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Mafuza Yasmin, Assistant Professor, Sociology CCH

Gandhi and Ambedkar on Human Dignity

By Ravi Ranjan*

Abstract

This research paper seeks to explain the idea of human dignity by analysing Gandhi's and Ambedkar's discourses on self, untouchability and the emancipatory social projects they propose in their writings and political practices. Convergences and divergences are evident in their shared enterprise to transcend humiliation for institutionalising a plural living world of self- respect, social recognition and dignity. They relentlessly tried to solve the problems of hierarchized and humiliating social order to ensue human dignity in their own ways. In India, day-to-day caste violence and oppression based on our horizontal and vertical identity often erodes human freedom and disallows equal respect as human being. These two founding fathers of modern India fought valiantly against these social evils and tried their best to rescue human dignity by changing individual from within to respect each other and to resist humiliating practices to open space for social recognition.

In OUR EVERYDAY LIFE few basic questions always keep troubling us. Why do we like to be respected and honoured? Why a Hindu funeral pyre can only be lit by a *Dom/Mahar* (Dalits)? If their lighting is to ensure our last journey to heaven then why are they considered as outcaste and untouchables? Does God divide people in four types of *vamas?* If my birth is not my choice then why I have to pay and suffer and get humiliated to cross the social boundary of caste or *jati?* On what basis do we relate ourselves with other selves? Who is entitled to decide about my last birth and next birth? Why and how the state processes have marginalized the livelihood resources of a large number of people and had impaired their support base? Such basic questions not only regulate our social relations but they do influence the socio-political discourses. Interrogating the idea of human dignity in Indian contend may help us in searching for some ways to answer these questions.

Gandhi and Ambedkar Contemporary Crisis and their Relevance

There are many ways in which we can understand the contemporary crisis of global India; some are external but majority of the problems are internal, few are legal but many are socio-political, and most of them are ethical and moral. Escalating violent conflicts, oppression, marginalization and exclusion has been producing and reproducing humiliation which dehumanizes the human 'self.' The relation of self to other self, hegemonic self to the oppressed self and individual self with the shared self embarks on the idea of equality and hence tries to eradicate untouchability and ensures dignity. In the Indian context the notion of equality still has to reach its constitutional commitment to be a righteous republic.[1] Therefore, it is required to deliberate on ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar that are constantly argued for dignified and harmonious human existence.

Gandhi and Ambedkar had differences and serious conflicts over their respective political, social and religious philosophies and practical-political strategies, but both shared a genuine and deep commitment to the eradication of untouchability. Due to this reason, movements for social transformation have become 'weak and localized' and ideologically 'fragmented or stagnant' because of a standardized positioning of Gandhi and Ambedkar as each other's enemy. We need to get out of this situation and attempt to move forward by 'building bridges between the two rich discourses of our times.'[2]

Among many of the modern Indian thinkers, activists and social reformers Gandhi and Ambedkar are of significance for many reasons. First, they developed experiential epistemology, through their political practices and daily life social transactions. Second, both of them were among the main leaders and social mobilizers of the independence movement and were well equipped with legal knowledge and negotiation tactics for their cause. They have produced a vast amount of original writings based on their belief; research and living and hold practices that place them as mass leaders with intellectual depth. Third, while critical to each otherâ€™s views? both of them have a common objective of fighting oppression and to liberate individuals to realise their human worth and capability[3] which is required for enhancing human dignity. Fourth, both the leaders were well versed with Indian traditions and social practices and were having a distinctive capacity to conceptualize their self-experience and theorize human dignity from Indian perspective.

Realizing dignity and feeling humiliated are experiences of the 'self' in a contextualized space. Human dignity may be decoded from a triangular relationship and where experiences play an important role in the production of thought and in doing social theory."[4]

In the case of Gandhi and Ambedkar, their experiences are sources of reflective consciousness that helped them to come out with their ideas of social change. They generate a set of moral or political categories that they deploy to motivate the masses for the purification of society and the purification of the soul. Both these thinkers of modern India gained an understanding of social nuances and an adequate understanding of India through voyages across Indian regions. For both of them, experience provides the vantage point for political mobilization of the masses.[5]

Gandhi and Ambedkar on Idea of the 'Self'

'Self' is an important category to study human dignity because it is the human 'self' that feels suffering and pain, experiences humiliation and advocates for dignity. The struggle against colonialism and imperialism, brought to the foreground both a sense of difference from the colonizer, as well as a strong sense of one's identity. The social and political leadership in each community articulated its identity by drawing upon the resources internal to the self/community. Gandhi and Ambedkar were studying self and strategizing their politics from different perspectives. Gandhi's notion of self starts with a moral question and ends with a moral answer. While Gandhi was more concerned about the political self while formulating *swaraj,* Ambedkar was more focused on social self to ensure equality to untouchables and their liberation *(mokshah).*

For Gandhi, the self both expands into the civilization self and contracts into the individual self. Self and the other can exist peacefully, respecting each other's difference.6 *Hind Swaraj* is Gandhi's meditation on India's self and India's sovereignty.

An enlightened thinker, Ambedkar, the self, had to be painstakingly carved out of the shaclding dross of a violent, hierarchical, and unequal society; it had to emerge out of the darkness of pre-modernity into the light of the rule of law, social justice, and egalitarian citizenship. Ambedkar rejected all interpretation of selfhood that subjected the self to rituals of humiliation, denied its intrinsic dignity, or resented its capacity for transformation and renewal. To Ambedkar, political freedom *(swaraj)* meant precisely the freedom to make the self. It was more a social self whose identity of being Dalit was cause of historical suffering and humiliation meted out to by caste Hindus.[7]

Contextualizing Humiliation: Gandhi and Ambedkar on Experience of Untouchability

What distinguishes humans from animals is the ability to experience the hurt caused by humiliation.[8] Humiliation is a normal risk in social interaction. In the Indian context it is the notion of untouchability that form and content of humiliation.[9] The social practices and hierarchized order of the Indian society itself produces the site for humiliation in modern India.

The western tradition through colonial rule in different parts of the world had subjected local people to both crude and subtle forms of humiliation.[10] India's nationalists ignored the internal forms of humiliation that emanate from the social practices based on caste, untouchability, and gender discrimination. However, they were over sensitive to racial humiliation; this looks internally conservative and externally radical.

Feeling of humiliation and shame is a powerful and ubiquitous emotion in social life, and humiliation is the active public face of shame: it is the hostile infliction of shame on others.[11]

In the Indian context, untouchability was both a condition of existence, as well as a violent expression of power. In August 1917, when the British colonial government, in anticipation of the 1919 Government of India Act, announced that it intended to set up self- government bodies, it provided an immediate opportunity to the untouchables, who constituted about

one-seventh of the population, to claim representation as an important political group. They demanded representation proportionate to their numerical strength in the promised self-government bodies. Untouchability as a unique form of inequality is not prevalent anywhere else except in Hindu India. Day to day humiliation and feeling of indignity was not new to Indian society, where the sense of honour was heavily stressed in social life and in social relations. For Gandhi, reason (moral) was invoked internally from within the tradition, while for Ambedkar it was, seemingly, invoking reason both internally and externally.

Ambedkar invokes the category of self-respect that signifies the transcendence of Bahishkrut Bharat[12] (the India of the excludedâ€"the untouchables) into Prabuddha Bharat[13] (the India of the enlightened people). Ambedkar's adoption of a modern vocabulary (social justice, equality, self-respect, and dignity) was definitely aimed at making a dent in the local configurations of caste and community. The untouchable's body and its shadow worked in tandem to produce a humiliating experience for the Dalits. In Ambedkar, the idea of self-respect as part of the larger concept of cultural justice springs from another experiential space - sacred space (Hindu temple).Â In Ambedkar's framework of social justice, the temple as sacred space gets seriously implicated in the radical politics that is aimed at creating a kind of negative consciousness among the untouchables.[14] Ambedkar argues that those untouchables who were responsible for constructing and later protecting the Hindu temple have every reason to feel the loss of self-respect as their labour contribution was not recognized by high-caste Hindus.[15] In his view, contribution generates the language of right to enter the temple.[16] If the untouchables failed to assert their right, then their self-respect would diminish.

Gandhi deploys the moral category of *'seva* in order to forge the intra-group solidarity that he thought was necessary for India's independence. Gandhi differs from Ambedkar to the extent that he does not deploy the modern language of rights while advocating temple entry for the untouchables. On the contrary, he puts emphasis on the moral duty of the high-caste Hindus to allow the untouchables to enter the Hindu temples and appeals them that untouchables have committed sin in their previous birth, is it not your moral duty to give them chance to wash their sin in the sacred space'[17] Here, Gandhi fails to link actual labour with justice and self- espect.[18] Gandhi produces change by mobilizing against the British rule. Ambedkar, on the other hand, tries to reason with the caste Hindus by deploying disembodied universal reason based on the notion of 'entitlement,' in terms of the capacity to exercise autonomy over the distribution of value produced by one's own social labour.[19] Ambedkar, through his historical analysis and experiences, arrived at the conclusion that untouchability is inseparable from the caste system and Hinduism. Ambedkar asked untouchables to make an unflinching resolve not tb eat the throw-out crumbs. We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help, regain our self-respect, and gain self-knowledge.[20]

Gandhi put the campaign against untouchability high on the national agenda and gave it unprecedented momentum.[21] Initially, Gandhi's anti-untouchability work was guided by his

reformist social-religious morality. He regarded untouchability as a historically institutionalized sin or *adharma* on the part of the caste Hindus, who should bear a primary responsibility for ending it. In *Young India,* he made the point that 'Non-cooperation against the government means cooperation among the governed, and if Hindus do not remove the sin of untouchability there will be no *swaraj,* whether in one year or in one hundred years. *Swaraj* is unattainable without the removal of the sins of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity.[22] Gandhi's initial critique of untouchability failed to challenge its scriptural or moral basis and attacked it on political grounds only.

Ambedkar analysed the nature of the caste system and tried to find out how it differed from other kinds of inequality, and was sustained for centuries. In Ambedkar's view, the practice of untouchability was a necessary product of the caste system. Ambedkar explained that there were three factors responsible for continuation of untouchability; they are ideological, economic and political.

Gandhi was unable to see any internal connection between untouchability and the caste system. Gandhi defended the caste system on several grounds.[23] Untouchability was the most acute manifestation of this pervasive ethos of pollution. Gandhian explanations were more rigid without working into possibility of class mobility and change of caste unless one converts himself. He equated religion with spirituality, the latter with morality, and defined morality in terms of self-purification and active social service. For Gandhi untouchability was a mixture of social and moral problems which can be corrected through minimum state intervention. He was, in principle, opposed to state-imposed and even state-initiated reforms.

For Ambedkar untouchables developed deep, subtle and often unconscious self-contempt, and half-believed that they were worthy of nothing better; therefore it was equally important that the untouchables should develop a sense of self-respect, which alone can generate a 'divine discontent' with their current condition and a `burning desire' to change it.[24] The untouchables must realise that they were fighting not only to 'improve' their material conditions but also to regain their 'honour' and 'dignity' and reclaim the 'title deeds' of their humanity that had been taken away by their masters. Ambedkar was trying to establish political institutions to pursue democratic rights for their people, as political institutions can promise people a sense of respect and dignity. Ambedkar insisted on a separate electorate for the untouchables at the Second Round Table Conference, and secured the Communal Award of 1931. When Gandhi opposed it and embarked on an indefinite fast, Ambedkar accepted a compromise, which saw an increase in the number of untouchable representatives.[25]

Gandhi suggests a two-way strategy to fight the problem of untouchability. First and most important, he sought to convince and convert the caste Hindus and mobilise their energies by means of moral and religious appeals. Second, he encouraged them to undertake welfare activities among the untouchables in a spirit of remorse and guilt. Gandhi launched a systematic campaign against untouchability. He denounced it on every available occasion. Under his leadership, the 1920 Congress session passed a resolution demanding that the

untouchables be admitted to Hindu temples and to National schools and colleges set up during the Non- Cooperation Movement. He started calling them *'harijans'* although many people found it patronising, including Ambedkar. Gandhi set a personal example by admitting a *harijan* woman in his *ashram* despite the opposition of some of its members, including his wife.

Despite Gandhi's attempts to weaken irrational and deep-seated prejudices, caste Hindus remained opaque to his appeals. When title British government decided in 1932 to grant the *harijans* a separate electorate and raised the spectre of a major split within the Hindu community, Gandhi announced a 'fast unto death' on 20 September 1932. In a widely circulated statement, he made it abundantly clear that the fast was primarily directed not against the separate electorate alone but the practice of untouchability itself: 'No patched-up agreement between caste Hindus and rival depressed class leaders will answer the purpose. The agreement to be valid has to be real. If the Hindu mass mind is not yet prepared to banish untouchability root and branch, it must sacrifice me without the slightest hesitation.'[26]

Exploring Human Dignity: A Critical Evaluation

Different from Ambedkar, Gandhi believed that the historical Hinduism of his time had a capacity to be reformed and to eliminate untouchability and he was instrumental in setting up the All-India Anti Untouchability League as an integral part of his campaign. Ambedkar, one of the three *harijan* members, wanted it to launch a nationwide civil rights movement.[27] He demanded that the League should attack not just untouchability but the caste system itself and vigorously campaigned against the taboos on inter-caste dining and marriage. When his proposals were turned down he resigned. After that Gandhi initiated the Harijan Sevak Sangh for the welfare of untouchables. He wanted it to ban untouchability and punish those found guilty of practising it. He also wanted it to introduce a massive social, educational and economic programme of *harijan* uplift, including giving them land for resettlement and necessary financial grants. He proposed that all elected bodies should reserve seats for them in proportion to their number in the population as a whole, but was against reservations in employment and in school and university admissions where merit alone was to count.

Although Gandhi's campaign created a widespread reformist movement among caste Hindus, Ambedkar concluded that Hindu society was not going to change and that the untouchables had no hope of achieving social equality with caste Hindus.

In Ambedkar, self-respect emerges from an affirmative link between the moral quality of labour and the claim that can be made over the distribution of the fruits of that labour. It was Ambedkar who took Gandhi's battle against untouchability in post independent India, when the Constituent Assembly passed article 11 declaring untouchability a cognisable offence. However, till the end of their life, they differed on the grounds of emancipation in terms of both causality and instrumentality.

To affirm the dignity of individuals particularly of untouchables, Ambedkar drew an important distinction between independence of the country and independence of its people. To

Ambedkar an independent India might mean little more than transfer of power from one set of masters to another, and make no difference to and even worsen the condition of the oppressed classes, especially the Dalits. He also argued that the question of untouchability was not just a social question like child marriage or a ban on widow reÂmarriage as Gandhi and others had argued. It was fundamentally an economic and political problem requiring a radical restructuring of not just the Hindu society but the Indian society as a whole and without this radical restructuring it is difficult to ensure dignity of every individual. For Ambedkar individual dignity was very important for liberation; therefore, he reinterpreted the Buddhist foundations in a new way that can deal with equity and human dignity. As Ambedkar said of Buddha, the latter was not a 'mokshadata but a margadata'.[28]

Ambedkar's vision of constitutive elements of dignity can be articulated in terms of the three interrelated ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. Social equality referred to equality of status and respect based on acknowledgement of the equal dignity and shared humanity of all human beings, and absence of all forms of discrimination, hierarchy and exclusion in their formal and informal relations. Economic equality meant equality of life chances and a broad equality of economic power. It required that no individual or group should be at mercy of and exercise disproportionate power over others. For Ambedkar, fraternity meant fellow feeling, and it implied a sense of common belonging.[29] For him, fraternity gave depth to liberty and equality and realised them in areas lying beyond the reach of the law. It is hardly surprising that the Preamble of the Constitution of India, in the drafting of which Ambedkar played an important role, commits the country to 'secure' justice, liberty and equality to all its citizens and to 'promote among them all fraternity.' Ambedkar's analysis of the nation suggests that without social union political unity is difficult to be achieved. If achieved, it would be precarious.[30] Like Tagore and Gandhi, his concept of nationhood has a humanist orientation and is remarkably free from the collectivism, narrowness and aggressiveness generally associated with it.[31]

Gandhi's contribution for achieving human dignity of' untouchables was considerable and greater than that of many other Indian leaders. No one before him had mounted a frontal attack on untouchability and launched a vigorous national campaign. Gandhi lived in *bhangi* colonies, adopted a *harijan* girl and mixed, lived and shared his meals with them. He gave the *harijans* a measure of dignity and self-confidence and the courage to stand up for their rights. A close analysis shows that while Ambedkar was looking just into equity among selves, Gandhi found way for the realization of 'the shared self' where a caste Hindu self may share a Dalit self and vice-versa. Here Gandhi transcends the existing vocabulary of rights and enters into larger categories of human compassion through shared self. This kind of shared self is helpful to understand and restore dignity. Gandhi's contribution too, had its limits in many terms. Untouchability was both a moral and a political problem and was deeply rooted in the highly unequal structure of power relationship between the upper castes and the *harijans.* Gandhi's campaign was conducted only at the moral and religious level. It gave the *harijans*

dignity but not power; moral "and, to some extent, social but not political and economic equality; self-respect but the self-confidence to organise and fight their own battles. At the same time Ambedkar's approach also suffered from a strong statist and elitist bias. He was right to emphasise the importance of political power, but wrong to think that the State provided answers to all of society's problems.

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar wanted to liberate the self from shackles of hierarchy, caste and bonds of unfreedom. Both of them emphasized the need of an open space to enhance human experience of self-respect and dignity. However, there were too many limitations in the understanding of both, as far as untouchability and its elimination were concerned. They had differences over the organising and correcting principles of society to assure human dignity. Ambedkar relied much on institutional mechanisms to protect and promote the interests of the untouchables, and did not fully appreciate the importance of changing the moral culture of the wider society. A profound cultural and moral change was needed in Hindu society in order to deal with the humiliation and privations of the untouchables. Since Gandhi saw this, he rightly concentrated on transforming Hinduism from within and Ambedkar was wrong to dismiss his work. Gandhi created among caste Hindus a deep sense of shame and guilt and awakened them to the egalitarian strand within their religion.[32] Despite their disagreements 'human dignity' was an important idea for them to deconstruct the inequality and ensure justice.

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RAVI RANJAN is Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Zakir Husain College, University of Delhi, J L Nehru Marg, New Delhi 2. E-mail: ranjanrl@gmail.com, Mob: +91-9899355602