



The Gandhi-Ambedkar Caste Debate: Is it Just Black and White or Shades of Grey are Possible? Or Was Gandhiji Apologetic of the Caste System?

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Abstract:

*With the Gandhi- Ambedkar caste debate being a widely read and a thoroughly debated subject, there is supposed to be ‘nothing new’ to be discussed in the matter. However, on my reading into the subject I realised there is an unnecessary **dichotomising** between the views of Gandhiji and Ambedkar. On the contrary, both were social reformers fighting the evils the society was embedded in. Howsoever, an in-depth reading into this field of scholarship readily and quite often portrays Gandhiji as being apologetic of the caste system. My aim is to see for myself and ther by to bring to notice whether Gandhiji was really up to such an agenda i.e. of defending and justifying the caste system. For this the first and foremost aspect would be through what **lens** are we looking into the matter. In my view, reading Gandhiji from his very own **standpoint**, or what Quentin Skinner would call reading a theorist within his context. This resolves the whole problem of reading any ambiguity or contradictions which is claimed to be in Gandhi.*

Keywords: Ambedkar, Caste system, Gandhi

1. Introduction

Caste is an important element of Indian socio-political discourse even today. Unfortunately, its venomous fangs are at work in guiding and shaping our electoral politics. This brings to light the ideas our founding fathers had about this very unique and indigenous problem of a stratified and divided Indian society; the dialogues and debates they engaged in; the sources they relied on to fight this evil.

Whenever one encounters the caste problem Ambedkar definitely appears as a messiah at work for the “lower- castes” and untouchables. However, the father of the nation is doubted for his stand on the caste problem. My interest stems from this very idea to dig deeper into Gandhiji’s thinking and obviously actions in relation to the “harijans”. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar had very different political trajectories. They did not have just a theoretical debate but had very separate interest groups and their battle unfolded in the heart of the Indian national movement. Ambedkar was Gandhi’s most formidable adversary.

- It is to be questioned at the outset what were Gandhijis views on caste?
- Was he really in favour of the prevalent caste system/ apologetic of the caste system?
- Which idea of Hinduism he cherished and defended?
- The context in which he had to work and envisage the future?

2. Relevance of the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate

In post-independence India there has been a concretization of caste assertions. Instead, of bringing all on an equal footing, there is a tendency to valorize the caste differentiation and stratification (largely to capitalize

on vote bank politics). With this “re-affirmation” of caste, one needs to ponder on the ideas put forth by Gandhi who had asked for equality of all castes or in his words, “all should become harijans”.

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If we rely on the primary works by these thinkers as well as different secondary texts and commentaries on them, there is much to be deciphered. But there has to be a critical, reflective and analytical engagement. The debate on caste has to also be comparative in comparing the thoughts of Gandhi vis-à-vis what Ambedkar had to say on the same issues.

I am advocating a contextual reading of Gandhi from his very standpoint Gandhiji's context: It has to be realized, at the very outset the scenario Gandhiji was working in. And the method he applied to fulfill this dream. He in opposition to the imperial superiority took the path of indigenous historic pride (similar to aurobindo and many others). Or what gopal guru will call a deshi paradigm rather than a lessening derivative one.

So, Gandhiji relied on the understanding of gita and other such pristine texts to understand hinduism, not on what was being practiced and advocated by the priests and masses. He definitely stood by the varna system. He believed it to be purely functional and not having any hierarchical or iniquitous connotations. In saying that all can become one varna he had the idea of dependency on each other. untouchability to him was the biggest sin in humanity. It was according to him nothing more than excrescences of the caste system. He was an ardent advocate of interdinning and intermarriage among castes.

However, he did not find anything wrongful in “Hinduism” itself in its true essence and didn't want to let go of it. Gandhiji is also called the saint of status quo. No coherent narrative is found in him. Gandhi actually said everything and its opposite. This is something constantly projected against him. But for Gandhiji it was not something to be sorry about as he argued that no one has a perfect knowledge of things especially as abstract as religion. His life was basically a movement from one truth to another.

Additionally, reading Gandhiji in consonance with the socio-political scenario he lived in he had to take the Indian people en masse. If he would have sided with the untouchables and outcastes only; independence from the foreign rule would have probably taken longer to come.

To instantiate, On November 7, 1933, he embarked on a country-wide tour which covered 12,500 miles and lasted for nine months. The tour evoked great enthusiasm for the breaking down of the barriers which divided the untouchables from the rest of the Hindu community, but it also provoked the militancy of the orthodox Hindus. This was the double edged rope Gandhiji was walking on.

Another idea that needs to be taken into account is, Gandhi's idea of a heart change of the opponent can be applied to the caste issue also. So, he did not support an idea like separate electorate but instead urged the high caste hindus to serve the downtrodden and lowly.

His idea of untouchability can be simply be understood from following lines. “It is wrong to treat certain human beings as untouchables from birth. It is also wrong to entertain false scruples about touching, a dead body, which should be an object of pity and respect. It is only out of considerations of health that we bathe after handling a dead body, or after an application of oil, or a shave. A man who does not bathe in such cases may be looked upon as dirty, but surely not as a sinner. A mother may be 'untouchable' so long as she has not bathed, or washed her hands and feet, after cleaning up her child's mess, but if a child happened to touch her, it would not be polluted by the touch.”

Untouchability means pollution by the touch of certain persons by reason of their birth in a particular state or family. None can be born untouchable, as all are sparks of one and the same Fire.

Gandhi wrote extensively about the excrescences of the caste system as it operated in India. For the most part, it signified bondage and disgrace for those affected by it. It had led to the ultimate fragmentation of society, as there were rigid rules governing inter-dining and intermarriage even between members of a sub-caste. What dismayed him most was that these customs were common even among the intelligentsia in the country.

“Inter-dining, interdrinking, intermarrying, I hold are not essential for the promotion of democracy.[...]. We shall ever seek unity in diversity, and I decline to consider it a sin for a man to drink with anybody everybody.”

Such a discourse is revealing of Gandhi's adherence to certain mechanisms and even to the spirit of caste system. Even though he rejects the rigidity of caste system, he appreciates the distribution of men in different castes as a factor of socio-economic complementarily and social harmony.

“It is necessary to bear in mind that the question of removal of untouchability, though it has a political significance of the greatest importance, is essentially and predominantly a religious question to be solved by the Hindus and as such for them it overshadows even the political aspect. That is to say, the duty of touchables in respect of removal of untouchability can never be subordinated to any political exigencies; hence the present political situation must not in any way be allowed to postpone the endeavour to end untouchability. Those who contend that non-Hindus can vote on questions arising out of untouchability I would refer to the first resolution, since the new constitution passed at Nagpur in 1920. There it is clearly stated that the question of removal of untouchability is one specially and exclusively reserved for Hindus. Therefore, a convention has grown up that Non-Hindus should not interfere by their votes or otherwise with this religious question.

Gandhi's ashrams easily passed the test as regards to opposition to untouchability. ‘Untouchable’ families came to the ashram freely and lived in it. Everyone in the ashram had in turn to do sanitary service, which was looked upon not as a special calling but a universal duty. No outside labour was engaged for this purpose.

“There are no restrictions on interdining and all Ashramites sit to dinner in the same line. But no propaganda in favour of interdining is carried on outside the Ashram, as it is unnecessary for the removal of untouchability, which implies the lifting of bans imposed on Harijans in public institutions and discarding the superstition that a man is polluted by the touch of certain persons by reason of their birth in a particular caste. This disability can also be removed by legislation. Interdining and intermarriage are promoted in the ashram.

No one is high and no one is low in this world; therefore he who thinks he belongs to a high class is never high-class, and he who believes himself to be low is merely the victim of ignorance. He has been taught by his masters that he is low. If a Brahmin has knowledge, those who are without it will respect him as a matter of course. But if he is puffed up by the respect thus shown to him and imagines himself to belong to a high class, he directly ceases to be a Brahmin. **Virtue will always command respect, but when the man of virtue thinks much of himself, his virtue ceases to have any significance for the world. Talents of all kinds are a trust and must be utilized for the benefit of society.** The individual has no right to live unto himself. Indeed it is impossible to live unto oneself. We fully live unto ourselves when we live unto society. No matter what was the position in ancient times, no one can nowadays go through life claiming to belong to a high class. Society will not willingly admit any such claim to superiority, but only under duress. The world is now wide awake.

The Varna system implies the obliteration of all distinctions of high and low. If the carpenter is held to be superior to the shoemaker and the pleader or doctor is superior to both of them, no one would willingly become a shoemaker or carpenter and all would try to become pleaders or doctors. They would be entitled to do so and to be praised for doing so. That is to say, the Varna system would be looked upon as an evil and abolished as such. All are supposed to earn wages for living a decent life, the living wage being the same for all.

In so far as these principles win acceptance, they will render a positive service to society. It may be objected that if such a plan is accepted there will be no incentive for the acquisition of knowledge. But the object with which knowledge is acquired nowadays tends to corrupt it, and therefore the absence of an incentive will be entirely beneficial. Knowledge truly so called is intended for one's salvation, that is to say, service of mankind. Whoever has a desire to render service will certainly try to equip him with the requisite knowledge, and his knowledge will be an ornament to himself as well as to society

Even then there will be scope for competition in trying to be good and helpful. And there will be no discontent or disorder as all will receive a living wage. Varna is wrongly understood today. That wrong understanding must make way for the principles outlined above. Untouchability must go, and varnas should have nothing to do with interdining or intermarriage. Society will be better constituted than it is at present, and the impurity and hypocrisy which infest it now will be dislodged. But in my opinion Hinduism does not prohibit interdining or intermarriage with anybody by reason of mere birth. **Essential religion has nothing to do with the regulation of such social relations.**

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5. Gandhiji's context/Background to the Gandhi Ambedkar Debate

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I am advocating a contextual reading of Gandhi from his very standpoint. in September 1932 when Gandhi, who was in Yeravda Jail, went on a fast as a protest against the segregation of the so-called "untouchables" in the electoral arrangement planned for the new Indian constitution. Uncharitable critics described the fast as a form of coercion, a political blackmail. Gandhi was aware that his fast did exercise a moral pressure, but the pressure was directed not against those who disagreed with him, but against those who loved him and believed in him. He did not expect his critics to react in the same way as his friends and co-workers, but if his self-crucifixion could demonstrate his sincerity to them, the battle would be more than half-won. He sought to prick the conscience of the people and to convey to them something of his own inner anguish at a monstrous social tyranny.

More important than the new electoral arrangement was the emotional catharsis through which the Hindu community had passed. The fast was intended by Gandhi "to sting the conscience of the Hindu community into right religious action". The scrapping of separate electorates was only the beginning of the end of untouchability. Under Gandhi's inspiration, while he was still in prison, a new organization, Harijan Sevak Sangh was founded to combat untouchability and a new weekly paper, the Harijan, was started. Harijan means "children of God"; it was Gandhi's name for the "untouchables"

After his release Gandhi devoted himself almost wholly to the campaign against untouchability.. On June 25, while Gandhi was on his way to the municipal hall in Poona, a bomb was thrown at his party. Seven persons were injured, but Gandhi was unhurt. He expressed his "deep pity" for the unknown thrower of the bomb. "I am not aching for martyrdom," he said, "but if it comes in my way in the prosecution of what I consider to be the supreme duty in defence of the faith I hold in common with millions of Hindus, I shall have well earned it."

Gandhi's fast had aroused public enthusiasm, but diverted it from political to social issues. In May 1933, he suspended civil disobedience for six weeks. He revived it later, but confined it to himself. A year later he discontinued it: this was a recognition of the fact that the country was fatigued and in no mood to continue a campaign of defiance. These decisions disconcerted many of his adherents, who did not relish his moral and religious approach to political issues, and chafed at his self-imposed restraints. Gandhi sensed the critical mood in the Congress party and in October 1934, announced his retirement from it. For the next three years, not politics but village economics was his dominant interest.

6. Concluding remarks

The movement for the removal of untouchability is one of self-purification. No man can be pressuried against his will. Therefore, there can be no force directly or indirectly used against the orthodox. It should be remembered that many of us were like the orthodox people before our recognition of the necessity of the removal of untouchability. We would not then have liked anybody to block our way to the temples, because we in those days believed, no doubt wrongly as we now think, that Harijans should not be allowed to enter temples. Even so may we not block the way of the orthodox to the temples?

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