

Personhood and Ideal Bhangi.

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Abstract.

Manual scavenging is the most inhuman work in modern world. India is the notorious hub of manual scavenging. Manual scavenging has been an integral part of caste system and it survives in modern independent India as a testimony to the continuation of caste occupations and their myriad forms of coercions and social controls. Mahatma Gandhi in one of his celebrated essays "The Ideal Bhangi", published in Harijan in 1936, sees manual scavenging and scavengers in totally different perspective. He glorifies the social productivity of manual scavenging and illustrates the social need for someone becoming and continuing the profession of scavenging passionately without expecting any reward other than self-satisfaction. In this article we are examining to what extent Gandhian concept of Ideal Bhangi is in conformity with the modern notions of liberal man with autonomy and choice in life decisions. Here we are critically analysing the extent of personhood in Ideal Bhangi.

Keywords:

Manual Scavenging, Ideal Bhangi, Personhood, Hermeneutics, Social Death.

Manual scavenging is one of the most inhuman occupations in the world. Unfortunately, India, the largest democracy in the world, is the biggest abode of manual scavengers. As per the census 2011, there are 1.8 lakh Indian households engage in manual scavenging for their daily survival. Maharashtra occupies one by third of manual scavenging population in India. Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura and Karnataka follow Maharashtra. As per the census there are about 63,713 manual scavengers in Maharashtra. Madhya Pradesh (23.093), Uttar Pradesh (17619), Tripura (17332), Karnataka (15375) and Punjab (11949) are the states in India having largest numbers of manual scavenging population [1]. Manual scavenging refers to the cleaning of others excreta without any protective measures. It, as a profession, has been an integral part of Indian culture, economy and legal system. Untouchable castes in our caste hierarchy traditionally engaged in this menial job which carries low wage and low social status extending to absolute social exclusion. Ancient Indian texts like Artha sastra and Manu Smruti give ample references of manual scavenging and manual scavengers.

Manual Scavenging is declared illegal and has been prohibited since 1993. In Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 [2], manual scavenging is defined as "Manual scavenger implies a person retained or hired, at the initiation of this Act or at any time hereafter, by a person or a local authorisation or an agency or a contractor, for manually sweeping, removing, disposing of, or otherwise working in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open duct or pit into which the human excreta from the unsanitary latrines disposed of, or railway trail or in such other places or premises, as the Central Government or a State Government may announce, before the excreta fully decompose in such way as may be prescribed, and the expression manual scavenging shall be interpreted accordingly." Manual scavenging is even today done by such castes which are noted in ancient texts indicates historical continuity of caste-based professions and structural inequalities associated with the caste system in India. Many people believed that transition of independent India to democracy and modernity would transform caste identities manual scavengers into class identities. Contemporary experiences of manual scavengers prove that such

optimism shared by people remained only as a distant dream. Manual scavengers in India are still forced to engage such inhuman works by direct and indirect ways of social controls which are aligned with caste hierarchy. In this article we are analysing the idea of ‘personhood’ of a manual scavenger imagined in Gandhian concept of ‘Ideal Bhangi’[3].

As we go through Gandhian literatures on manual scavenging in general and caste system in particular, we can see that Gandhi possessed contradictory views on caste system ranging from absolute rejection of caste system to romanticizing the virtues of caste system and its varna system. Gandhi writes in one of his articles ‘‘ The position that I really long for is that of the Bhangi. How sacred is this work of cleanliness! That work can be done only by a Brahmin or by a Bhangi. The Brahmin may do it in his wisdom, the Bhangi in ignorance. I respect, I adore, both of them. If either of the two disappears from Hinduism, Hinduism itself would disappear. And it is because seva-dharma (seva-service) is dear to my heart that the Bhangi is dear to me. I may even sit at my meals with a Bhangi on my side, but I do not ask you to align yourselves with them by inter-caste dinners and marriages’’[4]. In another article Gandhi argues that ‘‘ Does untouchability in the case of a cobbler or scavenger attach to birth or to occupation? If it attaches to birth, it is hideous and must be rooted out; if it attaches to occupation, it may be a sanitary rule of great importance. It is of universal application. A collier, whilst he is engaged in his work, is practically an untouchable. He, himself, refuses to shake the hand extended to him and says: ‘‘I am too dirty.’’ But his work finished, he takes his bath, changes his dress, and very properly mixes with the highest in the land. Immediately, therefore, we remove the taint of birth, i.e. the idea of superiority and inferiority attaching to birth, we purify Varnashrama. The scavenger’s children may remain scavengers without being or feeling degraded, and they will be no more considered untouchables than Brahmins. The fault does not, therefore, lie in recognizing the Law of Heredity and transmission of qualities from generation to generation, but it lies with the faulty conception of inequality.’’ He continues ‘‘ Varnashrama, in my opinion, was not conceived in any narrow spirit. On the contrary, it gave the labourer, the Shudra, the same status as the thinker, the Brahmin. It provided for the accentuation of merit and elimination of demerit, and it transferred human ambition from the general worldly sphere to the permanent and the spiritual. The aim of the Brahmin and the Shudra was common—Moksha, or self-realization—not realization of fame, riches and power. Later on, this lofty conception of Varnashrama became degraded and came to be identified with mere empty ceremonial and assumption of superiority by some and imposition of degradation upon others. This admission is not a demonstration of the weakness of Varnashrama but of human nature which, if it has a tendency under certain circumstances to rise to the highest point, has also a tendency under certain other circumstances to go down to the lowest. What the reformer seeks to do is to end the curse of untouchability and to restore Varnashrama to its proper place. Whether Varnashrama thus transmuted will survive the reform or not, remains to be seen. It will surely depend upon the new Brahmin class that is imperceptibly coming into being, namely, those who are dedicating themselves, body, soul and mind, to service of Hinduism and the country. If they have nothing of worldly ambition, it will be well with Hinduism; if they have, Hinduism, like any other ism, coming into the hands of ambitious men, will perish. But I have an immutable faith in the capacity of Hinduism to purge itself of all impurities from time to time. I do not think that that capacity is now exhausted.’’ [5]

The above two lengthy quotations from Gandhian literatures show that Gandhi approaches untouchability spiritually rather than as a socio-political sin. His most celebrated article ‘‘The Ideal Bhangi’’ gives us a clear understanding of how he visions the role of manual scavenging in the larger perspectives of caste system and its deeper social harmony at spiritual and everyday life. A hermeneutics of ‘‘Ideal Bhangi’’ is warranted here to elucidate Gandhian notions on untouchability and personhood. For having a clear-cut understanding of Gandhian views on manual scavenging. We have reproduced the full text for the benefit of the readers here.

Ideal Bhangi. [Published in Harijan in 1936, November 28]

The ideal Bhangi of my conception would be a Brahmin par excellence, possibly even excel him. It is possible to envisage the existence of a Bhangi without a Brahmin. But without the former the latter could not be. It is the Bhangi who enables society to live. A Bhangi does for society what a mother does for her baby. A mother washes her baby of the dirt and insures his health. Even so the Bhangi protects and safeguards the health of the entire community by maintaining sanitation for it. The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi's that of the body of society. But there is a difference in practice; the Brahmin generally does not live up to his duty, the Bhangi does, willy-nilly no doubt. Society is sustained by several services. The Bhangi constitutes the foundation of all services.

And yet our woebegone Indian society has branded the Bhangi as a social pariah, set him down at the bottom of the scale, held him fit only to receive kicks and abuse, a creature who must subsist on the leavings of the caste people and dwell on the dung-heap. He is without a friend; his very name has become a term of reproach. This is shocking. It is perhaps useless to seek the why and wherefore of it. I certainly am unaware of the origin of the inhuman conduct, but I know this much that by looking down upon the Bhangi, we Hindus, have deserved the contempt of the whole world. Our villages have today become seats of dirt and insanitation and the villagers come to an early and untimely death. If only we had given due recognition to the status of the Bhangi as equal to that of a Brahmin as in fact and justice he deserves, our villages today no less than their inhabitants would have looked a picture of cleanliness and order. We would have to a large extent been free from the ravages of a host of diseases which directly spring from our uncleanness and lack of sanitary habits. I therefore make bold to state without any manner of hesitation or doubt that not till the invidious distinction between the Brahmin and the Bhangi is removed will our society enjoy health, prosperity and peace, and be happy.

What qualities should such an honoured servant of society exemplify in his person? In my opinion an ideal Bhangi should have a thorough knowledge of the principles of sanitation. He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting nightsoil and urine into manure.

But that is not all. My ideal Bhangi would know the quality of night-soil and urine. He would keep a close watch on these and give a timely warning to the individual concerned. Thus, he will give a timely notice of the results of his examination of the excreta. That presupposes a scientific knowledge of the requirements of his profession. He would likewise be an authority on the subject of disposal of night-soil in small villages as well as big cities and his advice and guidance in the matter would be sought for and freely given to society. It goes without saying that he would have the usual learning necessary for reaching the standard here laid down for his profession. Such an ideal Bhangi, while deriving his livelihood from his occupation, would approach it only as a sacred duty. In other words, he would not dream of amassing wealth out of it. He would consider himself responsible for the proper removal and disposal of all the dirt and night-soil within the area which he serves and regard the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition within the same as the summum bonum of his existence.

Gandhi concludes "How many we have this ideal Bhangi? Only when we have produced an army of Appa Patwardhans. To cloth the Bhangi with dignity and respect due to him the special task and privilege of the educated class. Some members of the class themselves to master the science of sanitation to educate the Bhangis round them in the same. They would carefully study their present condition and causes underlying it and set themselves to the task of eradicating the same by dint of inexhaustible perseverance and patience that never looks back and knows no defeat. They would teach them the laws of cleanliness. Our Bhangis do not today possess even good brooms and suitable means for the removal of night-soil. The latrines themselves are wretched. The site round the Bhangi quarters is no better than a cess pool of dirt. All this can go only if some of the educated class give themselves up to the back of redeeming the Bhangi from his present plight and thus

redeeming the society from its terrible insanitation. Surely this is work enough to satisfy the highest ambition of one who has the spirit of service in him”.

Gandhi in his article “Ideal Bhangi” treats manual scavengers as innocent and ignorant children having no agency, consciousness or personhood. Gandhi at the very outset of his article says that a brahmin and a Bhangi are same and in a way a Bhangi is superior to a brahmin. Gandhi identifies the personhood of a manual scavenger as a manifestation of soul rather than a physical body with consciousness reflected in agency and autonomy. Gandhian concept of personhood of a manual scavenger does not extend to a modern citizen envisioned in Indian constitution with fundamental rights of right to equality and right to have a dignified life. Gandhi equates a Bhangi with a brahmin at soul level but not in their everyday life. A space of equality where people interact freely as human beings having rights and dignity does not constitute an integral part of Gandhian concept of personhood of a Bhangi or manual scavenger. Gandhi questions the role of the society in making the life of a manual scavenger pitiable and deplorable. We should note the critical point that Gandhi does this criticism at superficial level. He does not go deep down the complex structures of power relations which make one a Bhangi and the other a brahmin. Gandhi does not question the social, psychological and cultural aspects of power sharing in Indian society. Gandhi does not question the coercion which lies beneath the human relationship between the manual scavenger and his masters. According to Gandhi a Bhangi stands for the benefit of the society and its safety and security. Gandhi idealizes manual scavenging as a noble profession articulated for the wellbeing of the society. When Gandhi writes “A mother washes her baby of the dirt and ensures his health” and compares a Bhangi with such a lovable mother, he skilfully hides the violence which makes a manual scavenger. Gandhi does not acknowledge the “powerlessness” of a Bhangi. Gandhi sees a Bhangi as a human being with natural biological movements but without his own agency and autonomy. Bhangi’s existence is completely immersed in caste system based on Varna and social control. Gandhi does not see the possibility of a Bhangi living outside the value system of caste system. Gandhi does not see the possibilities of a Bhangi exploring the opportunities of modernity. Manual scavenging is nothing but slavery in Indian caste system. In Gandhian scheme of personhood of a Bhangi, a Bhangi is supposed to do his sanitation works without any distaste or ill feelings. As we know such a magnanimous service can only be expected from a person who has no free will and agency. The Bhangi is supposed to surrender his autonomy to the desires of dominant class. Moral preachings and praising of Gandhi on the Bhangi is just a mask on violent and inhuman social controls which create and maintain a Bhangi as a slave. Gandhi himself is ready to do the works of a manual scavenger but he is mysteriously silent on what callings are admissible for a manual scavenger in caste social system other than sanitation works. Gandhi in his article does honouring the Bhangi at soul or atman level but does keep silent on various levels of dishonouring Bhangis experience in their everyday life. Gandhi does not question the implicit relationship between the honour and power as explained in Hobbes’s Leviathan.[6]

Conclusion

Gandhian Ideal Bhangi enjoys honour and distinction and equal status with a brahmin at atman or soul level. He does not have autonomy, agency and free will as we suppose in the case of a citizen in a democracy. In Gandhian Ideal Bhangi, the personhood of the manual scavenger is limited within the physical body of the Bhangi and its ability to perform manual scavenging with mechanical precision and efficiency. Ideal Bhangi of Gandhi rests upon the karma and rebirth principle of Varna system rather than equal opportunity principle of Indian constitution. Personhood of a Bhangi is trapped in the value system of caste and varna. Ideal Bhangi is just a property with a human form rather than a human being having self-consciousness and individuality. Individuality of the Bhangi is denied and kept locked in caste prison. As Orlando Patterson [7] writes in his book “Slavery and social death” “perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the slave’s powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death.....Archotypically, slavery was a substitute for death in war. But almost as frequently, the death commuted was punishment for some capital offense, or death from exposure to starvation”. Being a Gandhian Ideal Bhangi is nothing but a substitute for death for a manual scavenger in Indian caste system. Ideal Bhangi is physically alive but socially and culturally dead. Gandhian Ideal Bhangi is even lesser valuable than a

‘subject’ in Kautilya’s Artha Sastra [8] and not possessing any rights and dignity of citizens enshrined in Indian constitution. Ambedkar stands for the annihilation [9] of caste system but through Ideal Bhangi, Gandhi works for its preservation. In short, Gandhian Ideal Bhangi is antithetical to modernity, human dignity and constitutional morality. Ideal Bhangi is not a social representation of a dignified profession but a social norm articulated in violence and social control. Individual liberty is a prerequisite of personhood. Individual liberty and choice are totally absent and denied for an Ideal Bhangi. Ideal Bhangi is a lesser human being who is captivated in his own physical existence like a domesticated animal. Ambedkar unambiguously points out the paradoxical position of Gandhi in his ideal Bhangi concept as follows, ‘Gandhism is a paradox. It stands for freedom from foreign domination, which means the destruction of the existing political structure of the country. At the same time, it seeks to maintain intact a social structure which permits the domination of one class by another on a hereditary basis which means a perpetual domination of one class by another’[10].

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