



## The Untouchable Campaign: A Survey of Assam's Experience through the perspective of Gandhi and Ambedkar

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**Abstract:** *In examining the Ambedkar's searching for political concessions to the low castes of India; simultaneously Gandhi's social reform agenda however made a hot debate in the political intelligentsia in and outside in India, the paper raises questions about the exact manner of their political and social agenda on the caste question and its impact. At the time of Freedom Struggle, Dalit activist began calling for separate electorate for untouchable in India with an objective of fair representation. It was officially labeled that alongside the Untouchables, the other minorities comprising of the Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians would also get a fair chance to represent them in the newly found Indian Government. The Communal Award launched by Ramsay Macdonald was readily accepted and supported by Ambedkar to eliminate Caste System i.e. they demanded the participation of the Untouchables in the public festivals, access to temple and wedding rituals. Gandhi didn't want any division among the Hindu community. In such situation an obvious cleavage between Ambedkar, there effective thinker of India and Nation's hero Gandhiji on the questions of Untouchables in India come to center of attention. By August 1932 the Civil Disobedient movement seemed to be at low ebb. The announcement of a fast by Gandhi, as a protest against the grant of separate electorates to untouchables was to stir public opinion powerfully, but it was to divert it into non-political channels. As a part of the all- India Untouchable Campaign, he had visited the state of Assam. His visits to Assam, the people were deeply influenced by Gandhi's words and actions. But he gained more popularity along with the prevailing campaign during his third visit to Assam in April 10, 1934 –in connection with Harijan Sewak Sangha to eradicate untouchability.*

**Key Words:** *Dalit, Untouchable, Assam Provincial Congress Committee, Hierarchy, Caste Movement.*

### Method and Objective:

The paper seeks to explore how the two great modern makers of modern India engaged in the untouchable questions. The paper basically on secondary sources however based on historical studies. The information has been collected from different books, autobiographies, journal, newspapers and other historical reports etc.

### Introduction:

'Caste' was a pan-Indian social system with little or no variations across regions throughout the landmass. It also remained virtually unchanged over centuries, from the time of its origin in ancient past up to the colonial rule-when the colonial state introduced a fundamentally different social and economic regime. Caste has been an enigma to the modern thinkers. By August 1932, Lord Willingdon and his advisers felt that under the hammer-blows from Government, the Civil Disobedience Movement had wilted. The number of convictions in a single month had come down from peak figure of 17,818 in February 1932 to 3,047 in August 1932. The movement seemed to be at a low ebb; it was to receive a further setback while Gandhi announcement of a fast as a protest against the grant of separate electorates to the untouchables. On September 13, 1932, newspapers all over India published a sensational announcement: Gandhi, still a prisoner in Yeravada jail, had decided to fast to death from September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1932; when the Communal award was published on August 17, 1932, it confirmed Gandhi's worst fears. In spite of double vote given to the depressed classes for their own separate constituencies, as well as for general (Hindu) constituencies, the fact remained that separate electorates were to be set up for these classes. Gandhi urged government to revised the decision and withdraw their scheme of communal award for the depressed classes. Three weeks later, Ramsay Macdonald acknowledged Gandhi's letter 'with much surprise' and 'very sincere regret'. The government's award, was, he explained, only an effort to weigh justly conflicting claims; only an agreement of the communities could supersede it with another electoral arrangement. This was like a 'cat and mouse game' among three contending parties, but it only revealed the lack of understanding on the part of British Premier and his advisers of Gandhi's deeply emotional and religious approach to the problem. The first impulse was to scent a political motive in the fast: Gandhi was trying a stunt to recover the prestige he had lost through the decline of Civil Disobedience. But Gandhi's interest in the depressed classes was neither a recent nor a temporary phase; it was rooted in his deep humanitarianism and dated back to his childhood. The abolition of untouchability was included in the constructive side of the



programme of non- co-operation. Untouchability was a recurrent theme in his speeches during his cross-country tours of the later twenties. Gandhi was surprised and it hurt him during the discussions at 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Table Conference to see the representative of untouchables play in to the hands of communal and politically reactionary elements.

### Discussion:

The Hindu leader's Conference held at Bombay considered a number of proposals: some of the members paid visit to Poona to discuss them with Gandhi. With the progress of fast and with the strain of the negotiations, Gandhi's strength had to begin to ebb quickly. Ambedkar bargained hard; he was reluctant to give up separate electorates, which the Communal Award gave to his community, unless he receiving some counter-balancing advantage. Eventually the Poona Pact ended the stalemate among the three contending parties. One of the greatest campaigns of social reform in history was thus launched by a state prisoner. Nobody knew better than Gandhi that an ancient tyranny could not be blasted overnight and that the result of the fast had to be followed up by work in the field and propaganda. Under his inspiration an all India organization was established with G.D.Birla as president and A.V. Thakkar as secretary. <sup>1</sup>After the RTC the name of Gandhi's organization was soon changed to the Servants of Untouchable Society. The title was then translated in to Hindi as *Harijan* Sevak Sangha, using the term *Harijan*(Children of God) adopted by Gandhi as a new appellation for the Untouchables. The purpose of the society was to use peaceful persuasion to secure access for the Depressed Classes to all public wells, roads, schools, temples, and cremation grounds. Social reforms such as inter-dining and other caste-based practices were admittedly outside the scope of the new organizations. Gandhi toured 12,500 miles over India from November 1933, to the end of July 1934, to preach against untouchability and to collect funds for the organization.

During the tours Gandhi had faced stubborn resistance of orthodox Hindus from *Sanatan Dharma Sabha* and the Hindu *Mahasabha* –which is still a part of Congress at that time. In Nagpur it is reportedly said by government, 'Orthodox Hindus had been conducting strong propaganda against the temple Entry Bill, the removal of untouchability, and Gandhi's campaign generally. 'In Delhi, three *Sanatanist* caused some commotion by throwing black flags in to his car.' In Varanasi, some forty or so *Sanatanist* carrying black flags assembled on the railway platform and a similar number outside the station when Gandhi's train arrived. All this mollified Ambedkar's hostility towards Gandhi. In November, 1932 heading for the RTC, he began to appreciate Gandhi's public declarations concerning untouchables. He wrote to his colleagues that he had noticed a gradual convergence with his own position on certain issues, even though he regretted that Gandhi still refused to endorse inter-caste eating and inter-caste marriage. In one of these letters, he indicated, in a very Gandhian manner: 'The Touchable and Untouchables cannot be held together by law, certainly not by any electoral law substituting joint electorate for separate electorates. The only thing is that can hold together is love.' However, it is observed that the positions of Gandhi and Ambedkar turned out to be contradictory during the debates about the legislative abolition of untouchability, temple entry and the role of the Anti-Untouchability League. Gandhi consequently, in an article published in *Harijan* he underlined, 'the futility of merely abolishing Untouchability: this evils being the product of a social hierarchy of a particular kind, it was the entire caste system that had to be eradicate: "there will be out castes (Untouchables) as long as there are castes" <sup>2</sup>It was also noticed that Gandhi's soft pedaling towards the untouchable movement caused to the growing hostility of orthodox Hindus to his policy. The Poona Pact ultimately, the struggle between Gandhi and Ambedkar ended with former's victory: while the social *status quo* was not totally preserved, the politicization of Untouchables by means of separate electorate had been defused. The reserved seats scheme of Poona Pact did not allow Untouchables to benefit from political representation proportional to their demographic weight. It thwarted Ambedkar's desire to transform untouchables in to a political force.

Nehru once compared Gandhis's first impact on Indian politics and society to a 'hurricane'; his visit tremendously extended and deepened the national consciousness of the people of India. His whirlwind tours carried his message to millions of people who had hitherto been beyond the pale of politics. During these years he travelled from one end of the country to other, and acquired at first hand a unique knowledge of the psychology of the Indian people. Not even than Buddha and Sankaracharya could have known as intimately every nook and corner of this country as Gandhi did. <sup>3</sup> He carefully diagnosed the ills of Indian society. Unfortunately, his words did not carry the same weight all the time with all sections of the people. However, he never faltered in his indefatigable crusade for communal unity, for eradication of untouchability, for propagation of national language, and for a new deal for the long suffering rural masses that could be form a durable foundation Indian nationalism.

After a long gap Gandhi's pleasure reflected in his third visit to Assam for ten days which was a program of all India Untouchable movement. His visit to the northeastern state of Assam which covered *Guloukganj, Dhuburi, Barpeta, Rangiya, Tongla, Rongapara, Tezpur, Nagaon, Sapormukh, Golaghat, Dergaon, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Morigaon, Janjhi, Namdang, Khuang, Kumarnisinga, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Guwahati etc.* had helped him collect a summation of Rs. 20,000 from the same. It is said that the untouchability had not been seen in a large scale in Assam and Bengal comparatively other places of India. But Gandhi did not reconcile it. He said, 'But it gives me an immense grief that there had been a distinction between man and man'. <sup>4</sup> The migrated *Doom, Bhangi, Samara etc.* had been as the lowest ebb of the society in Assam. To eradicate untouchability he meant for



the put off the distinction between upper and lower classes. 'We belong to one god and should full faith on humanitarianism.' The practice of untouchability is more or less running in this country, but there is no single evidence written in the *Sastras* that there should be a practice on untouchability. 'So with a noble cause I came to your place and wish you all to support the cause.' This is my humble request that upper class people must not touch the untouchable but had to forgive and forget the hate against them. Certainly I want a change in their mindset through the intercommunity dine, intercommunity marriage etc, but this of course is not an imposition. His most important visit was of course Tezpur and Jorhat. In Tezpur he visited the municipality along with the health workers. "Nowadays, the various Congress session held across the country has the provision of toiletry system, but still the people are seen breaking this chain of hygiene by making it a contaminated place. The immediate and main motive of ours at this point is to bring awareness amongst the population and to change their habitual state regarding health and hygiene. One is seen polluting the whole milieu, and the one who is cleaning up the dirt is looked upon in a filthy manner. That is why you all should come up and act humane. Maintaining and improving the health and hygiene condition of both cities and villages is not an easy task, we have to work a lot to bring a serene environment."<sup>5</sup>

In Jorhat, Gandhi had summed up events of the day in Sarma's *namghar* at Jorhat thus: 'The unique private temple entry movement of Krishnanath Sarma will lead the rest of India to remove social evils, distinction between man and man. Untouchability is a great sin and curse to Hindu society. Valiant soldiers like Krishnanath Sarma never care to face any odds. I am sure this movement will come out successful, give ample fruits to enjoy full rights and privileges, freedom of the soil of son'. "But many people were unhappy too, which was evident when the crowd thinned during the ceremonial opening of the shrine. *Prasad* was distributed to everyone assembled there."<sup>6</sup> Gandhi had been very much aggrieved as 'the Assamese were handy of idle and not an industrious at all. So the people across India flooded to Assam and some of the tea labor comes out of their service and permanently settled in Assam. The hard working labors were popularly known as *bongal-kuli* but it would be a prejudice for literate Assamese to detestation upon them.' So he had shown total interest for the development of tea garden labor in Assam.

While Gandhi categorically speaks to the people at Nogaon, 'this would be giant sin if the people of the places encourage the practice of untouchability where Sankardeva had born'. "What is meant for untouchability in Assam? Gandhi said it was nothing but the opium." There had been a constant hot debate regarding the status of untouchables between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Though Gandhi launched anti-untouchable movement vigorously, but he could not attack the caste system. While a question asked on the caste system to Gandhi by Ambedkar, Gandhi replied, "It is wrong to destroy caste because of the out-caste as it would be wrong to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or a crop because of the weeds." It was like the Newton's law of gravity, a natural phenomenon, and cannot be destroyed. <sup>7</sup>

Regarding the place of worship in Borpeta, Bhagwan Chandra Das a prolific writer of *Banhi* (second phase) exclaimed that the Assamese Hindu had partition it in to two floors of the same *Kirtan Ghar* as one is preserved for high caste –Hindus and other is confined to low caste –Hindus. Das also had witnessing that a *Nadiyal* while he was going to play *Nagara* in the Borpeta *Kirtan Ghar* he was attempted to expel, but he was rescued by him along with his friend. According to him, 'God is not a monopolistic property of the caste –Hindus'. While Gandhi wished a visit to Borpeta *Kirtan Ghar* in his tour to Assam, but the Gandhi had to oblige some precondition 'no untouchable or lower caste could accompany in his scheduled visit, and then he would be allowed to enter in that '*Kirtan Ghar*'. Gandhi simply did not accept this precondition. Interestingly, few days later the management of '*Kirtan Ghar*' allowed Lt. Governor Kean was to enter there with his shoes. <sup>8</sup>

It is a matter of fact that in his straight tour to Assam, on the will of Gandhi, an organization namely 'Untouchability Eradicate Association, Assam' came in to prominence; Debendra Nath Sarma becomes the first secretary of the organization. But the matter of fact that though Gandhi's tour was exclusively a untouchable campaign, but in its organizational level the APCC had paid less importance to the cause, except collecting money. The aftermaths of Civil Disobedience movement lost its earlier moral generally in India and particularly in Assam. Gandhi had been still in a state of confusion from the failure of the Civil Disobedience movement. According to Gandhi untouchability is a social problem, but for Ambedkar it was political problem. Ambedkar did not hesitate to say that the episode of 'Fast' by Gandhi against 'Communal Award' had been mere a political conjecture. In its forms as a *Harijan Sevak Sangha*, the new organization was closed to untouchable leadership. Gandhi defended this policy in response to criticism by explaining that it was an organization for penitents, for the expiration of the guilt of the caste Hindus. In spite of many obstacles in his third journey to Assam from the government, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioner of Sivsagar Fletcher and Waker respectively met Gandhi and by it, his visit to Assam came to an end.

In December, 1935 Ambedkar wrote, " what can anyone expect from a relationship so tragic as the relationship between the reforming sect of caste Hindus and the self-respecting sect of untouchables, where the former have no desire to alienate their orthodox fellows and later have no alternative but to insist upon reform being carried out?"<sup>9</sup> The years immediately after the Poona Pact were Gandhi's most intense period of work for anti-untouchability, but failed not only to win the support of Ambedkar, but also conciliate the orthodox Hindus. They took exception to his programme and to his personal actions as well. An article vehemently critical of Gandhi for his temple entry campaign and also for his allowing the marriage of his son to the daughter of C. Rajagopalcharya, a Madrasi Brahman, appeared in a Bombay journal. On the other hand, most of the caste Hindus



resented Gandhi's use of the word *Harijan* for untouchables and rejected Gandhi's attempts at persuasions regarding the temple entry issue, educated Untouchables found the word *Harijan* patronizing and the result of the temple campaign insignificant. Jagajivan Ram, a young politician from Congress described the *Harijan Sevak Sangha* as being erroneous in conception, faulty in analysis. In addition to these, it was clear that in the Gandhi's concept of service to the suffering untouchables, there was little room for the educated, politically conscious untouchables pressing for civil right.<sup>10</sup> In 1933, Ambedkar arguably said, "Unless you eradicate caste system, untouchability is impossible to get rid of. Untouchables will get freedom at the very expense of caste system only." In this debate, Gandhi opined that, "Ambedkar's arguments had the logic, but I don't want to blend *Varna system* with caste as ridiculed and rigorous. There were many limitations and discrepancies within the caste system, but there is not any sinful message."<sup>11</sup> On the part of Ambedkar, his party was successful in the election, it positions as small minority in the Congress-dominated assembly was very weak. In 1942, he reformulated his political plans, by forming a new party (former party was known as Independent Labor Party), Scheduled Caste Federation, and limited to the Untouchables in the hope of uniting all untouchables in a new battle for political power. So on, Ambedkar's criticism was not of the orthodox Hindu, whom he had given up years before as hopeless, but Gandhi and Congress-those who would inherit political power in the impending withdrawal of British rule. Despite Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi and Gandhi's unwillingness to include such a man in the structure of his reform schemes, there were indications that each was conscious of the other's necessary place in any final solutions of the problem of untouchability. Though there had been many distinction they often diverged, ultimately converged, forcing on the Indian conscience the problem of untouchability as an issue of national concern.

It is a matter of concern that reformers working for the removal of untouchability, including Gandhi, do not seem to realize the acts of the people are merely the results of their beliefs inculcated upon their conduct, until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the *sastras* on which their conduct is founded. The high caste hegemony prevailed on APCC also. In case of removing untouchability sometimes it was running on the line of symbolic gesture. Gandhi did not wish to antagonize the Hindus even if such antagonism was necessary to carry out his anti –untouchability programme. The fault is not entirely of the Hindu public. The fault is of Gandhi himself. Gandhi has built up his reputation of being a Mahatma on his being a harbinger of political freedom and not on his being a spiritual teacher. Whatever may his intentions, Mr. Gandhi is looked upon as an apostle of *Swaraj*. His anti –untouchability movement is looked upon as a fad if not a side show. That is why the Hindus respond to his political biddings but never to his social or religious preachings.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Impact on Assam:**

Ambedkar's resolute campaign for separate electorate had the reflection in Assam also. In Assam the All Assam Depressed people's Conference held at Shillong on 6th January, 1929 decided to form the All Assam Depressed Classes Association with its headquarter at Shillong and Sondhar Das Senapati as the president of the Association. Right from the beginning they were in the support of separate electorate. Senapati boldly stated, "Emancipations of the depressed caste can be secured only from the corridors of power".<sup>13</sup> He said that their separate representation would be utilized as a political instrument for ensuring protection of their social and economic interest, reservation of jobs, provision of special scholarship and above all enhancement of social status. But the Poona Pact did not satisfy Senapati. While reacting to it Senapati observe: "My firm belief, based on my well earned experience in social service is that you the caste Hindus cannot root out easily your time honored and deep seats hatred in your hearts against us and my experience makes me to fear that any of you –liberal, orthodox or *Sanatanist* caste Hindus, let you be a Borua, a historian, minister or a Tagore, a philosopher, a poet – cannot be free from caste prejudice. I doubt if I can exclude even Mahatmaji himself from the suspicion, he is now rending rocks to wipe out this sin from the face of the Hindu world. I should also be frank to say that we depressed classed also cannot but retain out ancient grudge against you."<sup>14</sup> Senapati's remarks on Poona Pact, "the fate of all depressed Hindus sealed in the Poona Pact" evoked displeasure and disappointment of A.V.Thakkar, the general secretary of *Harijan Sevak Sangha*.

#### **Conclusion:**

Gandhi's tour to Assam certainly endorsed an environment of secular trends is a noteworthy feature against the backdrop of caste conflict and prejudices in various region in India. This calls for giving further encouragement to the interaction of secularization and social integration for the sake of projecting the message of homogeneity and caste fraternity. Having ceased to be caste Hindu dominated organization the Congress party in Assam has come increasingly under the spell of non caste Hindus whose *entente* with the Muslims is intended to push the former in to political oblivion. The Tribal League's effort to distance itself from caste-Hindu Assamese society in carving out a 'tribal' identity was also evident when the *Assam Temple Entry Bill* was introduced in the Assembly in 1940. Ghanasyam Das, the mover, regretted the fact that most temples were not open to some sections of the society, the so-called depressed and backward classes. It is matter of fact that Gandhi's third tour to Assam invariably addressed that the depressed classes of Assam received a sense of identity and self confidence. In the following years, from 1938 onwards the depressed classes of Assam had a brilliant representation in Assam cabinet to 1946. It is seen a massive



shift from Untouchables to Scheduled caste in the constitutional diameter. Most importantly, Gandhi's campaign had vigorously benefitted the various groups of tribal Assam, firstly they become part of All India freedom movement; secondly, they had been in practice to take advantage of the government sponsored scheme with the patronage of rising tribal middle class. One of the cultural icons of Assam, with the inspiration from Ambedkar's Untouchable movement, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, though he started his carrier as cultural activist, later he embraced tribal politics for the emancipation of tribal against the prejudices of caste-Hindus in Assam. This is to be fair; Gandhi was the first and only Indian politician to make the abolition of untouchability central to the *Swaraj* and act so single mindedly in order to challenge it. In Assam, unlike other parts of India in his visit, there had been not a single example who opposed his campaign of untouchability.

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