
GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract: It is possible that very few writers have delved into Gandhian Philosophy while writing in English. A prose piece that discusses Gandhian philosophy of equality of **untouchables** on par with other social groups is by an Indian writer Kumud Pawde.

In her popular prose piece **THE STORY OF MY SANSKRIT** we can feel the strong effort Gandhi had put in towards elevating the Harijans community. **Harijan** was a term that meant *children of God* by Gandhi. His noble purpose was to empower this group of people, steeped in the misery of inferiority complex, conditioned by society to feel '**subservient**' to others owing to the false propaganda that these 'untouchables' were not destined to upliftment and **decent livelihood**; all because their ancestors were trained to do only menial jobs that mostly defied human dignity.

This autobiographical prose work by Pawde voices forth not only the battle against the **parochial narrow-mindedness of Indian caste system** but is a lesson to those many talented, capable and potential Harijans whom Gandhi sought to uplift along with the regular streams of society. This literary work shows a real life battle of the writer against an established petty mindset of society that has learnt to think of only categories as low and high...Here the writer becomes a **catalyst of change** for many other Harijan women and men to fulfill their dreams, that till then were limited to the upper caste people only.

Introduction: Gandhian Philosophy broadly comprises of the concepts of Satyagraha, Non-violence, Communal Harmony and social Justice. Under Social justice Mahatma Gandhi always championed the cause of elevation of Harijans from the lowest level of society to a position where they could stand shoulder to shoulder with the higher castes including the Brahmins. Gandhiji referred to the untouchables as Harijans a term meaning children of God. He thought it less pejorative than 'Untouchable', less patronizing than the colonial coinage, 'Depressed Classes', and more indigenous-sounding than his own earlier alternative, 'suppressed classes'. Gandhi remarked: 'Not that the change of name brings about any change of status, but one may at least be spared the use of a term which is itself one of reproach' Unfortunately this word Harijan too was not accepted in the right spirit of Gandhian ideology. The political unacceptance of the word finally made it get lost and the word Dalits became more prominent for all usage.

Who were Harijans? They were people who began to be called untouchables because of the categories of jobs they took up for livelihood. The jobs of fishermen, disposers of dead cattle (selling the hides of the animals), cleaning of faeces, urine, garbage (like sweepers and washermen) etc; and all these could be categorized as menial jobs.

Owing to the caste system that originated based on the occupation or jobs of people the Indian society pushed these Harijans to the lowest category (as they did the dirtiest and least paid jobs).

And the higher classes like the Brahmanas and Kshatriyas specially did not treat these sudras (as they were called) with equality and respect. Having realized this Gandhi wanted to boost the self-esteem of these groups of low classes. By coining the word Harijan he intended their upliftment. Many have argued that using 'Harijan' for Dalits was a project in Hindu consolidation. By using this term, Gandhi brought untouchables into the Hindu fold.

Kumud Pawde's essay is an excerpt from her autobiographical work called *Antasphot* which means Outburst...that was later confirmed by the author as not merely emotional. Hence we gather that this is

an open discussion of what all was faced by an untouchable, if they made the mistake of wanting to rise up from the pit of stagnation, odd jobs, illiteracy and inferiority complex.

This piece is the real life story of a Dalit (untouchable) woman in the public realm of education and employment. This account exposes how at various levels of bureaucracy the protagonist experiences resistance to rise up the hierarchical ladder, despite the efforts of the Government to implement the constitutional measures of equality of all. To add fuel to fire even politicians in the highest echelons remain mute spectators in the face of society's negation of the rights of the Dalits.

Here are quotes and instances from the text of several points of the author's struggle against Indian social inequalities in the caste system:

The author doesn't like praise because she feels its overemphasized (it heightens the abnormality of her achievement probably). To quote her to listen to praise is like to be 'stung by a lot of gadflies'. She understands that people praise her because they are unable to accept that she has learned Sanskrit against the background of her caste (being a mahar and the low class; another name for a Dalit). She says its an anomaly to a traditional mind that not only she learns it but teaches it. And the reason why society has deprived her of learning of the Sanskrit language is because it was religion that made society consider her caste folk as 'vermin' (parasites). The reason why the author cannot accept praise is because it feels like flattery oozing out from its sources with honey like effect but with sarcastic overtones like: "So you're teaching Sanskrit at the government college, are you?" Some others say with arrogance: "In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit from you?"

The author has learnt with her being identified by her low caste. 'What comes by birth but can't be cast off by dying-that is caste?' The only good thing in her job she feels is the genuine admiration by her students.

The admiration of her emerging as a victorious champion of learning (against her caste background) extends to official duties too. On one Vijayadasami occasion she recalls how she was asked to introduce honoured scholars at a celebration in Sanskrit language. At this point because of the language being disallowed to her caste folk all these years she found it tough to handle: overcome with anxiety, rapid heartbeat and drowned in feelings of inferiority complex. She was going to break the social barrier: defy the traditional books that had forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and sudras; by being both a woman, firstly and of the very lowest caste of the Sudras, secondly.

The author goes on to share other experiences of disgust where she was treated as an outcaste or ostracized due to her caste identity: Though she belonged to a lower caste ghetto sometimes while waiting for her school friends (who were Brahmins) their mothers would warn the daughters against touching the author and playing with her. At an age meant for playing and skipping around these thoughts would rouse her to fury.

On another occasion where she felt outraged she remembers she happened to wait on her friend whose brother was in a thread ceremony while an elderly woman came and gave her a ladoo and admonished her for watching the Brahmin rituals there. To this in disgust the author remarked: Can you see injuries on anyone just because I watched them? This was followed by a strong body language of briskly walking away with self-respect. It was this very action of being deprived to listen to Sanskrit mantras that attracted Kumud to the language and the rest became history. She then shared this hurt feeling to her dad who encouraged her telling her that he learnt the Gayatri mantra. This was the impetus that led her to become more determined to learn Sanskrit. Kumud continues that she was fortunate to know her teacher Hatekar sir who further understood her freedom to choose her subject of study. Gokhale sir was another mentor who helped her herein-her first teacher to teach her Sanskrit by rote. He even didn't practice the narrow habit of untouchability as felt by Kumud on being invited to his house. She describes it as his broadmindedness in accepting her as his sishya. If not for his warmth 'she would never have learnt Sanskrit' was her exclamation.

It was her being opposed to procure pursuit of her favourite field of learning Sanskrit that made her more determined. She joined the Morris prestigious college. Further as destiny favoured her ambition she got a scholarship to further motivate her and she landed with excellent marks in B.A. In her next course of M.A. she had a tough Pundit to manage because he was a bitter person scholarly in teaching but venomous in his speech. However facing this ordeal too she emerged with a distinction in M.A.(Sanskrit).Having been the first woman from her scheduled caste to pass with a distinction in Sanskrit Kumud presumed that she would get a government job on a platter. The reality was that there were several Brahmins who could not digest this truth and found it 'distasteful that a girl from the Mahar caste,should teach Sanskrit'.This was another hurdle in pursuit of a job for Kumud.

Kumud never accepted defeat. After two years of not obtaining a job with an M.A. because of the high caste officers in government high positions she wrote a sharp letter to the then Central Cabinet Minister Jagjivan Ram.He in turn gave the letter to Pandit Nehru who asked her to meet the Maharashtra Chief Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan. He asked Kumud to continue studies till he followed up her case for a job.In utter frustration of wanting a job she kept studying further.As time passed she even obtained M.A. in English Literature.

As fate would have it she got married soon and within 2 months of her inter-caste marriage she secured a job as assistant lecturer in a Government college.The irony was she got the job because post-marriage her surname was changed to Kumud Somkuwar and her caste too got changed incognito. The closing line of the author's text is her silent cry that because of her original caste she never got justice.."The caste of her maiden status (Kumud Pawde) remains deprived ".

Thus, this piece of literature takes us through the lifelong struggle of a Harijan girl who faced so many impediments in life just because she was born in a scheduled caste community. This could be the story of every man and woman of the lower castes in India for several years.

The parochial Indian society has not yet understood Gandhi's intention of elevating the lower castes, even 150 years later now in the present age. It has never been easy to reverse the conditioned minds of the Indian upper castes in their attitude towards the lower castes. Its the duty of all the lower caste folk to realize their self-esteem and pursue their dreams on par with other castes in society. This text is therefore highly appreciated as literature that will bring in a catalytic change towards creating a classless and casteless society. Probably if Gandhi lived to read this he would experience a sense of triumph in the seed he had sowed towards a harmonious egalitarian society. That indeed is the true freedom for India- to be free from chains of injustice and discrimination and live all as happy brothers and sisters as the Indian Pledge vows read:

"I shall respect my parents,teachers ad all elders and treat everyone with courtesy.
To my country and my people my devotion.
In their well-being and prosperity lies my happiness."

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