yogi' i.e. a practical man of action, believer in 'Sarvodaya', gave a practical shape to Non-violence and used these weapons in many of his movements like, 'Khadhi' Programme 'Swadeshi Movement', establishment of peaceful and heavenly society (Ramarajya/Gramarajya) uplifting of the villages through small scale and cottage industries. Being a social reformer, achiever and Savarniya himself, he made efforts to eliminate social ills and evils in India like untouchability, exploitation, slavery, child marriage, caste, religion, sex and racial discrimination. He dedicated his entire life to the service of the people of this country and brought the county out of the darkness of slavery, untouchability and all sorts of social discriminations.

Gandhi wanted to adopt certain principles and techniques like *Satyagraha*, Non-cooperation, civil disobedience, hunger strikes etc., for the achievement of self motivation, self-respect and self-confidence in all religions, and even among dalit people. He established socialism in order to achieve welfare of the people. He had great faith in internal peace and equality of all religions. He contributed many articles to the magazines such as *'Harijan'* and *'Young India''* and books like, *My Experiments with Truth, his autobiography, Economics of Khadi, Satyagraha, non-violent Society, Towards non-violent Society, Woman and Social Justice etc. He thus daringly challenged the religious validity and the precepts behind the caste system as its very <i>Sastric* root. It gave them faith to claim for all religions and dalits an equal social status and made them realize that they were no more destined to remain downtrodden. There is no such sphere of life in the 20th century and with the result the present society is, to a great extent, free from untouchability and socil discrimination. It's no exaggeration to say that Gandhi's influence is now seen now all over the world.

CONCLUSION

Equality is an essential prerequisite for the survival of mankind. Discrimination against any class or caste leads to disappointment and resentment among them. At the same time, there has been a natural instinct in each strong person or upper caste to dominate and exploit the weak person or of the lower caste. In case, a lower caste does not resist or react, the upper caste will increase the nature and degree of exploitation without any inhibition and limitation in this regard. This instinct and way of living of animals did influence human beings also. But with the advent of better social interactions, orderly social ethnic groups developed having dependency and intimacy. Subsequently certain basic norms were evolved and in order to maintain law and order in society, a system of polity was developed wherein certain rules were framed to be followed by everyone. Thus the concept of State as a sovereign body to implement these norms emerged. Hence the duty of the State was to protect one and all to regulate the activities. This concept of implementation of norms and regulations was mainly meant for protection of the weak and for the prevention of exploitation of natural rights.

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