

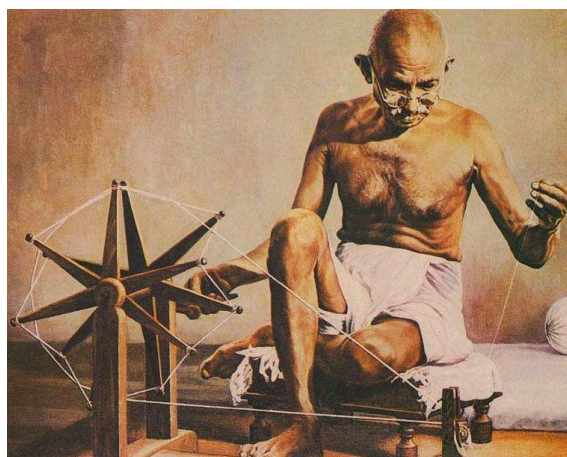


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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in the small town of Porbandar, on the west coast of India, on October 2, 1869. His father died when he was 15 years old, and apart from that time, his mother became the most significant influencer in his life. Her spiritual teacher was a Jain devotee. Among the Jains in India, the central doctrine is the "sanctity of all life," or Ahimsa, which is often translated as "non-violence." This teaching remained paramount with Gandhi.

Gandhi was a social reformist and leader of Indian Independence Movement who introduced the idea of non-violent resistance called Satyagraha. After organising a civil disobedience movement for Indians living in South Africa, he returned to India in 1915. In India, he set out on a train journey to different parts of the country trying to understand problems of farmers, peasants and urban labourers and organising protests for them. He took the leadership of Indian National Congress in 1921 and rose to become its most prominent leader and an iconic figure in Indian politics. He organised the Dandi Salt March in 1930 and Quit India Movement in 1942. He also worked for the upliftment of untouchables and gave them a new name 'Harijan' meaning the children of God.



Eradicating untouchability from its roots was one of Mahatma Gandhi's cardinal principles, upheld by the force of a lifetime of actions towards achieving it.

To begin with, Mahatma coined the term 'Harijan' or 'Man of God', intending to replace the term 'Dalit', which was a term that by and large means 'oppressed'.

Although the terminology was debated widely by other leaders, the intention was to accord the community their own status in society. This title served as a linchpin to Gandhi's philosophy.

His revolt against untouchability began at a very young age in 1881, when his mother warned him not to touch a boy named Uka who cleaned their toilets. The 12-year-old Gandhi dismissed his mother's warnings and questioned her belief in the system.

"If accidentally touched Uka, was asked to perform ablutions, and though naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion....I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful," Gandhi recounted in his speech at the 'Suppressed Classes Conference' in Ahmedabad (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol 23.DE42)

In 1915, when Gandhi had recently returned from South Africa, he founded the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad to spread his ideologies and train the community, despite the resistance shown by the local Vaishnavas.

In 1920, he pushed the envelope further and declared that his notion of 'Swaraj' was the complete eradication of untouchability and said: "Swaraj is a meaningless term if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjection, and deliberately deny to them the fruits of national culture."

On Nov. 27, 1927, Gandhi openly proclaimed that "if varnashrama goes to the dogs in the removal of untouchability, I shall not shed a tear."

"For reforms of Hinduism and for its real protection, removal of untouchability is the greatest thing...removal of untouchability is....a spiritual process," he said.

On Sept. 20, 1932, the Mahatma began his 'fast unto death' and "intended to sting the Hindu conscience into right religious action".

Between November 1933 and August 1934, Gandhi set out on a journey that extended over 20,000 kilometres by train, car, bullock cart and on foot to raise money for his 'Harijan Sevak Sangh: His expedition went on for nine months and was undertaken across the nation, including in the Princely States. The Sangh was a medium through which he wanted to spread his message of uprooting untouchability as a practice as well as an ideology and empower the social, political, economic and cultural spheres of society.

In his weekly newspaper, 'Harijan', Gandhi had written on this subject, saying, "Today, Brahmins and Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are mere labels. There is utter confusion of Varna as I understand it and I wish that all the Hindus will voluntarily call themselves Shudras. That is the only way to demonstrate the truth of Brahminism and to revive Varna dharma in its true state.

"This religion, if it can be called as such, stinks in my nostrils. This certainly cannot be the Hindu religion. I shall put up a lone fight, if need be, against this hypocrisy...the dirt that soils the scavenger is physical and can be easily removed but there are those who have become soiled with untruth and hypocrisy, and this dirt is so subtle that it is very difficult to remove it..." (cited in Rajmohan Gandhi's *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi*, New Delhi, Viking 1995, pg 237).

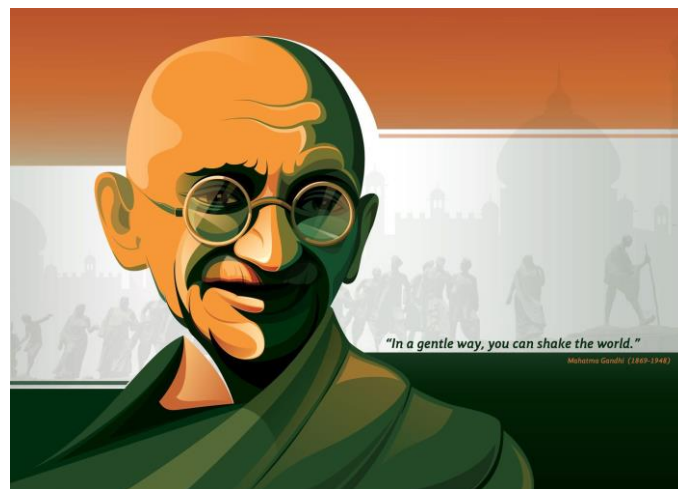
Gandhi did not believe in rebirth. Yet, to empathise with the oppressed caste, he once said, "If have to be reborn, should be born an untouchable, so that may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition."

"Vaishnava Jana To" was Gandhi's vision, which meant that a true human is one who feels the pain of others, removes misery and is never arrogant.

He advocated positive means for the uplift of Harijans. He addressed various public meetings reposing doctrines of Harijan welfare. He led several processions of Harijans with other upper caste people and made them participate in "poojas, bhajans, kirtans and Puranas".

In "Young India", he wrote that "Temples, public wells and public schools must be open to the untouchables equally with caste Hindus."

He said in 1934, "as a savarna Hindu, when I see that there are some Hindus called avarnas, it offends my sense of justice and truth," and "if I discover that Hindu shastras really countenance untouchability as it is seen today, I will renounce and denounce Hinduism." As early as 1915, he had said, "if it were proved to me that [untouchability] is an essential part of Hinduism, I for one would declare myself an open rebel against Hinduism itself." "This religion," he had said in 1917, "if it can be called such, stinks in my nostrils. This certainly cannot be the Hindu religion." These were strong words, but the passion behind them sprang from Gandhi's soul's agony. To live with untouchability, Gandhi said, was "like a cup of poison" to him.



Once when Kasturba showed reluctance, and was reticent, about cleaning the urine pot of one such member of his 'family', Gandhi had threatened to evict her from the house. Gandhi would invariably eat with people of different faiths and castes, including the 'Untouchables'. Gandhi berated as cowardly the satyagrahis in South African prisons who would not eat food touched by their 'Untouchable' brethren or sleep near them in jails. He told the Tamils in a meeting in South Africa that they had come to South Africa in vain if they brought with them the caste divisions from Madras. After returning to India in 1915, Gandhi had an 'Untouchable' family reside in his Satyagraha Ashram, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. He immediately faced the anger of the Vaishnav's of Ahmedabad who stopped all monetary help to the ashram. Following this, Gandhi decided to relocate his ashram to the 'Untouchables' quarters in Ahmedabad.

Starting with his grandfather, Gandhi states, his family had not been pursuing their hereditary duty over the last three generations that was assigned to them. He himself never earned his bread and butter by following his ancestors' calling. He also allowed his children to choose their own professions, and never pressed them to follow any pursuit prescribed for their caste. Not only did he allow his son Ramdas to marry someone who was from a different sub-caste but also allowed his other son Devadas to marry a girl who was from another varna altogether. Gandhi also married off his adopted daughter Lakshmi, who was an 'Untouchable', to a Brahmin boy. Moreover, Gandhi tried to master many activities that were prohibited for his caste. He himself worked as a scavenger, a barber, a washerman, a cobbler, a tiller and a tailor – all 'unclean' works. He even forced his family to break pollution taboos by engaging them in shoemaking, leatherwork, cleaning of toilets – works profoundly 'polluting' to the 'caste Hindus'. In fact, cleaning toilets persisted all his life. None of Gandhi's ashrams were built on the basic principle of the caste system or varnashrama dharma; and none of the caste restrictions were observed in his ashrams.

The critics of Gandhi by focusing on a 'selective' reading of some of Gandhi's 'early' writings reach to a conclusion that Gandhi never decisively renounced his belief in 'chaturvarna' or the system of four varnas. They rest their understanding of Gandhi's concern with caste based on these writings and ignore his 'practice', which were a clear denunciation of untouchability and caste prejudices. Gandhi, in his personal life rejected untouchability from the very beginning and relentlessly made efforts to eradicate it. As early as 1905, Gandhi had held that the Brahmins and the 'Untouchables' were equal in his eyes. He would insist on his own family circle that no one should consider work done by a scavenger as "polluting." In 1909, he was publicly rejecting the notion that there were "high" and "low" castes.

From 1921-27, he began to demand the entry of the 'Untouchable' children into public schools. Gandhi's strong public reputation at the peak of the Civil Disobedience Movement enabled him to demand that the 'caste Hindus' must do 'penance' and 'make reparations' to the 'Untouchables'. From 1927 to 1932, he took up evidently the most contentious issue demanding from the 'caste Hindus' that the 'Untouchables' must have the same rights of entry in all the temples as the other Hindus. In 1925, Gandhi supported it by backing the use of Satyagraha against a denial of the use of public roads adjacent to a temple and Brahmin residences in Vaikom. He personally went to Vaikom, Kerala, to debate with the orthodox Brahmins against their interpretation of the scriptures, and, managed to get the road next to the temple opened to all.

In 1932, he went to the extent of undertaking a "fast unto death" over the question of opening the Guruvayur Temple, Malabar, for the 'Untouchables'. With this, Gandhi moved from being a cautious reformer to attaining a bolder, albeit revolutionary, position on untouchability. Gandhi's approach and method were brilliantly understood by the atheist Indian social reformer, G. Ramachandra Rao, popularly known as 'Gora', who dialogued with Gandhi in the 1940s. Gora wrote on Gandhi's approach thus: "When [Gandhi] first undertook to remove untouchability, the problem of varna dharma was also there. It was easy to see intellectually, even then, that caste ought to go root and branch if untouchability was to be completely eradicated. But as a practical proposition, caste was not the immediate problem then. The problem was only the removal of untouchability. So, he allowed caste to

continue, though personally he observed no caste even then.” Gandhi’s goal of equality remained the same throughout, though the way it was sought to be executed differed responding to the changing ‘context’ over time and also of space as seen in the case of South Africa and India. Gandhi also wrote extensively for various newspapers and his symbol of self-reliance - the spinning wheel - became a popular symbol of Indian Independence Movement.

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