

"Rethinking Caste through Gandhi and Ambedkar's Dialogues"

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Abstract

the analysis in the article captures a key aspect of the complex relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, especially concerning their perspectives on the term's 'caste' and 'varṇa' within the context of Hindu socio-religious practices. Gandhi's vision was rooted in the idea of transcending traditional caste hierarchies and revitalizing Hinduism based on universal values. Gandhi believed in the possibility of transforming the varṇa system into a harmonious social order founded on principles of peace, love, and kindness. On the other hand, Ambedkar, argued that the concept had become deeply entrenched in age-old hierarchical structures and, as a result, had lost its transformative potential. Instead, he advocated for a more radical approach, emphasizing the need for a complete annihilation of the caste system and the establishment of a more egalitarian society.

The divergence in their views reflects different strategies for addressing the deeply rooted social issues in India. Gandhi, influenced by his commitment to non-violence and a vision of a unified Hindu society, sought reform from within the existing religious and social frameworks. In contrast, Ambedkar, pursued a more radical path, advocating for legal and social measures to break the shackles of caste.

The disagreement between Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar during late colonial India, specifically in 1932, on the issue of 'untouchability', the debate over separate electorates for 'untouchables' and other communities' underscores the complexities of identity, representation, and social justice during that period. In contemporary India, the legacy of these disagreements is evident in the divergent views held by their followers.

In contemporary India, the legacy of these disagreements is evident in the divergent views held by their followers. The criticism and debates between followers of Gandhi and Ambedkar reflect broader societal discussions on caste, social justice, and anti-caste movements. The study of these disputes contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped India's socio-political landscape..

Divergent Ideologies of Gandhi and Ambedkar

The term 'varna' was mentioned in ancient texts like the R̥gveda and later in epics like the Mahābhārata, but social and religious movements like the Arya Samaj redefined it to distinguish it from the contemporary caste system. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who founded the Samaj in 1875, proposed replacing the caste system with the Vedic fourfold varṇa system. This system would place individuals in a varṇa based on their qualities, actions, and nature, as determined by wise individuals. However, implementing this system posed various challenges, especially regarding a person's unchangeable 'nature', which could create difficulties in determining one's varṇa. Gandhi aimed to reform Hinduism rooted in

universal values, while Ambedkar proposed a new path called Navayana ('neo-Buddhism') focusing on material equality rather than spiritual liberation. They both sought to revitalize religious ideals but had different visions for the society that would be formed from this reconstruction. Gandhi envisioned a harmonious society structured by an ideal varṇa, while Ambedkar believed varṇa's long history of hierarchy could impede its capacity to dismantle oppressive systems.

Ambedkar and the Marginalized Sections in India

Three recurring themes emerge from Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches on caste, notably in "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables" (WCGU), "Annihilation of Caste" (AOC), and "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches" (WAS). These themes are crucial in understanding his disagreements with Gandhi regarding caste and 'untouchability'. Firstly, despite the Arya Samaj's portrayal of a society composed of four varṇas, Ambedkar emphasized that present upper caste Hindus do not view the 'untouchables' within an integrated societal framework. He contended that advising the Untouchables not to act against the Hindus under the premise that they would be going against their own community might be comprehensible. However, presuming that the Hindus consider the Untouchables as part of their own community is creating a false belief.

The 'untouchables' were not allowed by higher caste Hindus to do simple things like getting water from wells, owning land, or raising cattle. This was pointed out to Gandhi in a meeting in 1931. Gandhi believed in an ideal system with four cooperative varṇas, and he thought the caste differences and 'untouchability' were recent additions. But Dr. Ambedkar disagreed. He thought the idea of four cooperating varṇas was the root cause of inequality and the caste system, including 'untouchability'. So, the question remains if the 'untouchables' can see Gandhi as their friend.

Dr. Ambedkar asks a question: How can the 'untouchables' see Gandhi as their friend? He thinks Gandhi might truly believe that the issue of 'untouchability' is a problem related to society. However, the 'untouchables' can't consider him their friend because Gandhi wants to keep the caste system (varṇa) but end 'untouchability'. Dr. Ambedkar explains that 'untouchability' is actually an extension of the caste system. So, without getting rid of the caste system, there's no way to get rid of 'untouchability'.

Dr. Ambedkar asserts that three restrictions govern the life of a typical uneducated Hindu.: inter-dining, intermarriage, and avoiding touching specific groups— While the initial pair mirrors wider caste concepts, the third one specifically represents the concept of 'untouchability'.. Although they may appear separate, for Hindus, these form a unified system. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar asserts that attempting to eradicate discrimination without dismantling the social structure is futile. He argues against the notion the social structure and discrimination are distinct, stating them inseparable. Dr. Ambedkar denies any separation between caste practices, untouchability, and the idealized varṇa system, declaring both caste and varṇa as equally harmful concepts.

Dr. Ambedkar challenges Gandhi's argument that Dining together and marrying across different groups aren't crucial by differentiating between family relations and caste relations. Ambedkar emphasizes that while familial bonds can exist without these practices, the lack of such connections between Hindus and 'untouchables' necessitates Dining together and inter-caste marriage to dissolve the rigid barriers of 'untouchability'. He asserts that intermarriage can create a sense of belonging and kinship among different castes, crucial to eliminating the separatist feelings fostered by caste distinctions. Despite the Congress's assertion that 'untouchables' are fragments of Hindu society, the inability to inter-dine or inter-caste marriage with Hindus signifies their separation.

Dr. Ambedkar often talked about the political and the financial dimensions of the caste system,

suggesting that various societal and economic pressures were used to uphold caste hierarchies. He discussed that while Hinduism has adapted to external influences, it has not accepted 'untouchables' or removed the practice of 'untouchability'. Past attempts to abolish 'untouchability' failed because upper caste Hindus, about 240 million people, benefit from employing around 60 million 'untouchables' as laborers or in menial roles like sweepers and scavengers. Dr. Ambedkar emphasized that 'untouchability' isn't just based on religion but is a structure of economic exploitation. The caste structure doesn't only divide labor; it separates laborers into rigid, hierarchical compartments. Consequently, the 'untouchables' lend their support to the movement against British colonial rule., but they seek more than just political freedom. They aim for a societal equality in India that isn't controlled solely by Hindus and ensures constitutional protections for 'untouchables'.

Dr. Ambedkar consistently stressed that everyday life within Hinduism is discernable by the Brahmanical conception of unequal hierarchy across social classes. This principle restricts 'untouchables' from accessing education, owning property, or holding authoritative positions. Dr. Ambedkar says, this principle is not incidental but central to Hindu life and is considered sacred, making it difficult for Hindus to challenge or abandon it. He claimed that caste practices aren't followed because Hindus are inherently wrong but due to their adherence to scriptural texts like the Manusmṛiti, which dictate rules about dining and marriage between castes. Dr. Ambedkar urged reformers to free people from the impact of such texts, believing that this would naturally lead to more integration and acceptance among castes. Destroying caste (varṇapoc), a monumental task according to him, involves rejecting the religious belief that the societal structure has divine authority. Dr. Ambedkar also highlighted the difference between 'untouchability' as a visible practice and the underlying mental disposition that leads to social discrimination. While the previous might be fading in urban areas, the latter remains deeply rooted, particularly in village settings. Changing these deep-rooted beliefs is crucial because caste isn't just a physical obstacle but a mental construct, requiring a significant shift in thought.

Gandhi and the Integral Nature of the Hindu Community

A thorough examination of Gandhi's various replies in the Collected Works regarding caste shows that at times, his perspectives align closely with Dr. Ambedkar's despite their fundamental divergence regarding caste, viewed as varṇaide and varṇapoc, respectively. It's important to consider Gandhi's disclaimer about not being too concerned with maintaining consistency when surveying his opinions on significant topics like caste, politics, or religion. In his quest to find the truth, this person has often changed his earlier beliefs or opinions. Even though I am getting older, I don't feel like I've stopped learning or that my learning will end when my body dies. So, if anyone finds two things I've written that don't match up or seem different, they should probably trust the newer one if they still think I'm making sense.

As an example of these changes in perspective, one particular shift can be highlighted: initially, during the initial years of the 1920s, Gandhi supported limits on dining together and marrying across different groups, asserting that these practices and the elimination of 'untouchability' were separate issues. However, by 1945, his stance had become more proactive. Gandhi replies to Dr Ambedkar in the Harijan (18 July 1936) by stating difference between varṇa and caste: The varṇa system's law instructs us that each person must earn a living by following the traditional occupation of their family. Therefore, no profession is considered too low or too high. The duties of a Brahmin—a spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are seen as equal, and when performed diligently, both hold the same value in God's eyes.

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi shared a belief in democracy as a governing method, yet their view diverged in their perceptions of democracy's nature and extent. Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the parliamentary system as suitable for independent India, while Gandhi harbored minimal regard for the parliamentary form of government. Dr. Ambedkar, known for his staunch social activism, upheld firm principles, whereas Gandhi demonstrated flexibility in his ideology, except for his unwavering commitment to non-violence.

The law of the varna system dictates that individuals should pursue the hereditary profession of their family to earn a living. Consequently, no job is deemed inferior or superior. The responsibilities of a Brahmin—a spiritual mentor—and a scavenger are regarded as equal, and when carried out with dedication, both are equally valued by God.

He summarized these thoughts in 1934, stating that adherence to varṇa means honoring the hereditary vocations of ancestors as a duty. Gandhi believed that disregarding varṇa's principles and seeking livelihoods beyond hereditary occupations would lead to social disorder. Conversely, he believed adherence to varṇa would prevent conflicts between wealthy and less privileged groups.

Gandhi's understanding of caste, marked by the four divisions, is portrayed as essential for Hinduism's stability but has also accumulated elements like 'untouchability.' He proposed that adhering to varṇa is guided by an eternal law of heredity where failure to fulfill specific varṇa duties could lead to reincarnation into another varṇa. This doctrine of rebirth is fundamental to Gandhi's perception of varṇa. However, although all individuals do not share the same aptitudes and proclivities, all occupations will be equally respectable in an ideal varṇāśrama—whether that of the teacher, lawyer, leather worker, carpenter, scavenger and so on. Such an institution will not be marred by the 'monstrous anomaly' of the first three varṇas ruling over the Shudras who have to toil away for the rest.

Gandhi's perspective on varṇa and caste revolves around several interconnected ideas. He acknowledges that despite some Brahmins deviating from the high ideals of varṇa, there still exist genuine Brahmins who sustain themselves on alms and impart spiritual knowledge. Gandhi argues that rejecting varṇa due to some Brahmins' misconduct would be improper, emphasizing that varṇa signifies following hereditary callings in a dutiful manner. He summarized these thoughts in 1934, stating that adherence to varṇa means honoring the hereditary vocations of ancestors as a duty. Gandhi believed that disregarding varṇa's principles and seeking livelihoods beyond hereditary occupations would lead to social disorder. Conversely, he believed adherence to varṇa would prevent conflicts between wealthy and less privileged groups.

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Gandhi advocated for a reform in the varṇāśrama system by rejecting the ideas of superiority and inferiority attached to different castes. He believed that the varṇāśrama was initially a way for both Brahmins and Shudras to fulfill their specific varṇa duties and focus on the everlasting, aiming for liberation (mokṣa). Gandhi envisioned a reformed varṇāśrama system where even the children of scavengers could continue their family professions without feeling degraded. In this reconstituted system, they would not be deemed untouchables any more than Brahmins. Gandhi argued that the problem didn't lie in acknowledging the law of heredity and the transfer of traits through generations, but in the flawed

concept of inequality.

Gandhi contested Ambedkar's view that the annihilation of the caste system is the sole solution to emancipating the outcastes. Gandhi acknowledged that educated Hindus shared Ambedkar's perspective but argued that 'untouchability', which he aimed to eliminate completely, stemmed not from varṇāśrama but from distinctions of high and low. He compared the idea of destroying caste due to its flaws to removing a body due to an ugly growth or eradicating crops because of weeds. Gandhi believed that once the concept of 'high-and-low-ness' is eradicated, varṇāśrama would no longer embody the aspects that Ambedkar despised. Despite concerns about how Gandhi's influence might endorse caste-based discriminations, especially since people often don't differentiate between varṇa and caste in daily life, Gandhi remained unwavering in his commitment to varṇaide.

On different occasions, Gandhi's response to his critics who claimed that the ideal varṇa he envisioned only existed in his imagination was to acknowledge the unfortunate reality of this fact. He urged for the reformation of deteriorated structures without destroying the original varṇa system, striving to reach this ideal as much as possible.

Gandhi, defining terms like 'caste' and 'caste system' as varṇaide, argued that practices like inter-dining and intermarriage were not fundamentally linked to eradicating 'untouchability'. He believed these were social customs rather than religious observances and did not inherently signify superiority. He maintained that individuals, born into specific varṇas, should fulfill their duties without pride in their unique qualities. Gandhi envisioned a reconstituted varṇa system that wouldn't restrict inter-dining or intermarriage, indicating that such restrictions were social convenience rather than superiority-based. He emphasized that in the future varṇa system, inter-dining and intermarriage across varṇas wouldn't be discouraged and wouldn't be associated with untouchability. Gandhi made a distinction between untouchability's removal and varṇashrama dharma, asserting that intermingling across varṇas wouldn't necessarily mean accepting untouchability. Despite advocating for social reforms like inter-dining, Gandhi asserted that this wasn't the same as eradicating 'untouchability'. He argued that it was crucial to separate these issues, highlighting the need to eliminate social and religious injustices that prevented equal access to public amenities.

Gandhi's dedication to removing 'untouchability' was evident, often criticizing the absence of compassion and equality in the treatment of the 'untouchables' within Hindu society. He indicated a readiness to discard the ideal varṇa system in favor of eliminating 'untouchability', placing greater importance on the latter over varṇashrama. He thought that by eradicating 'untouchability', the varṇa system might become more agreeable to society. He urged those adhering to tradition to forsake caste biases for the sake of societal integration.

Examining Gandhi and Ambedkar's Perspectives

This discussion underscores the contrasting sociopolitical interpretations of varṇa system by Gandhi and Ambedkar regarding caste dynamics. Gandhi supported eradicating 'untouchability' alongside reinstating an ideal varṇa system, whereas Ambedkar promoted complete caste abolition through practices like dining together and marrying across caste lines to achieve genuine social equality.. Ambedkar rejected varṇaide, arguing it was impractical and camouflaged the reinforcement of varṇapoc. He noted the rigidity of caste labels and the impracticality of fitting diverse human qualities into four distinct classes. Ambedkar maintained that the relation between higher castes and Shudras was essentially that of master and servant, evident in texts like Manusmṛti that restricted Shudras from education and wealth. When Ambedkar spoke of caste, he referred to varṇapoc, not the idealized varṇa.

He argued that Hinduism's everyday practices were derived from texts like Manusmṛti, not spiritual equality projected in scriptures. Gandhi's belief that Hinduism's essence lay in teachings of one God and ahimsa clashed with Ambedkar's view that Hinduism was inherently divisive.

Critics such as Sant Ram and Periyar EVR dismissed Gandhi's differentiation between caste and varṇa, considering it too nuanced for widespread comprehension. They perceived Gandhi's support for varṇāśrama as a means to uphold Brahmanical dominance. Gandhi envisioned a society free from 'untouchability', where the varṇāśrama system would operate without hierarchy, with every individual contributing equally through assigned roles and services. In the context of the classical Vedantic-Yogic Hindu socio-religious debate, which involves accepting the social and ritual hierarchy while also transcending it spiritually, the discussions between Gandhi and Ambedkar can be seen as clashes between two opposing viewpoints. Gandhi represented a critical perspective aiming to discard the hierarchical layers of varṇa-āśrama-dharma and portrayed Hinduism as embodying universal principles such as non-violence, peace, and love. Conversely, Ambedkar took a strong stance, passionately highlighting that despite Hindu spiritual traditions existing for centuries, caste-based ideas, perspectives, and standards still endure.

Mr. Gandhi advocated for the reform of Hinduism by aiming to eliminate 'untouchability' and establish self-governing villages. In contrast, Ambedkar, who favored urban settings propelled by technology, viewed villages as morally corrupted. While Gandhi generally harbored skepticism regarding state intervention, Dr. Ambedkar, known as a "steadfast constitutionalist," sought solutions through state intervention. Moreover, Dr. Ambedkar differentiated between the transfer of power from Britain to India and the organization of Dalits into a separate bloc for their own interests. Amid these discussions, Ambedkar described the conflicts between 'untouchables' and upper-caste Hindus as structured by a "tragic" relationship, emphasizing the challenges in reform endeavors due to the orthodox beliefs of some and the self-respect of others. The debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar highlighted the disparity between a future varṇa concept devoid of hierarchy and the existing caste reality characterized by exclusivity and oppression. It's crucial to acknowledge these differences in significance amid the prevalent strong criticisms often exchanged among followers of Gandhi and Ambedkar.

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