

TRANSFORMATIVE APPEAL OF GANDHI: A STUDY OF CHANGE IN HIS PERCEPTION OF INTERCASTE MARRIAGE

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Introduction

Marriage is an institution or complex of social norms that has traditionally sanctioned the relationship of a man and woman and bound them in a system of mutual obligations and rights essential to the functioning of family. It has been considered a social union or legal contract between two individuals that also creates kinship. Kinship begins with family and family begins with marriage.

Indian society has been dominated by caste system and marriage amongst Hindus as a consequence is governed by explicit and implicit caste rules. Explicit structural rules include caste endogamy which means marriage within the group, village exogamy which implies husband and wife should not come from the same village or cluster of villages, territorial rules, jati endogamy wherein the village couple must stem from two families that have historically belonged to same jati, gotra rule according to which members of a gotra are presumed to be descendent of same ancestor and hence should not get married and sapinda relations (prohibited kin relations are collectively known as sapinda relations and are traced through both father and mother). Implicit rules of marriage say that each family aims to maximize its gain through marriage and minimize any loss either in status, wealth, or welfare of its child and this can be done through negotiations and distribution of wealth.

Also, marriage is considered to be a sacred act. It is the most prestigious family ceremony in which members of the family, caste and many others gather together to celebrate. Various generations even today have strong roots in village. Even today, there is a great emphasis on customs, rituals, and traditional practices in the domain of marriage. For example, at the time of marriage, a feast has to be given to all the members of one's own caste resident in the village or the town. At the preparation of these feasts as well as in connection with other items of the marriage ceremony it is again the caste-people who run to one's help. These and similar affairs of everyday life require the co-operation of one's caste-people. Hence castes are small and complete social worlds in themselves, marked off definitely from one another, though subsisting within the larger society.

Intercaste marriages have always remained and have created social tensions leading at times to conflict. This is because marriage amongst Hindus is considered as a union between two families and is social rather than an individual act. Desire, love, choice is not acceptable in the domain of marriage as marriage is a social union whereas an intercaste marriage is seen as union of two individuals which breaches the rules of marriage. Moreover it is believed that marriage amongst Hindus keeps alive the sense of common ancestor but through intercaste marriage, this notion gets dissolved. Ours is a patriarchal society. Patriarchal forces are strong in every sphere from maintaining caste purity, to status, power and hierarchy. And it is believed that intercaste marriages pose a serious threat to male dominance and question the traditional sanctioned power which exists in our families, kinship, caste, community. Thus there continues to be strong resistance to inter caste marriage amongst Hindus in India.

Relations established through marriage are expected to give caste group its strength and recognition- socially as well in the political economic sphere. Any breach or disturbance in marriage patterns leads to change and disturbance in family, clan and entire caste group. Even though Hindu Marriage Validity Act (1949) validates intercaste marriages, there has been constant resistance and conflict between- 1.Laws and customs and 2.Traditional concepts and social reality and overall assertion of caste in society.

India's caste system is quite entrenched. However India is also witness to sporadic and intensive experiments with regard to promotion of communal harmony and reduction of caste disparities and promotion of feeling of humanity across all communities. Historically it is also available that Buddhism and Bhakti movement talks of one god, derecognizes caste and emphasizes on relationship between human being to God directly without any mediation. For example- the basic philosophy of bhakti movement is that it round monotheism or the worship of one God. Ram & Rahim, Iswar & Allah are same but different names of one God that is the Supreme God. It rejected the caste system, denied the supremacy of the Brahmins, condemned ritual sacrifice and insisted on Bhakti and the worship of the one God. As in Buddhism, the Buddha, himself born into the warrior caste, was a severe critic of the caste system. He ridiculed the priests claims to be superior, he criticised the theological basis of the system and he welcomed into the [Sangha](#) people of all castes, including outcasts. His most famous saying on the subject is : " Birth does not make one a priest or an outcaste. Behaviour makes one either a priest or an outcaste".

Such experiments in contemporary India can be understood / draw upon to understand the movement from caste to castelessness and towards one humanity.

Gandhi needs to be understood in this perspective of providing guidance to many interventions based on one humanity principle.

Translating few lines of his very famous prayer/ bhajan, "Vaishnava Jana to", explains that a *vaishnav* (one who is a devotee of Vishnu), tolerates and respects the entire world, does not censure or belittle anyone, sees all equally, renounces greed and avarice etc.

In order to bring more respect and dignity to all human beings at all levels, Mahatma Gandhi also used and popularized the term '*harijan*' (children of god) to dalits as he felt that the word 'untouchables' used for them was derogatory. He went and stayed with them in their communities; localities shared meals with them and even took up the tasks of cleaning and scavenging with them. He even organized public dinners where people came together; dined and interacted and expressed their thinking and feelings against the practice of untouchability.

Slowly slowly he came to understand that there is a need to break the barrier to Intercaste marriages. Atheist like Goparaju Ramchandra Rao (Gora) influenced Gandhi to adapt more liberal approach to issues of marriage. Gora used to run a monthly program called "cosmopolitan dinners" every full moon night, where people of all castes and religions gathered together. Gora insisted on staying in a [Harijan](#) locality whenever he was invited to address a village. He also conducted several inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. One of his own sons and daughters married spouses from untouchable castes. In 1949, Gora married his eldest daughter, Manorama, to Arjuna Rao, who belonged to the [Dalit](#) community. The marriage was held in [Sevagram](#), in presence of [Jawaharlal Nehru](#). In 1960, the marriage of his eldest son, Lavanam, with Hemalata, the daughter of [Gurram Jashuva](#), was also held in [Sevagram](#). He believed that atheism allows a person to surpass the barriers of castes and religions. It allows a person to understand that his/her actions are directed by free will and no [karma](#), fate or divine will. This in turn would allow [Harijans](#) to be liberated, as they would no longer believe that they are fated to be untouchable.

According to him, if given the freedom of equality, the inherent talent in people would come to the fore and social change can be achieved, he maintained (The Hindu).

Conclusion:

Gandhi's evolved thinking demonstrates highest ethical principles of living the one humanity principle without barriers of caste, creed, race, religion or any other difference. It serves as important points of our own behaviour and attitude towards intercaste marriage or one's own choice in marriage. It further encourages youth to think and question the basis/premise of honour killings and the *khaps*, role of state and print media in encouraging/ hindering the thought process of people/ youngsters, by depicting the whole scenario and process of choosing one's partner (out of choice) for marriage.

Gandhi has been attributed as being the inspiration or model for various rights struggles around the world.

There is a need to respect the Gandhian Principles - the right to life, liberty and security of person, the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, right to equality in the family and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

And also abide by The Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 16 which says the following:(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

Thus, through intermingling, coming together of different castes, intercaste marriage only- the caste barriers will be broken down. The discrimination suffered by specially the lower caste will be removed.

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