

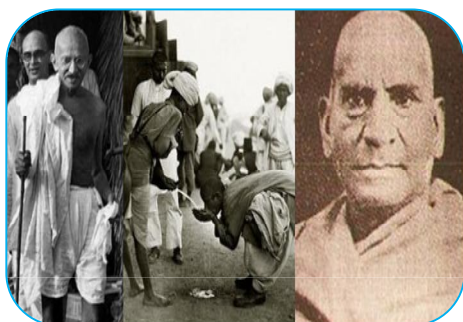


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## CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME : A GANDHIAN MOVE TO ABOLISH UNTOUCHABILITY - TAMIL COUNTRY CHAPTER

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### ABSTRACT:

*The Indian Hindu society is a caste ridden system. On the basis of Manu Dharma , the whole structure of the Hindu society has been broadly divided in to four major categories called Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. While the people of the first three categories were able to enjoy all the social privileges and the benefits, the fourth category was denied of everything. These people were also treated as untouchables and they were left in an untold social misery. The advent of Europeans and subsequently the spread of*

*western ideas generated a new kind of social awakening in the Hindu society. The rise of socio-religious reformers who were influenced by the western philosophy in the Nineteenth Century and their tireless works paved the way for the introduction of many legislations to remove the age-long social evils such as the practice of sati, child marriage, etc. While these legislations had a little impact over the people at higher level, the socio-economic conditions of the Sudras, otherwise called untouchables and depressed classes were not improved in any way until the arrival of Gandhi in the Indian public affairs. The present paper attempts to highlight the Gandhian ways to remove untouchability, a social ill in the Indian society. As a part of Constructive Programme , Gandhi plunged into the action and started Harijan Sevak Sangh. The works of Harijan sevak Sangh aimed at the upliftment of the Depressed Classes and Gandhi called them as Harijans.*

**KEYWORDS:** Gandhi , Harijan Sevak Sangh, Untouchability, Depressed Classes .

### INTRODUCTION :

The return of Gandhi from South Africa to Indian in 1915 <sup>1</sup> was the turning point in the course of the history of modern India. The socio-political and economic theories and ideas of Gandhi had started to shaken the basic structure of the Hindu society and British Administration in India. He made nationwide visits and became popular among the

Indian leaders particularly of the Congress. Within a short period Gandhi became the center of the movement of Indian National Congress. As a man of such calibre, Gandhi also became a strong fighter against the social evils like untouchability. He viewed that untouchability was the main drawback to the national unity and social integrity. He started campaign against untouchability even from his school days. He further experienced hardships of racial discrimination while studying in English in England

and later servicing in South Africa. So after his return, he established a Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmathi, Gujarat <sup>2</sup> to provide the training to the inmates to work for the formation of a casteless and classless model society in India. Besides he wrote a number of articles and columns against untouchability and other social evils in his journal, 'Young India'.<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar's demand of separate electorate for the depressed classes<sup>4</sup>, Gandhi's epic fast <sup>5</sup> and signing of the Poona Pact,<sup>6</sup> which were happened in 1932, had

opened a new chapter in the social history of India. The Poona Pact was the outcome of the struggle over the Communal Award given by the British government. In the Poona Pact, the leaders of the Caste-Hindus, in addition to the political adjustment, had agreed to work for the abolition of untouchability and for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes Castes.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi named the untouchables as 'Harijans' means children of God.<sup>8</sup> The British administrators called them as Scheduled Cases as per the Government of Indian Act of 1935.<sup>9</sup> While the negotiation between the leaders of the Caste-Hindus and Depressed Classes was going on just before signing the pact, Gandhi who was in Yervada Jail with his epic fast against the communal award had mooted the idea to establish a society or an organization specially to work for the overall welfare of Depressed Classes.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, immediately after signing the Pune Pact, the leaders of the Caste- Hindus formed a social welfare organization called All India Harijan Sevak Sangh in Bombay in September 1932.<sup>11</sup> The Sangh got the blessings of Gandhi. Gandhi wanted the Sangh to be work oriented. Moreover, he believed that the democratic system should not be suitable to all the Institutions particularly the institutions which led anti-untouchability campaigns. The works for the removal of untouchability and other social evils needs hearts and souls rather than the sound and sympathy, he added. So, he nominated his faithful stalwart G.D. Birla as the President of the Sangh. G.D. Birla was a millionaire and an eminent industrialist. The secretary of the Sangh. A.V . Thakkar Baba was inducted into the office in the same manner. Gandhi also picked up other suitable personalities from the Caste- Hindus to lead the Sangh.<sup>12</sup> He said that the leaders and the members of the Sangh at all level should be from the sides of Caste-Hindus, and not from the side of the Depressed Classes. He supported his view by saying that the Depressed Classes were the creditors and the caste Hindus were debtors.<sup>13</sup> The time had come to the caste Hindus to work of the Depressed Classes who already afforded their services from the time of immemorial, he said. With this ideological background, the Harijan Sevak Sanghs at central as well as provincial level came into existence and started its functioning in every nook and corner of the country.<sup>14</sup>

One of the salient features of the Sangh is that nobody should be easily accommodated in the Harijan Sevak Sangh as the Sevaks, Gandhi had prescribed some basic qualifications for those who interested in the mission for the upliftment of Depressed Classes.<sup>15</sup> It was emphasized that every Sevak should be fired with a passion of purifying Hinduism and must be ready to lay down his life in the attempt to eliminate the social evils like untouchability. Such a Sevak should be ready to sacrifice his all family connections, social advantages and even the life itself in order to wipe out the blot on (untouchability) on Hinduism. Further, the Harijan Sevaks should devote all their energies for promoting the interests of the depressed Classes. They involved in the cleanliness and hygienic activities among the untouchables. They introduced the improved method of carrying on what were known as unclean occupation like scavenging and tanning, They encouraged to give up beef eating and intoxicating liquor. They also educated the parents to send their children to the schools and they determined to abolish untouchability among themselves.

These activities were considered the basic duties for those who were willing to serve as the Harijan Sevaks. Even after learning all these basic duties, a number of Caste-Hindus irrespective of their age, social status and economic background voluntarily came forward and enrolled themselves with the local Harijan Sevak Sanghs for doing the noble services for the cause of the Depressed Classes .

As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, T.S.S. Rajan, a prominent leader from Trichy was nominated as the President of Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh <sup>16</sup> by C.Rajagoplachari, known as Rajaji who was the close associate of Gandhi and pioneer in the field of Harijan services even before the formation of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. G.Ramachandran, student of Tagore, an expert in the field of cottage and village industries, was chosen as the secretary.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, a number of versatile and dynamic Gandhian stalwarts like A.Vaidyanatha Iyer and N.M.R. Subbarmana of Madurai, Sardar Vedarathnam Pillai of Vedaranyam, T.S. Avinshilingam of Coimbatore, Bhasyam Iyengar of Madras and more and more took in charge of the works for the upliftment of Depressed Classes.<sup>18</sup>

After the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi diverted his path to the Constructive Programme which he considered an important way to meet the downtrodden people and enlist their

support to attain the political goals of the Congress. The eradication of untouchability was a part of the Constructive Programme. After the failure of the Round Table Conferences, Gandhi signed the Poona Pact with B.R.Ambedkar. As per the pact, Gandhi and Gandhian leaders involved in the upliftment of the depressed classes. Gandhi called untouchables as Harijans. He changed the name of his his paper , 'Young India', as 'Harijan. ' Further Gandhi made an all India Harijan Tour from 1933 to 1934 to create awakening among the people to remove untouchability which he considered a social sin. Above all, he became an instrument to found All India Harijan Sevak Sangh. The Gandhian move was sincerely followed by his dedicated adherents like A.Vaidyanatha Iyer, N.M.R. Subbraman and T.S.S. Rajan. The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sangh as a branch totally plunged into action in promoting the welfare of the depressed classes by enhancing their social dignity and position in public sphere

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