

Spiritual Devotion as Social Action: Gandhian Social Engineering in Bharati Sarabhai's The Well of the People

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HOW TO CITE:

Singathi Upendar, Gaini Ramya Rani (2026). Spiritual Devotion as Social Action: Gandhian Social Engineering in Bharati Sarabhai's The Well of the People. International Journal of Special Education, 41(19s), 477 - 482

ABSTRACT:

This paper critically examines Bharati Sarabhai's play The Well of the People (1943) within the theoretical framework of Social Engineering and the Gandhian concept of Daridra Narayana. The play discusses themes such as untouchability, spiritual devotion and social reform within a rural Indian setting. The protagonist of the play, Rani, is an elderly, physically disabled Brahmin widow who saves money for a pilgrimage to Kashi but uses those savings to construct a temple well for the "untouchables" of her village. Thus, she symbolically redefines ritual purity and caste hierarchies. This research adopts 'close reading' and 'textual analyses' within the frameworks of Alexander and Schmidt's 'Social Engineering' and Gandhian socio-political thought. In pre-independence India, untouchables were not allowed to enter temples and to touch the water from the well in the name of purity. But, in the play, the protagonist builds a temple well for the untouchables with the money she saved for her pilgrimage to Kashi. Her decision reflects the Gandhian principle of Daridra Narayana, which means 'service to the oppressed is service to God', thereby transforming spiritual devotion into social action. The study argues that Sarabhai advocates caste reform not through confrontation, but through ethical persuasion grounded in Gandhian ideology. By foregrounding a Brahmin woman as the agent of reform, the play suggests a modern way of leadership which reimagines caste relations through inclusion and social responsibility. Thus, the paper showcases The Well of the People as a literary expression of Gandhian social engineering aimed to address untouchability in pre-independence India.

Keywords: Bharati Sarabhai's The Well of the People-Gandhian social engineering-spiritual devotion-reform-untouchability

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1. Introduction

Bharati Sarabhai's play The Well of the People (1943) is inspired by a real incident and reflects

the socio-political conditions of pre-independence India. Issues such as widowhood

and caste discrimination were widely debated, and there was a need to reform the caste hierarchies. In this social climate, Bharati Sarabhai tried to address issues such as untouchability and widowhood through the character of an elderly widow, Rani. In the play, Rani's religious aspiration of going to Kashi evolves into a socially transformative act- building a temple well for the untouchables. Thus, the playwright presented how spiritual devotion can be transformed into a concrete social action with the profound influence of Gandhian ideology.

The play is significant because it presents an important contribution to the discourse of caste-reform: from criticism of religion as a cause of caste system to Gandhi's strategy of reform within the Hindu framework. Gandhi's ideas of Daridro Narayana Hari (serving God is service to the poor) and treating untouchables as Harijans (People of God) place them at the highest rung of the caste ladder. This works as a spiritual and moral basis for social engineering. Sarabhai adopts this framework theatrically, suggesting that dismantling caste discrimination needs not only legal reform but also moral reorientation.

This paper argues that the playwright responds to the practice of untouchability by suggesting that it can be eradicated through the Gandhian way of social engineering in her play *The Well of the People*. By repositioning untouchables close to the divine, caste Hindus may abandon their indifference and discrimination towards them. Through symbolic structure, chorus technique, and the character of Rani, Sarabhai presents Gandhian humanism as a viable solution to caste oppression.

II.Objectives of the Study

- 1.To examine how Bharati Sarabhai represents untouchability and social reform in *The Well of the People*.
- 2.To analyse the play through the framework of Gandhian social engineering.

III.Research Questions

- 1.How does the playwright use Gandhian principles to address the issue of untouchability in *The Well of the People*?

IV.Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative textual analysis method to interpret literary presentations of historical and social issues in the selected play. The primary theoretical framework is derived from Alexander and Schmidt's concept of social engineering, defined as "arranging and channelling environmental and social forces to create a high probability that effective social action will occur" (1). Their assertion that social engineers function as moralists and utopian reformers provides a useful lens for understanding the solution proposed by Gandhian ideology.

Another concept used in this study is Gandhi's doctrine of Daridro Narayan (the identification of God with the poor). And, Gandhi's renaming of untouchables as Harijans aimed to invert the hierarchy of caste. His statement that "Humanism is the true religion. Daridranarayan is the true and highest God. We are all children of one God" (Gandhi 328) formulates this ethical vision.

By combining both of these frameworks, the paper analyses that Sarabhai's play suggests Gandhian social engineering as a mechanism of social reform to eradicate the untouchability.

V.Literature Review

Professor Tutun Mukherjee's e-PG Pathashala notes introduce the play's thematic concerns and place Sarabhai within early Indian English drama. While they are useful for understanding the contents of the play, these discussions do not fully theorize the Gandhian dimension.

Thenu Aida's dissertation *With History to Making History: Plays by Women in Indian Drama in English* offers a reading of the play from gender perspectives. Aida observes that the Old Woman is rendered largely inarticulate and mediated through the chorus, arguing that "the Old Woman is the passive acceptor" (Thenu, 109) and that the play privileges national liberation over individual satisfaction. This critique foregrounds issues of agency but does not explore Gandhian social engineering.

Durgesh Ravande's *Indian English Drama: A*

Gynocritical Perspective studies the play from feminist criticism, highlighting Sarabhai's contribution as a woman playwright. However, the study primarily emphasizes gender and leaves the Gandhian socio-religious framework unexplored.

Thus, a significant research gap exists in examining how the Gandhian way of social engineering is used to address untouchability, structurally and thematically, in the play. This paper addresses that gap.

VI. Discussion and Analysis

1. Summary of the Play

The inspiration for Bharati Sarabhai's *The Well of the People* came from a story about

an old woman that she happened to come across in Harijan. The play, written in 1943, revolves around an elderly widow whose lifelong dream of visiting Haridwar remains unfulfilled.

Structurally, the play is divided into two parts without conventional acts and features. The major characters of the play are the Old Woman (Rani), Chetan, Sanathan, and Vichitra. There are several minor characters such as a group of peasants, Gandhian village workers, and women's choruses.

The stage is symbolically arranged into foreground, middle space, and background, with the imagery of Haridwar, the Himalayas, the flowing Ganga, and pilgrims. Multiple choruses function as narrative voices that articulate both personal and collective experiences.

The drama opens with a fantasy-like Haridwar scene in which Chetan, Vichitra, and Sanathan appear in differently arranged stage spaces while shadowy choruses describe the pilgrimage. The action then shifts to a village with a mud hut, cottage crafts, and a portrait of Gandhiji with the spinning wheel. Here, a group of peasants voice their suffering under colonial and economic oppression, while Gandhian workers introduce the maxim *Daridra Narayana*. Now, Rani emerges at the centre of this stage and appears as an aged widow who has endured profound personal losses yet continues to cherish her two-decade-old desire to go on a pilgrimage.

But Rani's physical disability and financial constraints bring moral changes in her. Instead of seeking personal salvation, she decides to use her savings to build a temple well for the untouchables. As she collapses, the closing chorus affirms that the well will be finished. The chorus also sings the play's main message that real devotion lies in recognising the 'God within-Daridra Narayan' and serving humanity.

2. Gandhian Context and Social Engineering

Through the term Harijan, Gandhi wanted to place untouchables close to God and at the highest rung of the caste ladder. Others could also become close to God by treating untouchables without indifference and discrimination. His strategy to reform caste hierarchies and eradicate untouchability was this conceptual repositioning of the untouchables. By designating them as "Harijans" (children of God), Gandhi sought to relocate spiritual authority and moral worth toward the most marginalized. His explanation in *Young India* makes this intention clear:

"The other day a friend suggested to me that the word Harijana (man of God) be substituted for the word Antyaja (the last-born) that is being used for 'untouchables.' It was a word used by the great saint Narasinha Mehta, who by the by belonged to the Nagar Brahmana community and who defied the whole community by claiming the 'untouchables' as his own. I am delighted to adopt that word which is sanctified by having been used by such a great saint, but it has for me a deeper meaning than you may imagine. The 'untouchable', to me, is, compared to us, really a Harijana—a man of God, and we are 'Durjana' (men of evil). For whilst the 'untouchable' has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the shortcomings and faults that we lay at the door of these 'untouchables.' It is still open to us to be Harijana ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting of our sin against them." (Gandhi, 204)

Gandhi reinforced this repositioning in his article

Why Harijans, where he mentioned that the term was meant to restore dignity to the oppressed while challenging caste Hindus morally. He mentioned:

“Harijan means ‘a man of God.’ All the religions of the world describe God pre-eminently as the Friend of the friendless, Help of the helpless and Protector of the weak. The rest of the world apart, in India who can be more friendless, helpless or weaker than the forty million or more Hindus of India who are classified as ‘untouchables? If, therefore, anybody of people can be fitly described as men of God, they are surely these helpless, friendless and despised people. Hence, in the pages of Navajivan, I have always adopted Harijan as the name signifying ‘untouchables.’ 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. When Caste Hindus have of their own inner conviction and, therefore, voluntarily, got rid of the present-day untouchability, we shall all be called Harijans; for, according to my humble opinion, Caste Hindus will then have found favour with God and may therefore, be fitly described as His men.” (Gandhi,7)

At the same time, Gandhi differentiated his position from that of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. While Ambedkar called for the annihilation of caste, Gandhi wanted to eradicate untouchability through moral reform within Hindu framework. He clarified:

“I do not believe the caste system, even as distinguished from varnashram, to be an ‘odious and vicious dogma’. It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it, as there is about untouchability, and it is a by-product of the caste system it is only in the same sense that an ugly growth is of a body, or weeds of a crop. It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the out-caste, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it, or of a crop because of the weeds. The outcast-ness, in the sense we understand it has therefore, to be destroyed altogether.” (Gandhi ,3)

From the above statements, it can be deciphered

that Gandhi’s strategy is to re-engineer caste system from within, rather than dismantling it completely. Further, his motto Daridra Narayana emphasizes that serving the poor is equal to serving God. As he asserted, “Humanism is the true religion. Daridranarayan is the true and highest God. We are all children of one God” (328). This is how the place of divinity shifted from ritual spaces to suffering humanity and this provides a powerful ethical foundation for social reform.

This strategy of reform is very much similar with Alexander and Schmidt’s definition of social engineering as “arranging and channelling environmental and social forces to create a high probability that effective social action will occur” (1). Besides, their observation “All social engineers are moralists... [whose] first task is to eradicate evil” (3) aptly describes Gandhi’s reformist mission. Renaming of the untouchables and the doctrine of Daridra Narayana together work as a moral-psychological strategy aimed at transforming social attitudes. As a moralist and reformer, Gandhiji attempted to eradicate the evil of untouchability by elevating position of the oppressed and compelling caste Hindus toward repentance and equality. In this sense, Gandhi’s campaign can be understood as a deliberate form of social engineering targeted to reconstruct Hindu society on humanitarian and moral grounds.

3. Structure as Symbolic Reform

The structure of the play and the different stage settings are symbolic representations of the evolution of social reform. The opening scene and the Haridwar sequence represent orthodox Hinduism with the traditional performance of rituals. As the action shifts to the village, the stage displays Gandhian imagery—a portrait of Gandhi, the spinning wheel, and the mud hut—which symbolises the reformist consciousness. Later, the Old Woman’s decision to build a temple well for the untouchables becomes the turning point. After her death, the transformation of the stage into a temple space, accompanied by chants, indicates an evolved Hinduism shaped by Gandhi’s doctrine of Daridra Narayana.

In her foreword, Sarabhai explains this structural design as a reflection of the contemporary Hindu mindset in transition. The shift between Haridwar scene and the village scene signifies the shift from orthodoxy to humanity. Thus, the very structure of the play symbolizes the gradual transformation of Indian social consciousness from rigid denial of reform to acceptance of it under Gandhian influence.

4. Gandhi as Prophet and the Turn from Rituals to Humanism

In *The Well of the People*, Gandhi is treated as a prophetic figure who preserves India's spiritual heritage while guiding it toward ethical reform. As Sarabhai mentions in the foreword, he is "the miracle of ages, a prophet, who holds in himself India new and Old" (6). This formulates the core idea of the play: retaining faith while discarding superstition and inhuman practices. That's why, the early scenes highlight the futility of pilgrimage and rituals. Chetan laments that despite the pilgrims' devotion, "The slums, the village hovels, had not changed / And would not change" (18), while Vichitra adds that "Men dropped like flies... some fell dead as they came" (19). The choric voice then highlights the play's message: true salvation lies not in holy places but in inner realization—"Why do you go to Haridwar... when I am within?" (22); indeed, "The golden antelope runs on seeking; the priceless musk laughs, laughs within." (23). This vision is similar to Gandhi's belief that courage springs from recognizing that "God... is incarnate in every individual" (Desai, 168).

Rani's transformation exemplifies this Gandhian humanism. Despite her long time savings, she ultimately decides to give away her seventy silver coins to build a temple well for the untouchables, declaring social service superior to ritual piety. Her act challenges caste orthodoxy and follows the principle of Daridra Narayana. As Vichitra proclaims, the well will allow all to "come, drink and drink / Here at my well with Harijans" (43). Through this symbolic intervention, Sarabhai presents Gandhian social engineering as a practical and spiritual strategy for dismantling untouchability and rehumanizing Hindu society.

5. Water, purity and Gandhian Reordering of caste

An important symbolic element in *The Well of the People* is the association of water with caste purity and pollution. Traditionally, untouchables were denied access to wells and temples, making water a powerful marker of social exclusion. Against this backdrop, Rani's decision to use her lifelong pilgrimage savings to dig a temple well for the untouchables becomes a radical intervention. The well—culturally as vital as the sacred cow—had long reinforced caste hierarchy; Sarabhai reconfigures it as an instrument of equality. By making water accessible to Harijans, the play enacts Gandhi's vision of relocating the divine among the oppressed.

Through this narrative strategy, Sarabhai subtly advances a Gandhian model of social engineering. An elderly Maithili Brahmin widow becomes the unlikely agent of reform, challenging deep rooted orthodoxy. Rani's personal quest for salvation thus expands into a collective social mission. Her act not only exposes the deep-rooted friction of caste society but also proposes a practical pathway toward its transformation through humanistic faith and ethical action.

VII. Findings

1. Bharati Sarabhai deliberately presented Gandhian social engineering within a Hindu Framework as a practical solution to the problem of untouchability. The play propagates the idea of Harijan and Daridra Narayana, foundational concepts of social re-engineering.
2. Sarabhai presents Gandhian social engineering as both a practical and spiritual strategy for eradicating untouchability without annihilating caste system entirely.
3. The very structure of the play symbolizes the gradual transformation of Indian social consciousness—moving from a rigid denial of reform to acceptance of it under Gandhian influence.
4. Untouchability cannot be eradicated solely through political agitation but also through the moral and religious reorientation.

VIII. Conclusion

In *The Well of the People*, Bharati Sarabhai dramatized how spiritual devotion can become a vehicle for social reform. The play performs the very social engineering it advocates by elevating the untouchable to the status of Harijan and by highlighting service to the poor as the highest form of service to God. Rani's decision to donate her lifelong savings to build a temple well for the untouchables —symbolizes the moral

reorientation Gandhi envisioned for Hindu society. Sarabhai thus proposes that caste discrimination cannot be removed only through political agitation; it requires a moral and religious reorientation.

The play remains relevant because it presented a culturally embedded strategy of reform: not the rejection of tradition, but its ethical re-interpretation.

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