

Mahatma Gandhi: excerpt from the Speech at Tanjore¹

Delivered on 16 September 1927.

I had hoped on coming to Tanjore today to discuss the Brahmin–non–Brahmin² question here and I had the pleasure of having a brief discussion with some of the friends this afternoon. [...]

They seemed to think that I had identified myself with the notion of inherited superiority and inferiority. I assured them that nothing was farther from my thought and told them that I would gladly explain my meaning of *varnashrama*³ more fully than I have done in order to remove the slightest misunderstanding as to this question of superiority. In my opinion there is no such thing as inherited or acquired superiority. I believe in the rock-bottom doctrine of Advaita⁴ and my interpretation of Advaita excludes totally any idea of superiority at any stage whatsoever. I believe implicitly that all men are born equal. All – whether born in India or in England or America or in any circumstances whatsoever – have the same soul as any other. And it is because I believe in this inherent equality of all men that I fight the doctrine of superiority which many of our rulers arrogate to themselves. I have fought this doctrine of superiority in South Africa inch by inch, and it is because of that inherent belief that I delight in calling myself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver, a farmer and a labourer. And I have fought against the Brahmins themselves wherever they have claimed any superiority for themselves either by reason of their birth or by reason of their subsequently acquired knowledge. I *consider that it is unmanly for any person to claim superiority over a fellow-being*. And there is the amplest warrant for the belief that I am enunciating in the Bhagavad Gita⁵, and I am therefore through and through with every non–Brahmin when he fights this monster of superiority, whether it is claimed by a Brahmin or by anybody else. He who claims superiority at once forfeits his claim to be called a man. That is my opinion.

But in spite of all my beliefs that I have explained to you, I still believe in *varnashrama dharma*. [...] *Varnashrama dharma* is humility. Whilst I have said that all men and women are born equal, I do not wish therefore to suggest that qualities are not inherited, but on the contrary I believe that just as everyone inherits a particular form so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors. [...]

1 Mahatma Gandhi: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1958.

2 Brahmins were the highest of the four social classes in Hinduism, specialising as priests, teachers, and protectors of sacred learning

3 The organization of society into four castes, and the division of life into four stages

4 The view that the *atman*, the self in man, is not distinct from the Brahman, the Absolute; literally, 'non-dualism'

5 Holy book of Hinduism, part of Mahabharata

And if you accept what I have ventured to suggest to you, you will find that the solution of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question also, insofar as it is concerned with the religious aspect, becomes very easy. As a non-Brahmin I would seek to purify Brahminism insofar as a non-Brahmin can, but not to destroy it... I would not touch his great learning wherever I see it. And whilst he may not claim superiority by reason of learning I myself must not withhold that need of homage that learning, wherever it resides, always commands. But I must not go deeper into the subject before a large audience of this kind.

After all I must fall upon one sovereign remedy which I think is applicable for all the ills of life. And that is, in whatever fight we engage, the fight should be clean and straight, there should not be the slightest departure from truth and ahimsa⁶. And if we will keep our carriage safely on these two rails you will find that our fight even though we may commit a thousand blunders will always smell clean and will be easier fought. And even as a train that is derailed comes to a disastrous end, so shall we, if we be derailed off these two rails, come to a disaster. A man who is truthful and does not mean ill even to his adversary will be slow to believe charges even against his foes. He will, however, try to understand the viewpoints of his opponents and will always keep an open mind and seek every opportunity of serving his opponents. I have endeavoured to apply this law in my relations with Englishmen and Europeans in general in South Africa as well as here and not without some success. How much more then should we apply this law in our homes, in our relations, in our domestic affairs, in connection with our own kith and kin?

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was an Indian lawyer and political and spiritual leader who was leading an anti-colonialist movement fighting for India's independence from British rule. He led non-violent protests to advance his cause.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

Does the doctrine of inherited superiority recognize persons as subjects or as objects? Why does Gandhi not accept it?

How would Gandhi resolve the Brahmin and non-Brahmin question?

What kind of approach does he advise when defending or promoting some cause?

6 Principle of avoiding violence towards all living beings.